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Johnson Jr. Drives Mopar Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat to Winner's Circle at Mopar Express Lane NHRA Nationals Presented by Pennzoil

- Tommy Johnson Jr. and the Don Schumacher Racing (DSR) Mopar Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat Funny Car roared to a win at the Mopar Express Lane Nationals Presented by Pennzoil at Maple Grove Raceway to launch the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) "Countdown to the Championship" seven-event playoff series
- Johnson earned his 23rd career Funny Car victory while competing on behalf of sidelined DSR pilot Matt Hagan
- Johnson's victory moves Hagan's Mopar Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat entry into the No. 2 position in the Funny Car championship standings and within one round win of the points lead
- No. 5 qualifier Ron Capps' quarterfinal appearance in the first of seven NHRA playoff series events puts his DSR NAPA Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat third in the Funny Car championship battle
- No. 1 qualifier Cruz Pedregon drove his Snap-On Tools Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat to the quarterfinals to move him up a spot in the Funny Car standings into seventh
- DSR Top Fuel driver Leah Pruett piloted her No. 8 seeded Mopar Dodge//SRT dragster to the quarterfinals and leaves Maple Grove Raceway fifth in the championship battle

September 12, 2021, Mohnton, Pennsylvania - A Mopar machine roared its way to the winner's circle at the Mopar Express Lane Nationals Presented by Pennzoil as the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) kicked off the "Countdown to the Championship" seven-event playoff series at Maple Grove Raceway near Reading, Pennsylvania. Funny Car driver Tommy Johnson Jr. powered the Mopar Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat to victory as a reserve driver for Don Schumacher Racing (DSR) after defending Funny Car world champion Matt Hagan was unable to compete as he continues his recovery from COVID-19.

In rising to the occasion, Johnson secured his 23rd career win and took home the Wally trophy while the points earned from the victory were awarded to DSR and Hagan. The result moved the Mopar Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat entry from fifth to second place on the Funny Car leaderboard with six events left to battle for the world championship.

"Congratulations to Tommy Johnson Jr. for his win at the Mopar Express Lane Nationals Presented by Pennzoil," said Mark Bosanac, North America Vice President, Mopar Service, Parts & Customer Care. "It's great to see Tommy step in and skillfully drive to the winner's circle at a key event representing the Mopar and Dodge//SRT brands."

Johnson, who finished the 2020 NHRA season runner-up to Hagan in the Funny Car world championship and who had not since been behind the wheel of race car, slipped into the driver's seat of the HEMI®-powered DSR entry and promptly drove it to the second quickest pass in Friday's provisional qualifying session with a 3.895-second run at 333.82 mph to record his career-best speed and put himself in the No. 4 position for eliminations.

From there, Johnson and the Mopar team made their way through the rounds, defeating Jim Campbell, DSR teammate Ron Capps and J.R. Todd to advance to a final showdown against John Force. With a solid 3.926-second elapsed time run at 330.23 mph, Johnson turned on the win lights ahead of Force's 3.946-second pass.

"It's pretty amazing, actually," said Johnson. "I got a call a week ago after I've been sitting on the sidelines for 10 months, saying 'we need you.' To come back and up your game that good, I mean, (Crew Chief) Dickie (Venables) and the guys have been racing all season, while I haven't been doing anything. I thank them for the opportunity. They rose to the challenge and dove in and made me fit in this car and made everything happen."

Watching the action live on FS1 from home, Hagan was pleased with the result for both his stand-in and his team.

"I am so proud of my guys," said Hagan. "They got it done today. T.J. did a phenomenal job in the race car. He's a wheelman. We battled each other the last two years and there wasn't a doubt in my mind that he could get it done. Everybody adapted to adversity and the driver change and I'm just so proud of what these guys accomplished today. We weren't able to race in Indy and it was a setback, but that just goes to show, you can dig right back."

The points earned by Johnson's efforts puts Hagan within one round win of the Funny Car points lead.

"I can't say thank you enough to T.J. for stepping in and bringing his A-game," added Hagan, who awaits clearance to return to competition for the balance of the playoffs.

DSR teammate Capps, who came into this first playoff event of 2021 as the top seed in the hunt for the championship after a runner-up finish at last weekend's Dodge//SRT NHRA U.S. Nationals, qualified his NAPA AUTO PARTS Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat No. 5 and drove it to a holeshot win over Blake Alexander in the opening round. For his quarterfinal match up, Capps found himself paired with Johnson and while he took the early lead, the eventual event winner edged him at the finish to dethrone him from the points lead. Capps will drive his HEMI-powered machine to the next event ranked third in points.

No. 1 qualifier Cruz Pedregon began his race day by taking his Snap-on Tools Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat Funny Car for a solid 3.908 seconds/318.62 mph bye-run win to advance to the quarterfinals where he would battle No. 7 seed Todd. Pedregon put in another respectable pass at 3.981 seconds but it wasn't enough to pass Todd and his 3.931-second pass to take the win. With this weekend's performance, the Cruz Pedregon Racing team moved up a spot in the standings to seventh place.

In the hunt for a Top Fuel championship for a sixth consecutive season, Leah Pruett began this playoff series ranked fourth in the points standings and qualified her white and blue Mopar dragster next to DSR teammate and No. 7 seed Antron Brown. While both had traction issues, Pruett stayed with it for the round win. That set up a quarterfinal battle against No.1 qualifier Brittany Force, against whom Pruett lost traction halfway through the run to end her hopes of advancing further. The result puts her Mopar Dodge//SRT dragster fifth in the Top Fuel standings.

The "Countdown to the Championship" continues next weekend with the second of the seven NHRA playoff series events, the Carolina Nationals at zMAX Dragway near Charlotte, North Carolina, Sept 17-19.

ADDITIONAL NOTES and QUOTES

FUNNY CAR:

Tommy Johnson Jr., DSR Mopar Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat

(No. 4 Qualifier – 3.895 seconds at 333.82 mph)

Round 1: (0.083-second reaction time, 3.892 seconds at 333.58 mph) defeats No. 11 Jim Campbell (0.164/ no time/ no speed)

Round 2: (0.050/3.892/332.02) defeats No. 5 Ron Capps (0.047/3.924/331.12)

Round 3: (0.050/3.902/331.53) defeats No. 7 J.R. Todd (0.078/3.905/332.75)

Round 4: (0.043/3.926/330.23) defeats No. 12 John Force (0.026/3.946/328.54)

"After Q1 I thought we had a pretty good chance to win this race. It's hard to sit out that long. These cars accelerate so fast and to keep up and keep ahead of the car and be able to drive them good. Each run, it just got more and more comfortable, and as the day went on I kept getting more relaxed and more relaxed. By the final round I was like, "Oh, OK. There's nothing to it now." I was astonished when I threw the parachutes and saw the win light come on. I just burst out laughing because I couldn't believe it happened. I thought, 'You've gotta be kidding.' We've come a long way in a week."

It's a really good car and a really good team and it makes it easier for the driver to just jump in that thing. I've known the guys from the shop. We always interacted with each other so I know I've known a lot of these guys for a long time. And so it wasn't like I didn't know anybody on the team, so that helped a lot. One of the things that made it real easy was they went back to the shop and grabbed the seat out of my car from last year and they put it in and I fit almost

perfectly, It was about as smooth a transition as you could have to make this whole thing happen. Two weeks ago sitting at home, I didn't think I'd have a trophy from this season and to come out here and get one this weekend... this race will mean a ton to me later on."

Ron Capps, DSR NAPA Auto Parts Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat

(No. 5 Qualifier – 3.896 seconds at 328.86 mph)

Round 1: (0.069-second reaction time, 3.929 seconds at 327.82) defeats No. 10 Blake Alexander (0.080/5.500/131.65)

Round 2: (0.047/3.924/331.12) loss to No. 4 Tommy Johnson Jr. (0.050/3.892/332.02)

"We hope that (Matt) Hagan returns to competition soon. What else can you say about Tommy Johnson. He was my teammate for several years at Don Prudhomme's and then over here at DSR. You're talking about one of the best drivers ever in Funny Car and to be sitting out this long and jump in and seamlessly keep that car running the way it is is amazing. We didn't have lane choice but that's no excuse. These two lanes are great. Like I told (crew chiefs) Guido (Dean Antonelli) and John Medlen, you pat them on the butt and say great weekend. We went down the track each run under power. We did have a little hiccup Q3, but showed that NAPA Know How I always talk about today on race day with two great 3.92 laps. We feel like we can win every weekend and it's getting tough. Everybody has that Countdown fever. That playoff fever and I can't wait to get to Charlotte no matter what the points are. I've got a great feeling."

Cruz Pedregon, Cruz Pedregon Racing Snap-on® Tools Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat

(No. 1 Qualifier – 3.875 seconds at 326.00 mph)

Round 1: (0.103-second reaction time, 3.908 seconds at 318.62 mph) wins on a BYE run

Round 2: (0.083/3.981/315.86) loss to No. 7 J.R. Todd (0.068/3.931/328.86)

"After qualifying No. 1 with a great 3.87 (second run) at 327 mph, we went on to run a 3.90 in the first round, and then lost a close race to the DHL car (J.R. Todd) in the quarterfinals with a 3.98. I scrubbed a little bit of time off it with the way I was staged. I inadvertently rolled in a little further than I would have liked and that affected the timing clocks, so it probably ran more like a 3.94 or 3.95, but overall it was a good event for our team."

"We wanted to go further than that, obviously, but this is the first of the seven countdown races. We did move up a spot (in the standings) so we're headed in the right direction. If we can continue this great qualifying performance we've showed lately that's only going to bode well for our chances moving forward. There's a lot of great racing left. The tracks are going to be fast and it's going to be a great opportunity to continue our work. It's coming together at the right time for us. We're still fairly new as a team as this is our 14th race together. We're still gelling and there's still some areas we can improve on, myself included, to be a little sharper. We'll get ready for the Charlotte race at a great facility, a modern racetrack that is super smooth. It's going to be a little warmer and we'll look forward to making some great runs."

TOP FUEL:

Leah Pruett, DSR Pennzoil Mopar Dodge//SRT Dragster

(No. 8 Qualifier – 3.733 seconds at 323.89 mph)

Round 1: (0.063-second reaction time, 3.930 seconds at 219.44 mph) defeats No. 7 Antron Brown (0.053/5.755/121.47)

Round 2: (0.098/4.025/227.23) loss to No. 1 Brittany Force (0.076/3.704/334.48)

"The thing about momentum is that you want it to last as long as possible and we felt like we had it coming into race day. Matching up against our teammate, we expected a great race from starting line to finish line and we smoked the tires way far out and did a great job pedaling to get the win light. We made some adjustments on the tire spin going into E2 against the No. 1 qualifier and we thought we had it tuned up the right way, but we ended up smoking the tires down track and at this very moment we feel like we have a gremlin in this system and we have a few days to figure it out. We'll work hard to fine tune things for Charlotte and the points will stay tight as we're early in this Countdown and we're ready to make up for this weekend in Charlotte."

NHRA Championship Points Standings:

FUNNY CAR (season wins in parentheses)

1. John Force – 2,172 (3)
- 2. Matt Hagan/Tommy Johnson Jr. (Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat) – 2,167 (2/1)**
- 3. Ron Capps (Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat) – 2,157 (1)**
4. J.R. Todd – 2,133 (1)
5. Robert Hight – 2,121 (2)
6. Bob Tasca III – 2,106 (2)
- 7. Cruz Pedregon (Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat) – 2,083 (1)**
8. Alexis DeJoria – 2,063
9. Tim Wilkerson – 2,048 (1)
10. Blake Alexander – 2,032

TOP FUEL (season wins in parentheses)

1. Steve Torrance – 2,179 (8)
2. Brittany Force – 2,167 (1)
3. Billy Torrence – 2,137 (2)
4. Justin Ashley – 2,124
- 5. Leah Pruett (Mopar Dodge//SRT) – 2,113 (1)**
6. Antron Brown – 2,103 (1)
7. Shawn Langdon – 2,102
8. Mike Salinas – 2,078
9. Clay Millican – 2,067
10. Doug Kalitta – 2,032

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