In Unfamiliar Territory

Robert Hight, who has never finished lower than fifth since he began driving for John Force in 2005, finds himself fighting for a spot in the Countdown to 1 with four races to go.

During his 2005 rookie season, Robert Hight won his first national event in just his fourth start, and since then, he has won 10 more events, including the Mac Tools U.S. Nationals. This season, Hight finds himself in an unusual position with no victories or final-round appearances after the first 14 events. He is currently 12th in the NHRA Full Throttle Drag Racing Series Countdown to the Championship standings and 43 points out of a top 10 berth with four races remaining before the Countdown to 1 field is finalized at the U.S. Nationals.

Hight is not the only member of the John Force Racing contingent to experience difficulties this season; John Force and teammate Mike Neff are eighth and ninth, respectively, in the standings. However, teammate Ashley Force Hood is currently sitting in second place.

Hight showed some signs of promise with his semifinal finish at Denver’s Mopar Mile-High NHRA Nationals only to come back and suffer his seventh first-round loss of the year at the NHRA Northwest Nationals in Seattle.

While on his way back to Force’s shop in Yorba Linda, Calif., where he is beginning to prepare for the final event of the Western Swing, Hight spoke with National DRAGSTER Associate Editor John Jodauga about the challenges he and veteran crew chief Jimmy Prock have faced this year, their game plan for Sonoma, and the long-range plans for getting the team back on track.

Q: How would you rate your season so far?
A: Terrible. It’s very frustrating to be so unlike the team that we know we can be. Jimmy and I still believe that we’re not that far from being a winning car again. I think we need to calm down a little bit, quit trying so many things, and just work out what we’ve got. If we do that, we still should be fine.

Q: Was losing in the first round in Seattle a disappointment after your semifinal finish in Denver?
A: Yes it was, and a lot of the problems that we’ve experienced come from a lack of confidence. We’re not anywhere near what Ashley’s team is in knowing what our car is going to run with changes we make to it. The quicker we can get to that point, the better it’s going to be.

In Seattle, we were never quick enough in the early part of the runs. [The car] was always slow, and when we tried to give it more clutch, it smoked the tires in two of the qualifying runs. In the first round, we fixed it somewhat but still didn’t have it quick enough early on. And that just comes from not having enough confidence in knowing what will make it quick and still go down the racetrack. Jimmy will take a different approach in Sonoma, and we’re going to know where we are.

Q: Have you and Jimmy been trying something considerably different with your racing combination this year?
A: Earlier in the season, yes we did. We tried a new style of clutch controller and probably stuck with that a bit too long. We still may go back to it some day, but it got to the point where we couldn’t afford to keep learning what we need to do by losing. We’ve got to get ourselves out of the hole we dug and get into the top 10.

We’ve decided to go back to a more normal approach with things that we’ve run in the past, but that’s not always that easy either. You don’t always have the same clutch discs, and we’ve changed to a different style of tires. You can’t go back much more than two years with your notes because so many things are different, including the new three-rail chassis designs. It used to be that you could go back to your computer and look at things from three or more previous years and say, ‘Oh, this or that worked,’ and try it, and it would get it close. But that’s not the case any more. The new cars are 150 pounds heavier, and they’re probably not as friendly going down the racetrack. They’re stiffer and a little harder to run. It makes something that is already tricky a little bit trickier.

“Guido” [Dean Antonelli] and Ron Douglas have done an excellent job in dealing with these issues on Ashley’s car.
this year. The smartest thing that they’ve done is that they haven’t changed anything on that car, and if they do, it’s one thing at a time. They have such a good handle on that combination that they can honestly see how a new product or part that they want to try affects the car. They’re in that good of a position.

Q: What was the reason for the change in the clutch controller?
A: Consistency. Clutch discs are inherently inconsistent from batch to batch. Even if you take 10 discs out of the same batch, they don’t all wear the same. We rely on a consistent degree of clutch wear to keep the car consistent, and that doesn’t exist. The new controller is designed to take away the inconsistency factors because whether the discs are wearing or not, it still moves the bearing like you want it. And in the long run, it will be a better deal. There’s just still quite a bit to learn about it yet. Austin Coil is using the same type of controller with John’s car, and they’re inching up on it. Austin likes to remind us that we’ve had thousands and thousands of runs with the old-style clutch controller, and we don’t even have 100 runs yet on the new one, so it’s unfair to make a conclusion about this so soon. Austin and John are in the top 10 and are doing all right. But we are in a position where we can’t afford any more losses from that one unit.

Q: Are there any other contributing factors to the challenges you’ve faced this year?
A: Yes, testing restrictions and rules implementations. One thing I learned from Austin a long time ago is that when you change something, you can’t tell positively what it did or whether it was good or bad in just one run. You need to try it for 10 or 12 runs and then make an evaluation of whether it’s better or worse and if you’re going to stick with it or not. Right now, we don’t have 10 or 12 runs to mess with.

One of the things that hurt our team has been the cutback on testing. We used to go out and test things and wouldn’t necessarily race with what we tested at the next event. We’d go back to what we normally ran and then put the new things back in again the next time we had the chance to test, and by the time we did 10 or 12 runs, like Austin said, you’d have a pretty good idea whether it was something to keep pursuing, put it on the car for good, or trash it. The lack of testing has put a hold on that because we’re out there now attempting to refine what we’ve got, trying new things that we think will help the car qualify and win rounds. And that’s hard to do.

The restriction on testing is better on the pocketbook, and in this economy, I understand why NHRA did it, and I agree 100 percent. But it changes the way you race, and with the rules that are in place now, there’s a lot less new innovation than there used to be. You had guys back in the 1990s and the early 2000s, like Dale Armstrong, Austin Coil, and Tim Richards, who were always coming up with something new that advanced the cars, and you don’t really see that any more. A lot of that has to do with what the rules say you can and can’t run. It has bunched it up for sure.

Q: Following the Seattle event, the four drivers, including you, between the ninth and 12th position were separated by only 57 points. Do you expect it to remain that close for the remainder of the Countdown to 10?
A: Yes, I think it will be right down to Indy, unless somebody gets on a roll and wins two or three races that distances them from the pack. A lot will depend on how you qualify and whom you race, just like what happened to me this weekend. I think I would have had the chance to beat just about anyone except the guy I had to race, Tim Wilkerson. And that goes back to us not qualifying where we needed to be, and we ended up racing a hitter. Of course, they’re all good cars out there, all 16, but some are better than others, and Wilkerson was the guy we didn’t need to be racing in the first round. And you’re going to see some first-round matchups between these four cars in the next few races. It’s inevitable that it will happen.

For us to be the car that runs away from the pack, we need to qualify in the top four in every race from Sonoma to Indy and either get to the semi’s at every race or win a couple. If you won two of the next four and had good outings in the other two, you honestly could get up into sixth or seventh; it’s not that far from where I’m at. I want to make sure I get into the top 10 but don’t want to knock out one of my other teammates in order to do it. I want all four of our Mustangs to be in the Countdown to 1 and account for 40 percent of the field. That’s kind of how we shine. We work together, and having four good race cars is going to help us.

The one thing that has been a very big positive in all this is the backing of our main sponsor, Automobile Club of Southern California. They’ve never questioned us or put any pressure on the team. They believe in us and know that we’re going to get back on track.

Q: With the Dodgers and Angels leading in their respective divisions this year, do you think we’ll finally get to see a long-awaited freeway World Series?
A: That would be awesome. I think the Dodgers could use another good starting pitcher, but they’re fun to watch right now. Their offense is unbelievable. It used to be that going into the eighth or ninth inning behind, you could pretty much write them off. But now, any guy from one through eight in the lineup can win it for them in the last minute. If the Angels get in the World Series, that would be cool, too. Their stadium is a lot closer to where I live, but I’ve been a Dodger fan all my life, so there’s no secret as to whom I’m rooting for.

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