

Runner-Up Performance for Hagan and 2015 Dodge Charger R/T at NHRA Midwest Nationals

- Matt Hagan drives DSR Mopar Express Lane Dodge Charger R/T to runner-up finish at National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) Midwest Nationals
- Hagan moves up to second place in "Countdown to the Championship" with performance at Gateway Motorsports Park
- Runner-up finish marks 19th final round appearance for new 2015 Dodge Charger R/T Funny Car in 20 national events this season
- Another semi-final appearance for Allen Johnson's Magneti Marelli Dodge Dart moves him up into third place in the NHRA Pro Stock Countdown standings

September 27, 2015, Madison, Illinois - For a 19th time in 20 National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) national events this season, the new 2015 Mopar Dodge Charger R/T Funny Car battled for a title in final elimination round as Don Schumacher Racing (DSR) pilot Matt Hagan raced to a runner-up finish at the AAA Insurance NHRA Midwest Nationals near the famous St. Louis Gateway Arch. While his record setting performance in qualifying garnered him the No.1 qualifier position, Sunday's final round appearance helped Hagan gain some ground in his quest to defend his 2014 NHRA Funny Car World Championship by moving him up from fourth to second in the "Countdown to the Championship."

Prior to eliminations, the reigning Funny Car world title holder drove the Mopar Express Lane Dodge Charger R/T to his fourth No.1 qualifier position of the season by posting the second quickest time ever recorded by a Funny Car at 3.883 seconds and fastest speed ever at an unprecedented 330.47 mph. Hagan began his drive through eliminations by disposing of Brian Stewart and John Force to face DSR teammate Ron Capps, who has three wins to his credit at Gateway Motorsports Park.

While Hagan had four wins early in the regular season and his team worked tirelessly to get back to round-winning form for the playoffs, luck also played a factor in getting the Mopar Express Lane Dodge to the final elimination round in St. Louis.

In the all-Mopar semifinal match-up, Hagan struck the tires on the start then watched helplessly as Capps drove to the finish line first, but not before crossing the centerline, running over two cones to void the run, and cede the win to his teammate. Capps remains sixth in the standings.

Hagan and his team quickly regrouped to advance to the final against last week's winner and points leader Del Worsham. While both had nearly identical reaction times, Hagan's stout 3.983/324.20 run wasn't quite enough to stop his competitor's 3.964/320.13 pass for the title.

"Obviously we had a lucky round but we also had some great racing and (Crew Chief) Dickie (Venables) did a great job stepping up to make our Mopar Express Lane Dodge Charger run really well," said Hagan who now sits 90 points behind the leader in second place. "We got put over in the really tricky lane for the final after we didn't go down it in the semis, and when we came back to it, he (Venables) had made some big adjustments. Proud of him and (assistant) Mike Knudson for getting me down the racetrack and giving them boys in the other lane a good fight."

"We have a lot of ground to make up and four races to do it," Hagan added. "It looks like we still have a shot at it so we have to go to Reading and make something happen. Reading is definitely going to be fast but it's also going to present the opportunity to shake the tires a lot too. You'll bring your mouth piece and your seatbelt, but you just don't know which you are going to use most."

After winning a career-best six nationals titles during the regular season, including sweeping the U.S. Nationals race weekend, a number of record setting runs and going into the playoffs as the points leader, Jack Beckman and his Infinite Hero Dodge Charger R/T has lost some ground after the first two Countdown races. Following a first round loss at the Carolina Nationals, Beckman fell in the second round to Cruz Pedregon to drop to fourth in the standings and 119 points behind leader Worsham.

"It's pretty demoralizing to run as well as we did and stretch out a nine round lead in the regular season, have probably the most perfect weekend you can have in drag racing at Indy, and then go into the points reset where they tightened everybody back up on our rear bumper and then stumble the next two races," Beckman said. "We certainly didn't expect it. We didn't think it would be easy sailing but this is the very thing that you don't want to do it the Countdown.

"Now we have another race next weekend and Maple Grove might be national record type of conditions," Beckman added. "We basically put ourselves in a position where we were going to need to set a record and win the race to get back in this. It will sure make a great story at the end of the year if we can do all those things. Don't count us out by a long shot. We're smart enough to figure this out. We might need a little racing luck to get back on it but I think we'll be contending the last day at Pomona."

It was also a tough day for Tommy Johnson Jr. who, after earning a runner-up finish in the first playoff event at the Carolina Nationals and then posting career best runs in qualifying this weekend in St. Louis, was hoping to make a few more gains in the championship standings aboard the fifth seeded Make-A-Wish Mopar in eliminations. Johnson Jr. saw those plans go askew just like his first round pass against Alexis DeJoria when a sudden move sideways ended his drive to the quarterfinals and dropped him from second to third place in the Countdown standings. In his battle to contend for a second NHRA Pro Stock championship, Allen Johnson and his eighth seeded "Magneti Marelli Offered by Mopar" Dodge Dart had a strong outing and gained a little more ground in the Countdown standings in the second of six playoff events.

In the first round, Johnson took his HEMI-powered ride for a nice 6.559 second elapsed time run at 211.00 mph with a 0.026-second reaction time to advance past Shane Gray who had a red light foul by -0.015 seconds. While that wasn't quite enough to give the Mopar driver lane choice in the quarterfinals against No.1 qualifier Greg Anderson and his first round low e.t. of 6.492/213.27, Johnson improved his odds with a 0.002-second reaction time and then took his hot rod for a 6.558/211.26 pass for a holeshot win over Anderson's 0.035-second reaction time and 6.533/211.49 run.

It was a huge round win for the Mopar team, with championship points implications, and the second week in a row that the Magneti Marelli Dodge Dart made its way to the semifinals. This time his opponent was the fourth seed and rookie Drew Skillman but a red light start by -0.024 seconds ruined any chance of the Mopar advancing to the final.

"We really needed to win that round and win the title to be able to gain a little bit on (points leader) Erica (Enders-Stevens) who is on fire, but we are still in the thick of it," said Johnson who moves up from fourth place to third in the Countdown standings and now trails the leader, Enders-Stevens, by 136 markers. "She could have a bad race next race and I'm sure the KB Racing boys and everybody is going to try to qualify against to get her first round and stuff like that, but who knows what can happen. If we can go to the semis every race we've got a chance and if we can win one and really give ourselves a chance.

"We still have to qualify a little better," said Johnson about improvements his team needs to make for the final four playoff events. "Our performance isn't quite as good as it ought to be. We've got to get in with the top three or four cars every run to give ourselves a real chance because there are a lot of good drivers out here and they're going to stand up and not take holeshot losses. We have to qualify better and run better and just stay the course.

"Against Greg (Anderson) there I told the boys "Ya'll have to be perfect and I have to be perfect" and then we went up there and I was almost too perfect, but we made a good run and I was able to take him down," added Johnson. "On that last (semifinal) run (against Drew Skillman)I pushed it a little too hard and red lit but I'm not sure I would have been able to make it down anyways as the car went left and shook the tires. I just pushed a little too hard but that's what you have to do to win a championship."

Skillman, who was also responsible for sending both Dodge Dart drivers V. Gaines and Deric Kramer home early in the first two rounds, went on to win his first career Pro Stock title at the Midwest Nationals over Countdown points leader Enders-Stevens after she nearly went sideways on the start with severe tire shake.

Mopar drivers now get set to head to Maple Grove Raceway near Reading, Pennsylvania, for the third national event in as many weeks in the six-race NHRA Countdown to the Championship playoffs series, the 31st NHRA Keystone Nationals, scheduled for October 1-4.

2015 NHRA Countdown to the Championship Standings (following NHRA Midwest Nationals race results)

PRO STOCK (season wins in parentheses)

1. Erica Enders-Stevens – 2331 (6)
2. Greg Anderson – 2218 (4)
3. **Allen Johnson – Dodge Dart – 2195 (1)**
4. **Drew Skillman – 2171**
5. Larry Morgan – 2167 (2)
6. Chris McGaha – 2162 (2)
7. Vincent Nobile – 2155
8. Jason Line – 2125 (2)
9. Shane Gray – 2117
10. Jonathan Gray – 2066

FUNNY CAR (season wins in parentheses)

1. Del Worsham – 2327 (2)
2. **Matt Hagan – (2015 Dodge Charger R/T) – 2237 (4)**
3. **Tommy Johnson Jr. – (2015 Dodge Charger R/T) – 2211 (2)**
4. **Jack Beckman – (2015 Dodge Charger R/T) – 2208 (5)**
5. John Force – 2178 (2)
6. **Ron Capps – (2015 Dodge Charger R/T) – 2177 (2)**
7. Alexis DeJoria – 2123
8. Cruz Pedregon – 2116
9. Tim Wilkerson – 2107 (1)
10. Robert Hight – 2099 (1)

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