

John Force Racing:

NO EXCUSES

in 2009

by Duke Ritenhouse



With his body healing nicely and a quiet off-season behind him, John Force, right, with daughter and team driver Ashley Force Hood, is looking to put a John Force Racing (JFR) entry at the top of the final Funny Car points standings in 2009. The team's mantra for the season: "No excuses."

John Force, usually a man of many words, is willing to limit himself to just two when discussing the upcoming 2009 NHRA Full Throttle season, his 32nd as a Professional: "No excuses."

Two full seasons removed from his most recent NHRA world championship — he won the 2006 Funny Car title, his 14th overall, in NHRA's final year of its longtime traditional scoring format — Force is fired up and ready to take on all comers behind the wheel of his Austin Coil-tuned Mustang. An off-season that, in comparison to many recent downtimes, was mostly quiet and uneventful has served to remind Force of some of the basic reasons why he does what he does and why he's willing to be on the road for virtually three-quarters of every year: He loves to win drag races, and he wants nothing more than to lead the four-car John Force Racing (JFR) operation into another season of hard-fought NHRA Funny Car battles.

A quiet off-season

Not a lot of drama or news came out of the JFR camp over the winter, a welcomed development for a team that not only had a busy off-season between 2007 and 2008 but also has had to deal with more than its share of emotional times. Although the memories will never fade, the simple passage of time has helped the team to better cope with the tragic death of Eric Medlen in early 2007 and Force's horrific crash in Dallas later that year. In fact, the most dramatic development for the team in this most recent off-season was a joyous one with Force's daughter and teammate, Ashley, marrying amidst the spectacular setting of Lake Tahoe in December.

Not that there hasn't been work to do — there's always work to do at the top level of NHRA Drag

Racing — but the relatively quiet off-season has allowed Force and his team to relax, recharge, and regroup in preparation for what is likely to be another wide-open Funny Car championship battle in 2009.

And for Force, it's a time to get back to the basics of racing, to look over at the guy in the other lane and say, "You'd better have brung enough, pal," to turn on win lights, and to visit some winner's circles. And excuses will not be tolerated.

"Every year, we come up with a concept. When I lost to Cruz [Pedregon] in '92, we called it the Comeback Tour. When we were dominating, we'd call it the Nightmare Tour; there's always some sort of slogan," said Force, who is coming off of consecutive seventh-place finishes in the final Funny Car points standings. "We have two slogans for this year. One is 'getting back to our roots.' We want to go back to where we all came from, to learn how to race again.

"Number two, this tour is being branded No Excuses. I want to make this clear: I have no excuses this year. When we lost Eric, we focused on safety. Then I got crashed, and we focused on more safety. I've focused on Ashley as she's been coming up, and I've focused on [JFR drivers] Robert Hight and then Mike Neff. But, right now, at the end of the day, my focus is for one of my teams to win the championship, not only for ourselves but for Ford, Castrol, AAA,

BrandSource, and all of the people who help us out. There are no more excuses."

Two years, no titles

One of the more startling statistics in all of NHRA racing is the fact that no John Force Racing driver has won the NHRA Funny Car world championship in the last two seasons. The last time such a trend took place was in 1988 and 1989, when Kenny Bernstein won the last of what turned out to be a four-in-a-row streak of titles, followed a year later by Bruce Larson's one and only NHRA championship. It's one thing to do the math and see that those events happened roughly 20 years ago, but it's even more of a stunner to consider that Force's youngest daughter, Courtney, now fully grown and an NHRA Top Alcohol Dragster driver, was busy being born during Bernstein's run to the title.

Following Larson's 1989 title, 15 of the next 17 NHRA Funny Car championships went to Force or a Force-backed driver. Force won 14 of those (including 10 in a row in one stretch), with teammate Tony Pedregon adding to the total by



The JFR teams will have their veteran crew chiefs returning for the 2009 season, including Austin Coil, left, and Bernie Fedderly calling the shots for John's Mustang entry.



(Above left) The team's last championship came in 2006, when John reached the semifinals at the season-ending Automobile Club of Southern California NHRA Finals to clinch the points title, then went on to win the event. It was his 14th season title. (Above) Despite not ending with any drivers in the top three of the standings, the 2008 season featured a number of highlights for the team. Among the highest points was a final-round win for Ashley, far lane, over her father in Atlanta, which made her NHRA's first female Funny Car winner.



The 2008 season began with a flourish for the Force camp, which picked up a season-opening win when driver Robert Hight, right, and crew chief Jimmy Prock combined to win four rounds in Pomona.

claiming the 2003 championship. The only exceptions to this unparalleled era of dominance came in 1992, when Cruz Pedregon broke through for his first career title, and 2005, when Gary Scelzi won his first Funny Car championship after



Hight, left, is entering his fifth season as a Force team driver. After consecutive second-place finishes in 2006 and 2007, he wound up fourth in last year's final standings.



Mike Neff, in his first full season racing under the JFR banner, put together a breakthrough performance at last year's Madison event, scoring his first career round-win and then reaching the final, where he lost by one-hundredth of a second to Tim Wilkerson, far lane.

previously scoring three titles in Top Fuel.

Currently, though, the title of best Funny Car team resides elsewhere. Cruz Pedregon staged a spectacular late-season rally last year to win a second championship 16 years after his first, and younger brother Tony claimed the 2007 crown as an independent driver. In a "what have you done for me lately?" sense, Force's 2006 title is beginning to sound like old news, a fact not lost on a veteran driver who has been part of the NHRA wars since 1978.

"We were beat fair and square by guys like Cruz and Tim Wilkerson, and God bless 'em," said Force.

"Those guys beat multicar teams, and I want to congratulate them. But I just want to say, our four race cars are coming back. I'm telling

those guys to bring the thunder because we're ready to play ball, and the No Excuses tour is ready to go drag racing."

No turnover

The four-car JFR team has some ground to make up if a championship in 2009 is to become a reality. In a kind of good news/bad news scenario last season, all four team drivers reached the Countdown to 1 playoff – representing 40 percent of the field – but none finished higher than fourth, and three finished in the bottom half of the final top 10 standings. The team got off to a shaky overall start at the first Countdown to 1 event in Charlotte, with Force not qualifying and only one entry going as far as the semifinals, and that appeared to set the tone for what always seemed to be a struggling-to-catch-up season. Hight was a factor to the end in what emerged as a frantic battle at the top of the Funny Car standings, eventually finishing fourth, but Ashley Force Hood (sixth), John Force (seventh), and Neff (ninth) struggled to emerge as contenders for the top spot.

One important factor that should work in the Force camp's favor is the team's cohesiveness during the off-season. In addition to the four drivers, the four teams employ dozens of crewmembers, yet experienced virtually no off-season turnover. The John Force Racing teams that made their last runs of the 2008 season on Nov. 16 will be essentially identical to the teams that make their initial qualifying passes Feb. 5 at the Kragen O'Reilly NHRA Winternationals. At the top of each team's pyramid, the same experienced set of crew chiefs will also be returning: Coil and Bernie Fedderly for John, Jimmy Prock for Hight, John Medlen for Neff, and Dean Antonelli and Ron Douglas for Ashley.

"I always look forward to a new year, but I'm really optimistic this year," said Hight, who has

never finished lower than fifth in his four full seasons of driving on the NHRA Professional level. "It's inspiring to see guys like Austin Coil at the shop, and I've been doing some work with him, and I can tell you that he's got lots of things cooking. All our guys are ready: Jimmy, Medlen, 'Guido' [Antonelli], all of them. Austin looks like he's back to the old Austin, and when he gets that way, look out. That gives me a lot of confidence because Jimmy works so well with Austin. That's what this team is all about: working together and getting all the cars to run well."

And for the man at the very top of the massive four-team JFR pyramid? It's actually pretty simple: John Force says he feels great and wonders why the Winternationals can't start tomorrow.

"I feel strong, and my weight is close to 200. I'm building muscle in the gym every day, and that will help me drive the car, where last year I was weak," said Force. "I'm in the best shape that I've been in in the last decade. My body is healed; I'm ready. My teams are ready. No excuses." **ND**



After two seasons without a title, Force is single-minded when he looks ahead to the 2009 season: "My focus is for one of my teams to win the championship."



Coil (above) has been part of all 14 of Force's Funny Car titles and has tuned his way to a total of 16 NHRA championships. Force (left), putting his terrible 2007 accident farther behind him every day, says that he feels better than he has in the last 10 years.

