


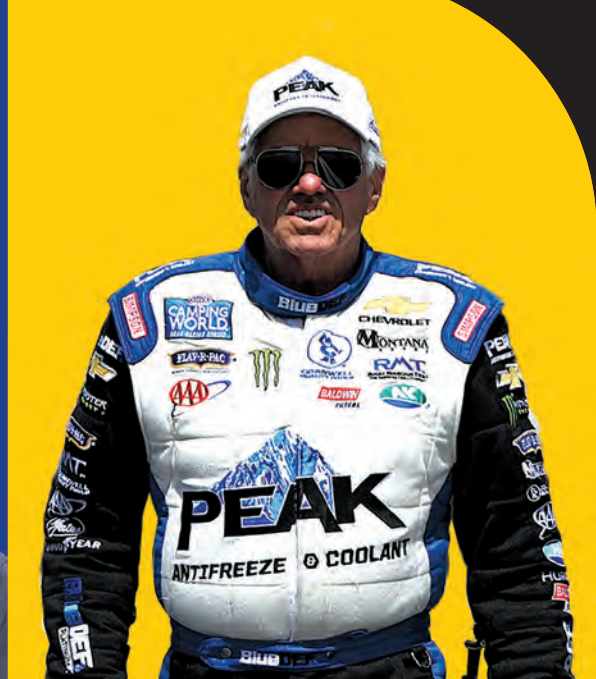
MOVERS, SHAKERS, AND DEAL MAKERS

The sport of drag racing isn't just shaped by those who win or lose, or what e.t. or speed they ran. That's ancient history. The level of competition has gotten so high and complex that strategy, logistics, partnerships, goals, and audience all participate in a modern win.

And in an era when more people see more drag racing every day — strike that, every hour — than ever before, some of the people shaping the sport do so when they aren't even behind the wheel of a drag car. Who are these people? What are they trying to accomplish, and what are they looking to change about the sport we all love?

The NHRA has enjoyed amazing growth over the last decade thanks in part to individuals and organizations who promote, support, and enjoy the sport and continue to move it forward.

In the inaugural compilation of NHRA's Movers, Shakers, and Deal Makers, NHRA *National Dragster* recognizes the contributions of many of those most recently responsible for the growing success of the sport. 



KELLY ANTONELLI Vice President of Team Operations, Tony Stewart Racing

Motorsports veteran Tony Stewart made a wise decision when he enlisted the help of Kelly Antonelli to build an NHRA team from the ground up. Antonelli, now the vice president of Racing Operations for the Tony Stewart Racing (TSR) nitro team, had years of experience in the industry and a true passion for NHRA Drag Racing. What she brought to the table was critical to the effective launch of what has already shown to be a powerhouse.

In TSR's first season as a multicar team, Leah Pruett piloted her Top Fuel dragster to a mid-summer victory. In Funny Car, Matt Hagan remained a championship contender all season with four wins in eight finals. The team returned in 2023 looking like a well-oiled machine with some distinct sublime green Dodge branding and a winning stance to go along with it.

While Stewart, Pruett, and Hagan are the face of the operation, Antonelli keeps things running smoothly backstage. Indianapolis-based Antonelli knows how to run the show; she's been involved in motorsports since she was a teen. Her first position was as an intern with Mac Tools, and she was eventually hired to be part of their motorsports marketing team.

Antonelli soaked up as much knowledge as she could and accepted a position with John Force Racing (JFR) six years later. Initially, her assignments



at JFR included licensing, marketing, and working with sponsors in the field, but her responsibilities grew exponentially over time, and ultimately, Antonelli earned the reputation as a go-to for those within and outside of the operation. Her stable, calm nature and vast experience made her a natural fit for the opportunity at TSR when it was presented.

"I think it's important to make sure that you're always learning and growing, and that you continue to find ways to challenge yourself and get better," said Antonelli. "[At TSR], we're continually looking at what we can do in the future and what we can

improve on to bring extra value to our partners. I've always felt that NHRA was the most welcoming motorsport and had the most to offer potential sponsors. This is a place they can get a good return on their investment.

"I also believe that one of the most important aspects within any team is valuing the employees and what they bring to the table, and from the day we walked in the door, Tony established a culture of 'one team, all team.' I think that welcoming culture is a big part of what makes this work."

PETER BIONDO racer, promoter

For years, it seemed Peter Biondo's legacy would be his incredible on-track success as a Sportsman racer, which includes (to date) seven NHRA world championships, 52 national event titles, and countless other victories. While Biondo is rightfully mentioned in any debate regarding the sport's all-time greats, it might well be his current career as a promoter that ultimately garners the most attention.

Biondo shifted his focus to the promotional side of the sport, and not surprisingly, he's enjoyed success with his Fling events, which have become some of the sport's most successful and lucrative E.T. bracket races. Biondo's recent Spring Fling Million, held in Las Vegas, paid a whopping \$400,000 to eventual winner Andy Schmall.

Biondo and his longtime friend, the late Kyle Seipel, held their first Spring Fling at Bristol Dragway in 2010. Success didn't come without a few growing pains, but the end result is a successful series that currently includes stops in Las Vegas, GALOT Motorsports Park in North Carolina, Columbus, and Bristol.

"New Year's 2010, Kyle and I were on vacation in Lake Tahoe, and we were trying to come up with a racing schedule that we both liked," Biondo recalled. "There just wasn't much that excited us. One thing led to another, and we decided to do our own event. Honestly, it didn't work the first year. We were a little ahead of ourselves. It takes more than three months to plan an event and get the word out. We also underestimated the amount of work involved."

Biondo and Seipel dedicated themselves to improving the Fling events each season until Seipel's untimely death from cancer in June 2021. Biondo understandably questioned whether he'd continue, but he ultimately decided to soldier on, relying heavily on the support of his wife, Emily.

"When Kyle passed, I was at a crossroads," Biondo said. "My deal was race operations, and Kyle was the people person, and I can't imagine any two



partners who better complimented each other. I talked to Kyle about a week before he died, and his wishes were clear. He said, 'Keep the Flings on top but don't burn yourselves out.' We've tried to do just that, but no way could I have carried on without Emily."

When it comes to driving, Biondo has taken a break from NHRA competition while he tends to business and raises his family, but he's far from retired.

"I'll be back," he said. "In fact, right now, I'm restoring the old Hatari [Super Stock Pontiac] that I used to race. It's going to be really nice. I won't do a full schedule, but we're going to race as a family."

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RODGER BROGDON

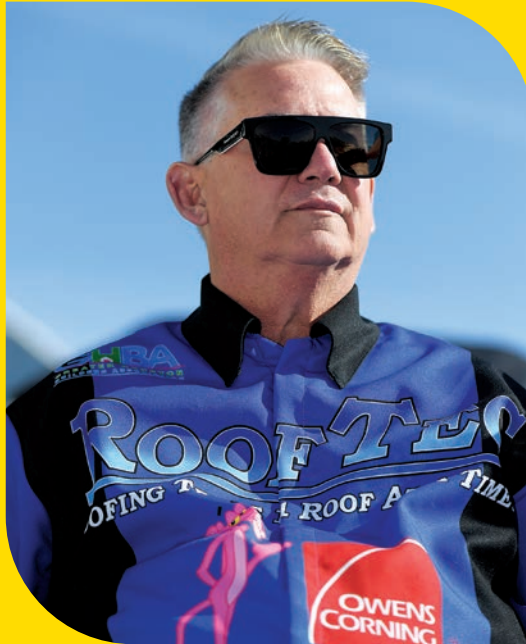
competitor, owner of RoofTec

Rodger Brogdon's decades-long commitment to drag racing has stretched across every level of competition, from local bracket racing to competing in NHRA Pro Stock. It's easy to surmise, however, that his appreciation of the sport leans heavily toward the category now simply known as Comp.

Brogdon is not alone in his appreciation of the highly competitive and intricately structured category, and in 2021, he gave fellow Comp enthusiasts a not-so-little nudge to show up and show out. Aiming to rejuvenate the category, Brogdon developed the RoofTec Competition Eliminator Bonus Fund for NHRA's South Central Division. Through the bonus series, racers competing in seven of the nine events within the division were invited to compete for a sizable championship jackpot as well as in-event cash awards and fund distribution for the top 10.

The Texas businessman and owner of Houston roofing contractor RoofTec put up the initial funding to get the program off the ground in 2021, and after a successful first go that saw a distinct increase in participation and enthusiasm, the program grew even larger in 2022. This year, along with the RoofTec Competition Eliminator Bonus Fund, Brogdon and RoofTec partnered with NHRA to introduce the RoofTec NHRA Competition Eliminator Cash Clash specialty race at the Dodge

Power Brokers NHRA U.S. Nationals at Lucas Oil Indianapolis Raceway Park. The top 16 drivers from the RoofTec Comp Eliminator Bonus Fund will square off at the most prestigious event on the NHRA national event tour with \$30,000 going to the victor.



In further partnership with NHRA for 2023, the winning driver in Comp at the U.S. Nationals and the Texas NHRA Fall Nationals in Dallas will score the newly established RoofTec NHRA Competition Class Bonus Award – an \$11,500 bump in addition to the national event purse.

“Competition eliminator is it for me; it's always been my favorite, and I really just wanted to do something for the class and the racers,” said Brogdon, who stated in 2022 that entries were, on average, more than double what they had been before the bonus program. “We've really seen growth in the class, and the competition was incredible.

“I just love the creativity and the challenge here. Just about anything you can dream up, you can find a class to run it in with Competition eliminator, and you can be competitive with a wide variety of budgets. It's a great class. You'd be surprised how many people just love it and want to be part of it.”

DAVID H. DAVIES

corporate executive with Flexjet

Lee Iacocca famously said, “The speed of the boss is the speed of the team,” and if David H. Davies, the man behind the Flexjet NHRA Factory Stock Showdown sponsorship is any indication, his velocity has launched Detroit's quickest production-car class forward at a jet-age pace.

Davies is not only the principle behind the Flexjet sponsorship of the Factory Stock Showdown class, but he's also one of its racers. Why? Because he understands there's an intrinsic connection between his corporate goals and NHRA Drag Racing. It turns out many of the skills used in the aviation repair and maintenance world are shared with what NHRA teams do.

“We have a huge fabrication shop, a huge composite shop in our aerospace engineering division,” said Davies. “My guys and gals in our hangars could build one of these cars. They have the same skill set. They do the same things. And by the way, they're fans, and by the way, I happen to have had a car.” Davies said he invested in the class because he was looking to hire 100 technicians, but he's quickly found other business-to-business upsides for him to leverage for his day job.

“NHRA racers are a great tool to acquire and retain partners,” said Davies. “The racers are all over the country in a three-day event that anyone can enjoy and find time for.”

Davies has new goals for his NHRA involvement in 2023. “Racing here is the top of the heap,” he said, “You couldn't give me enough prize money to take away a Wally.” So, in addition to launching his own team in 2023 and his FSS development driver program with Madi Turley, he's also working on bringing a surge in media attention to the class. Davies also has his sights



on sponsoring a car in another class, and he's building a 300-mph Dodge Charger to run at Bonneville Salt Flats. He's even looking at getting a Top Alcohol Dragster. Folks, he's already made the reservation at Frank Hawley's Drag Racing School.



DRAG AND DRIVE EVENTS



The latest entry on our list isn't an individual, but rather a movement called Drag and Drive that has steadily gained popularity over the last decade or so, and it's currently one of the hottest happenings in the sport.

The first Drag and Drive race launched nearly two decades ago when David Freiburger, then editor of *Hot Rod* magazine, attempted to answer the age-old question of who had the fastest street car in the country. Inspired by the One Lap of America event for road racers, Freiburger envisioned an event where racers would make one run at each track and then drive to the next facility without the benefit of a truck and trailer or the customary support equipment. Hot Rod Drag Week launched in 2005, and Carl Scott was crowned the first champion with an 8.58-second average for five days.

Today, Hot Rod Drag Week is still going strong, and there are now more than 20 similar events that stretch from all corners of the globe, including Alaska and Sweden.

One of the individuals most responsible for the recent growth of Drag and Drive events also happens to be its quickest competitor, Tom Bailey, who wheels

a Pro Mod-style Camaro that has run deep into the five-second zone while still capable of racking up hundreds of highway miles.

In 2022, Bailey launched his own Drag and Drive event, Sick Week, which tours Florida and Georgia in February. Not surprisingly, it was a huge hit and sold out in minutes. Bailey also launched his own publication, *Sick the Magazine*, which is the first and only publication dedicated exclusively to the Drag and Drive scene. Naturally, Bailey is bullish on the future of the movement.

"I know this sounds strange, but I think what attracts people to Drag and Drive events is the misery that often goes with it," said Bailey. "The long drives from track to track, the roadside repairs, the lack of sleep, it's all part of it, and when you share that suffering, it builds bonds between racers. Last year at Drag Week, I had pistons out of my car every day, and that was one of the most memorable experiences I've had.

"The good news is that there are so many events now, people are out of excuses not to attend," Bailey said. "If you want to build a car to do a Drag and Drive, there is a place for you to run it."

JOHN FORCE owner, John Force Racing

Above and beyond the fact that John Force is NHRA's winningest driver, with a record 16 Funny Car championships and 155 national victories – a number that likely will never be challenged – drag racing's G.O.A.T. has excelled in so many areas of the sport that have helped NHRA continue to grow. The list of new sponsors and companies that Force, through his gregarious and everyman nature, has introduced to the sport and numerous safety and technical innovations could fill many volumes. As a spokesperson for NHRA out in the world, there are few bigger cheerleaders, and when John

Force speaks, people listen. He's become the very public face of the sport, known to even those who do not follow the NHRA closely.

"I've been doing this for 50 years. I do it because I love doing it," said Force. "I love the cheer of the crowd and the fans. I love the sponsors. I love the people and the camaraderie of the teams. In drag racing, you've got two cars side by side; sometimes you've got men racing women. The smell of nitromethane, header fire, cars at 338 mph, side by side, smoking the tires, wheelstanding – it's got everything. You can get your picture or an autograph with your favorite driver. It's a family sport. Bring your family in the morning and watch them warm the cars up – you can be there all day. That's why sponsors come here."

Even though he's still a proven winner, Force has for decades been working to ensure the sport's future with his Next Generation program that brought us drivers like three-time world champion Robert Hight, Austin Prock, Tony Pedregon, and Eric Medlen. Force's own family has played a huge role, as daughters Ashley, Brittany, and Courtney all followed their father into the cockpit and the winner's circle, and grandsons Jacob and Noah and granddaughter Autumn all compete in the NHRA Jr. Drag Racing League and look forward to faster cars in their future.

"I love the sport, I always have," he said. "It's been very successful for me to be a part of it, to raise my children, and I just feel like I owe the sport back, to have my children involved and now my grandchildren involved, just trying to grow for the future.

"NHRA now is doing so much work to try to generate more money for the race teams and to keep the fans entertained. We've got a great TV program with FOX if you can't come out. It was a hard time for everybody coming out of the pandemic, but NHRA survived it, and I want to be a part of that. It's the greatest show on earth."



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BRITNEY FRIESEN YouTube personality

In her YouTube and Instagram bios, Britney Friesen describes herself as a drag racer, builder, and content creator, and as it turns out, she is all of those things and more. Friesen also reminds people of all ages to never give up on their dreams, and she clearly lives by that mantra as well.

Friesen's YouTube channel, Britney Automotive, boasts nearly 100,000 subscribers, and her Instagram account recently topped 250,000 followers. Friesen uses her platform to document many aspects of her hectic life, most notably the ongoing build of her '93 Camaro, which is primarily a drag and drive car. For someone relatively new to the social media game, she's gained a sizable audience, but that doesn't make her an overnight sensation.

"I started with social media to have fun. I honestly didn't think it would go anywhere, but it's changed my whole life," said Friesen, who was raised in Kansas but currently calls Kentucky home. "When it comes to content, I kind of do whatever I want. You start to realize that you have an impact when you go to the track and there's a little girl who recognizes you and wants to build cars. She sees that you're a real person and not just some random girl on the internet. That's why my videos aren't totally professional. I post my bloopers because they're real."

"It's pretty crazy how much it's blown up. It takes a lot of time and effort, probably more than people realize. There is also a big difference between the racing industry and the car-building industry. I try to get on both sides of that. I try to stay on top of it, and it's a full-time job."

Friesen's videos are not just for show. She's actively involved in almost every aspect of her build, including engine assembly, wiring, plumbing, and tuning. She admits that some aspects of race-car construction can be a bit intimidating, but that doesn't prevent her from tackling them head-on.

"At first, I didn't know much about building cars, and it gave me anxiety,"



Friesen said. "I'm still learning every day, but I actually enjoy the more tedious tasks like wiring and grinding rings."

Friesen continues to work on her Camaro with the short-term goal of having an eight-second street car for Drag and Drive events. Beyond that, she's open to most anything.

"I have posters in my garage of [NHRA Pros] Leah [Pruett] and Courtney and Brittany Force," she said. "If the opportunity to race something like that came up, I'd be 100% on board with it."

RICHARD FREEMAN owner, Elite Motorsports

NHRA Pro Stock was once the stomping ground of lone wolves looking to prove their dominance. But as the class evolved, the level of capabilities grew so vast that a modern super-team structure has logistical and data-driven advantages. In an age of all-out war, if Pro Stock racing has a General Patton, that man is Elite Motorsports' Richard Freeman.

He doesn't think of himself as the team owner, he sees himself as part of the program. "I service the motor in Erica's [Enders] car, and I jump in on other people's cars when they need help," said Freeman. We've taken an approach as a professional team, not just a professional driver," he said. "Some of the team's drivers are better than others, but we are all striving to be better."

With eight cars campaigning under the Elite name and a ninth on its way with David Cuadra, Freeman is redefining what a Pro Stock team effort looks like. In a previously unheard-of manner, he works in unison with engine builder Frank Iaconio who powers the Cuadra family's cars in his camp. Freeman's team model is to cross lines that have never been crossed and share the success down the line. What's the pace like with so many cars, drivers, and agendas?

"I am wide open," said Freeman. "We've had a rough start to the season, we could have won three of the first four races this year. Winning five championships since 2014 is just amazing to me, but it's not all about the engines, the crew chiefs, or the drivers — it's all about the team."

He believes the sport of drag racing has a tremendous opportunity over



the next 24 months, and it's trending up because people want interactions, and this sport is one that people can be part of — right now.

"I don't care if the glass is half full or half empty as long as I am the one pouring," said Freeman.



JOSH HART

Top Fuel team owner and driver, owner of Burnyzz Speed Shop

In his short time as a team owner and driver, Josh Hart has already made an impression. Yes, he caught everyone's attention by winning Top Fuel at the 2021 Amalie Motor Oil NHRA Gatornationals in his national event debut – but he also stepped into the role of team owner in an intense arena unfit for the faint of heart. Hart recognized the challenge of such endeavors but was able to assemble a professional program that rivaled the elder statesmen of the sport.

Along the way from Super Gas to Top Fuel, Hart built a fruitful business with wife Brittanie. They own Burnyzz Speed Shop, a new and classic car restoration and speed shop that began as a mobile detailing business, and expanded their footprint in Ocala, Fla., in 2021 to the size of a city block.

Hart did not come from wealth, and he keeps sight of where he came from. The father of two deeply believes in helping others. Last season, when Pro Stock racer Matt Hartford's truck driver was unable to make the trek to Denver, he facilitated a solution, sending an R+L Carriers driver to help. Hartford won the event.

Hart has often sought to give back, and his generosity and investment in drag racing shone ahead of the NHRA Camping World Drag Racing Series season opener, when he threw open the

doors of Burnyzz Speed Shop to host the inaugural NHRA Gatornationals FanFest. The event, organized primarily by Brittanie, featured hundreds of classic cars on display, food trucks, and live music, and it drew thousands of fans.

For Hart, it all comes back to an experience he had at the very beginning of his career in drag racing.

"This sport is expensive, and it's hard to find people to help you," said

Hart. "When I asked how much it would cost to run a Top Fuel dragster, someone of very big importance said, 'If you're asking, you can't afford it.' I felt like that was the biggest insult in the world, so here I am. Instead of taking that approach, I'm trying to help people get into it.

"Before getting into Top Fuel, I thought, if there was a way for me to take my contingency money and donate it back through sponsorship to young racers, maybe they wouldn't have to feel the burden the way I did to advance their career. We've done that for 12 years now, picking someone we feel will impact the sport, and we donate whatever they need to get to the races. We don't do these things for publicity. We just really want to help people make it happen."



FRANK HAWLEY

owner, Frank Hawley's Drag Racing School

In its early days, drag racing was a horsepower battle. Racers needed the power to go quicker than anybody else. Phase two was engineering component durability to run fast every pass. But as the level of competition grew, the amount of talent in the pits equalized, and the competition for driver prowess was born. Though Wally Parks envisioned drag racing as a sport where "the cars are the stars," every category is now a battle of drivers' wits.

If there were a metaphorical dyno where people could develop the mind-body connection of drivers in this sport — that piece of equipment would be found in Frank Hawley's classroom (FrankHawley.com). A Top Fuel racer and two-time nitro Funny Car champion himself, Hawley has ultimately made a name crafting the minds and capabilities of other drivers at every level. His technique builds the minds of racers from first principles thinking. Who has he helped? It would be easier to list the drivers he hasn't worked with.

Tony Stewart, Doug Kalitta, Antron Brown, Austin Prock, Justin Ashley, the entire Salinas family, and Alexis DeJoria all practice the Hawley teachings. And what are those teachings?

"What you find out is that most of what we spend our time on with drivers," said Hawley, "is improving how [they] deal with anxiety in life in general. Then we apply those [mechanisms] to their driving."

Hawley labels himself as a "pretty curious person" who noticed there were some people "who could drive right off the bat," and he wanted to understand why. Driving never seemed that hard for him, but he understands the pressure to perform.

Spend just a few minutes with Hawley, and you will experience his ability to clear mental clutter and make room in your mind for clarity and focus. His process is humble but effective. "If someone thinks I have a secret on how to cut a great light — they are sorely mistaken," said Hawley. "It'll be a discovery process, and I think at the end you'll enjoy the process, and enjoying the process has a way of making everyone a better driver.

"I found out many years ago there were all kinds of [car] people who knew about cars — but there weren't any [car] people who knew about people," said Hawley.



STEVE JACKSON

NHRA Pro Mod driver

A competition on any level is a competition on every level, and when you race against Steve Jackson, you race against a machine of horsepower, mechanical understanding, charisma, reaction time, experience, and just outright joy for the sport of drag racing.

Coming up through his radial-tire roots, where Jackson found his motivation and audience, his success meant that when he entered the world of NHRA Pro Mod racing, he had more momentum and brand awareness than nearly any other racer in the category, even those with far more NHRA success.

Pro Mod racing, in fact all of the NHRA racing events have seemed quieter without Jackson this year. So, where has he been?

A spine surgery at the end of 2022 has so far sidelined him from driving competition in 2023. While his racing efforts have slowed, his pent-up expectations and work in all of



the other categories of competition have continued. Jackson's tell-it-like-it-is style is missed, but so is his joy for the sport.

"Everybody I've talked to has told me to wait. So, while it's hard, I'm going to wait till [the doctors] clear me. I do not want to have to do this again," said Jackson.

While he waits for doctor's clearance to return to his Pro Mod Camaro, you can catch him on his *The Shake and Bake Show with Stevie Fast & Lyle Barnett* and see the engine development work he's done with a 33psi tune on his blown Pro Mod engine combination.

Will his return mark a new era of horsepower in Pro Mod? Will he still be the "Fast" fans have come to know and love? Let's be clear, you do not count this man out no matter the rules changes, the category changes, or the names on the side of the car — Jackson is in it to win it and will be the second he slides behind the steering wheel at an NHRA race again.

ALEX LAUGHLIN

NHRA Funny Car driver

Alex Laughlin's talent as a driver isn't the way he dumps the clutch, shifts the gears, keeps the car in the groove, or crosses the finish line at high speed. It's all those things.

He began his professional driving career in a Pro Stock car, he dabbled in Pro Mod, some radial-tire racing, Top Fuel, and even helped daredevil (and fellow race-car driver) Travis Pastrana get licensed in a Top Fueler. To say Laughlin is well connected would be an understatement with his Texas ties to Havoline Oil, Elite Motorsports, the Gas Monkey phenomenon, and just being a legit car guy.

There were always so many reasons to watch Laughlin that we were intrigued when rumors circulated in 2022 that he might add the final four-wheel NHRA Pro category to his résumé. When he released footage of him testing in the Jim Dunn Funny Car, he became someone we knew we'd be watching in 2023.

"I'm surprised how much I underestimated how big a change [Funny Car] would be," said Laughlin.

Coming from the door-car world with acceleration experience of a Top Fuel dragster, he has confidence in his abilities "to not make dangerous mistakes on the dragstrip," said Laughlin, and with Jim Dunn as his crew chief, he's stepping into a philosophy of running a car that's first goal is to get cleanly down the track.



As only the second racer in NHRA history to have competed in three Professional classes, the other being Bruce Larson, and with his run against fellow Funny Car convert J.R. Todd, Laughlin has a round-win in all three Professional classes he's raced in.

What's left for Laughlin? Is there a Pro Stock Motorcycle in his future? It's hard to say, but he once took a Harley-Davidson driving class with NHRA on FOX's Amanda Busick ...



BRIAN LOHNES

NHRA on FOX broadcast lead, announcer

Brian Lohnes is not just the voice of the NHRA on FOX, he is drag racing's Head-Fan-in-Chief in any room, at any starting line, or on any track. Lohnes' success in this sport comes from his passion and his tribal knowledge of racing, cars, personalities, and obscure facts. Mix in his joy for sharing this love with the audience in every format, and you have the internet-age version of Dave McClelland.

A still-to-this-day approachable grassroots enthusiast, Lohnes' process was shaped by track announcers, storytellers, and television coverage. Not growing up near an NHRA national event, his announcing roots began at the fabled New England Dragway, where he began as the Wednesday-night announcer. For the 10 years after graduating from journalism school, he announced every single event he could around the country.

With decades of announcing and writing under his belt, he has helped shape the way drag racing fans see and hear



the sport they know and love. He enriches the passion of those fans by infusing what they see with his honest, accurate, and insightful comments. He never runs out of gas because his interest in drag racing is authentic to his core. He provides the soundtrack for audiences who are in many cases seeing exactly what he is witnessing, yet effortlessly enriches their experience with what they love.

"I try to be historically accurate, calling it like it is when the moment comes, and providing any experience I've had with stuff I've seen for the audience," said Lohnes.

While we look to him in 2023 to shape this sport, what is Lohnes watching for?

"It's the cliché answer, but it's always Indy," said Lohnes. "What other event has five or six other drag racing events the weekend before designed to prepare racers for the [Big Go]? Honest to God, there's nothing like that event. It's the Valhalla for me."

JOE AND CATHI MAYNARD

owners, JCM Racing

Joe and Cathi Maynard first became involved in NHRA in 2021, joining Don Schumacher Racing as associate partners and were instrumental in bringing Tony Schumacher back into Top Fuel in 2022. In mid-2022, the Maynards, owners of Echo Power Engineering, became majority owners of the Schumacher Top Fuel operation and in 2023 brought Funny Car's Tim Wilkerson into the JCM Racing operation as co-owners. Both race cars are sponsored by Scag Power Equipment, which recently became the Official Outdoor Power Equipment Provider of the NHRA.

The Maynards, long known for their generosity in helping charity causes – including American Mobility and A Soldier's Child, which were bannered

on Schumacher's dragster late last year – launched the JCM Racing Driver Development program in early 2023 to offer young racers the opportunity to perfect their driving and sponsor-relation skills as they work towards a career in NHRA's Professional ranks.

"We were fans first," said Joe Maynard. "That's the reason we got into this. We had little bit of means and the drive that we felt we could help the sport from a longevity standpoint. Bringing Tony back, obviously, but bringing a little more funding to the whole sport, and in driver development – all of those things add up.

"In our charity work, we focus on three things: vets, homeless, and kids, in no particular order. When I'm out there, I talk to a lot of disabled vets. My wife and I were both in the military, and the camaraderie of the sport is what enamored us the most. The teamwork, regardless of whether you're foes on the track or not, means a lot to us, as well as the fan experience. To see the fans excited, especially the kids, and for them to get to hang out with Tony Schumacher or Tim Wilkerson just makes my wife and I excited to take it a step further. One of our children, Joe, is pretty excited about this, too, so it's also a family thing for us.

"Our plan is to grow this, so when Tony and Tim retire, we have young people ready to represent the Maynard family and our sponsors for a long, long time. Our intent is to grow over time, hopefully into the other Pro categories. Next year, our plan is to help one Jr. Dragster in each [NHRA] division to get on the right track that will grow them in the sport. Hopefully, we'll start working on crew people before it's all done.

"We just want to see the sport grow, we want to see it expand, and have young kids be as excited about it as we were for most of our adult lives. That's what motivates us."



CLEETUS MCFARLAND

YouTube personality, track operator, and promoter

Cleetus McFarland provides a textbook example of just how far an individual can go with a bit of imagination, a solid work ethic, and the tools afforded by modern social media.

McFarland is the hugely popular alter ego of Garrett Mitchell, who was once an aspiring law school student, but has more recently become arguably the hottest social media star in all of motorsports. McFarland got his start working with the 1320 Video crew, and during an off-the-cuff ad-lib performance, his Cleetus McFarland character was born.

McFarland's current social media following is immense with more than 3.1 million subscribers to his YouTube channel. His almost daily content includes a bit of everything automotive, from updates on various race- and street-car builds to wild and crazy experiments that most likely should not be duplicated at home.

Not surprisingly, McFarland's own fleet of race cars mirrors his colorful personality. His most successful car is "Mullet," a six-second Chevy El Camino that has won top honors at several Drag and Drive events. He also occasionally pilots "Ruby," a turbocharged Corvette, and "Leroy," a stick-shift Corvette that has been stripped of its fiberglass body so that little more than the roll cage and windshield remain.



As his brand has grown, McFarland has expanded into merchandising, and he purchased the former DeSoto Memorial Speedway, a circle track near his home in Bradenton, Fla. He has renamed the track the Freedom Factory and hosts a wide array of automotive events that are broadcast via his own livestream service. He's also the creator and promoter of Cleetus and Cars, an automotive extravaganza that typically includes a bit of everything, including drag racing, burnout contests, and an oval track race featuring a roster of automotive celebrities, racers, and influencers driving identically prepared Crown Victoria race cars. McFarland brings his Cleetus and Cars event to several well-known facilities, including Lucas Oil Indianapolis Raceway Park, where it historically plays to near-sellout crowds.

"The sport is evolving, but there's so many people interested in so many different aspects of the sport," Mitchell noted in a previous

interview with *Drag Illustrated*. "There's a huge car culture fanbase, and that shows in all the different types of things people are interested in, whether it's drag racing or burnouts or drifting or whatever. I definitely think there's a growing fanbase. I think people just like things they can relate to, and there's a lot of great things going on right now."

COREY MICHALEK

driver, video creator

The term "content creator" only begins to describe the visual masterpieces produced by videographer and artist Corey Michalek. His company, React104, is a one-man show responsible for stunning, emotion-evoking pieces featuring some of the most prominent places and players in NHRA Drag Racing. Michalek, himself, generates the content, capturing video and devoting endless hours in postproduction to editing each piece until it matches his vision.

It could be argued that such impactful art could only be created by someone deeply connected to the sport, but Michalek claims he's a bit of a late bloomer when it comes to drag racing. He attended his first race when he was in high school. But, he said, "When I saw it in person, I fell in love with it—just like everybody else."

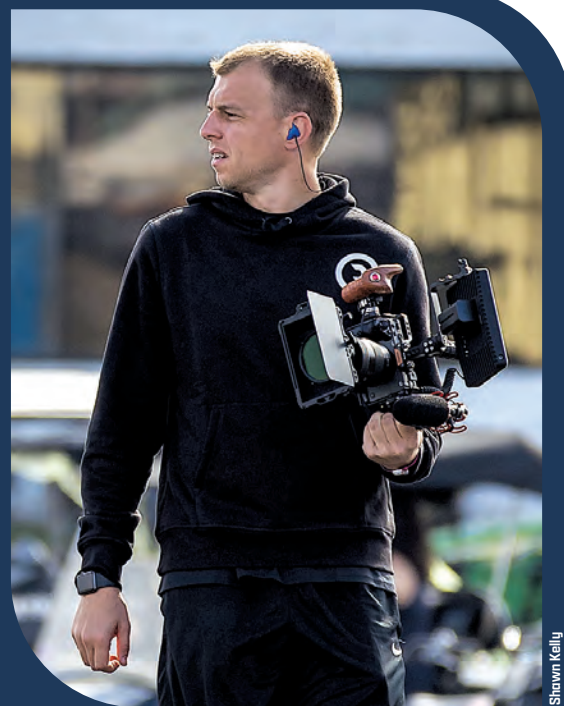
Drag racing became increasingly personal for Michalek, who went from casual observer to crewmember on Pat Dakin's Top Fuel car to a two-time national event winner as a competitor in the esteemed Top Alcohol Dragster category. His time behind the wheel began in a Super Comp car owned by his brother, Kyle. His Christmas gift one year was licensing in the dragster, and that launched a whole new chapter. The brothers eventually partnered with Randy and Jared Dreher for two years and learned the ropes in the alcohol class before putting together their own program, which they continue to run under the Michalek Brothers Racing banner.

Ahead of this season, Michalek left his position as a creative director for an ad agency in New York City to go full throttle with React104. In recent years, he's produced remarkable pieces commemorating Summit Motorsports Park and spotlighting specific teams, and through a collaboration with Innovative Creation Experts, he's had the opportunity to tell visual stories for world

champions such as Ron Capps, Steve Torrence, and more.

"I really focus on elevating the way the sport of drag racing is portrayed," said Michalek. "I love creating videos and being able to marry that with my love for the sport of drag racing. I always tell people that I daydream in drag racing; I'm consistently thinking about it and how 'larger than life' it is. I do my best to take the feeling I get at the racetrack or in the cockpit of the race car and portray that through the medium of film.

"To be able to take a camera and recreate the stories I see on a daily basis with people who are heroes to me, I'm very grateful. I think it's the perfect match."



Shawn Kelly



JULIE NATAAS

Top Alcohol Dragster driver

After sweeping both the Baby Gators regional event and the Amalie Motor Oil NHRA Gatornationals, Julie Nataas is currently the points leader in the Top Alcohol Dragster category. While it's still early in the season, no one should be the least bit surprised by her success.

Anyone who has followed the Norway-born Nataas, from her earliest days as a Jr. drag racer and Super Comp driver in Europe to her current status as a championship contender with Randy Meyer's injected nitro team, has likely taken notice of her drive and determination. After a string of impressive top 10 finishes, she's clearly got her sights set a bit higher this season, most notably the championship.

"Of course, [the championship] is our goal every year, but sometimes things happen that you can't control. Last year, we got off to a great start and then lost a little something later in the year," said Nataas, of last season's sixth-place finish. "This year, we're working hard to get that back, and so far, it's been good. Winning those two races in Gainesville was a great way to start the season."

As a driver, Nataas wants to be known

as a complete package, and to that end, she didn't hesitate for a second when given the opportunity to drive Meyer's injected nitro Funny Car. Currently, she drives the Funny Car at Nitro Chaos events while racing the dragster in NHRA competition. The rest of the time Nataas spends at her adopted home in Brownsburg, Ind. She works out daily and also spends time on marketing and sponsorship proposals for what she hopes will be the next chapter of her career, a full-time nitro ride in the NHRA Camping World Drag Racing Series.

"I don't really see myself as an influencer, although I do have a lot of fans who want to follow what I'm doing, including quite a few from Europe," Nataas said. "I came to the U.S. about eight years ago, and racing [as a professional] has been my goal the whole time."

"I absolutely want to be in a nitro car, and I'm not picky; I'll race either Top Fuel or Funny Car. That's one of the reasons why I wanted to drive Randy's injected nitro car. I wanted to be able to show that I can handle either one. I'm working hard to make it happen, hopefully as soon as next year."



JAKE SANDERS

machinist, fabricator, tuner

When Brownsburg, Ind., became home to the bulk of NHRA's nitro teams, their arrival spawned a cottage industry of support companies and one of the most important is Snake Enterprises, which is run by Jake Sanders. From machine work to welding and fabrication, Sanders can pretty much do it all, and one of his specialties is repairing aluminum engine blocks. At the track, Sanders also tunes a variety of nitro-powered cars, primarily in the Nitro Chaos and NHRA Hot Rod Heritage Racing Series.

Sanders got his start in Nostalgia racing, most notably as the crew chief of the Mr. Explosive Nostalgia Funny Car, owned and driven by his father, Mark. Sanders grew up in Washington but quickly realized that Brownsburg was the land of opportunity.

"I got my start in mud and sand racing, but eventually, my dad wanted to build a Nostalgia car," Sanders recalled. "My high



school project was building a Nostalgia Funny Car. I did the wiring, plumbing, and a lot of the fabrication, and that got me started."

Before long, Sanders realized that his career path would best be served by moving to Brownsburg, so at 25, he took a leap of faith that has so far paid big dividends.

"I definitely saw a need, especially when it came to repairing blocks," he said. "I moved to Indiana, bought a house with a shop in the back, started the business, and never looked back. Today, I've got four CNC machines, and they all stay pretty busy. I've also got [a] jig table, so I can build or repair a car, mount a Funny Car body, or whatever else someone needs."

Sanders estimates that he repairs about 90 to 100 blocks per year for drag racers, tractor pullers, monster trucks, and boat racers. He says that most of the blocks, whether TFX, DSR, JFR, or Brad Anderson, use similar tooling, which helps expedite the process.

Sanders is also an accomplished tuner, who knows his way around a nitro engine. He's previously worked as a crewmember for several nitro drivers, including Steve Torrence, Krista Baldwin, and the Lagana Bros. Nitro Ninja entry.

"I really enjoy tuning, but I'm not sure that's where my future is," he said. "I mean, if a big-show team wanted to hire me, I'd certainly take a look at it, but that's a big commitment. I'd probably be more likely to build my own car and just run it when I felt like it."

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MICHAEL SCOTT president, Right Trailers

Michael Scott, president of Right Trailers, made his first appearance in NHRA *National Dragster* in the mid-1980s as a toddler sitting on his dad's shoulders at the NHRA Gatornationals, but he's become recognized for much bigger things over the last decade. His father, Hough, was a dedicated bracket racer in Florida and together they started a business selling trailers in the mid-2000s that will grow to 10-15 brick-and-mortar stores and a robust online presence over the next few years.

Scott has invested back into the sport, with the Right on the Number bonus program for racers running right on their dial-ins, and also sponsors more than two dozen racers in a variety of classes. In 2023, Right Trailers became the title sponsor for the Top Dragster and Top Sportsman classes and also renewed as the title sponsor of the NHRA Jr. Drag Racing League Western and Eastern Conference Finals.



“With the Jr. program and

its involvement with John Force Racing's next-gen program to the Right on the Number program and now with Top Dragster and Top Sportsman, we feel we've now tied all those together,” he said. “We're helping the sport of drag racing, from the very entry level to the most professional level, to move forward.

“We truly believe that the Jrs. are the next generation of drag racers: great sportsmanship and morals and good stewardship of the sport and as human beings. We want to elevate them to have something more than just the win. Bringing a large corporate sponsor to the Jr. Drag Racing League gives them that elevated platform. Camrie Caruso has been on our team for close to four years, and she communicates with the Jr. racers, so some of the teams not only get sponsorship from Right Trailers, but then they also get the interaction with Camrie. Honestly, we're not anticipating selling a trailer to a Jr. team, but it truly is just investing in that future generation.

“For the Right on the Number program, we wanted a simple program, something that racers can target, run a few decals, and just get paid. We increased that program with additional money this year to give it more prestige, and I get a lot of feedback that racers really do appreciate it. Certainly, it brings notoriety to Right Trailers, but more importantly, a racer literally can run one round, hit that program, go out in round two, and still go home with \$1,500, so that's pretty good round money.

“Top Dragster and Top Sportsman are the very highest level that you can run and not have round maintenance or need a big team to be successful, and that, to me, is deserving of more notoriety. And with our social influence and Street Outlaw connections that we're getting, it's just pushing NHRA and Right Trailers forward in a very good light, and that, to me, is the reward at the end of the day.”

LYNSI SNYDER owner and president of In-N-Out Burger, racer

NHRA and Southern California fast-food icon In-N-Out Burger made huge news late in 2022 with the announcement that In-N-Out, California's first drive-thru hamburger stand, had been named the title sponsor of both the In-N-Out Burger Pomona Dragstrip and the In-N-Out NHRA Finals as part of an exciting multiyear partnership. Additionally, the legendary track in Pomona will also play host to a massive event to celebrate In-N-Out Burger's 75th anniversary Oct. 22, with NHRA and In-N-Out Burger teaming up to celebrate the car culture that has been so important in the history of both organizations.

Lynsi Snyder-Ellingson, the owner and president of In-N-Out, was practically born into the sport. Her grandparents, In-N-Out founders Harry and Esther Snyder, were part owners of the famed Irwindale Raceway dragstrip in Southern California in the 1960s, and her father, Guy, later competed in NHRA's Competition eliminator class. The company has sponsored numerous racers since 1985, including Tripp Shumake, Dale Pulde, Tim Grose, Mark Oswald, Melanie Troxel, Shane Gay, and Rob Wendland.

Snyder-Ellingson's love of the sport came from her father, and she fondly remembers sitting in his race car in the pits at the Pomona track. Not just a fan and supporter of the sport, she has competed since she was 18. She won a divisional Wally in 2012 driving her dad's 588-cid '84 Camaro in Super Gas. She also raced a '70 'Cuda with a 709-cid engine in Top Sportsman before taking a five-year hiatus from the sport. She returned to the track in Top Sportsman at the 2023 NHRA Winternationals with a 200-mph '69 Chevelle using the same Chevy Hemi as before.

She also has two cars for future NHRA Hot Rod Heritage Racing Series races, including her dad's '69 Dart built for C/Gas with a 520-cid Chrysler motor and a '69 Dart for B/Gas with a 572-cid Chrysler motor.

“It's a match made in heaven with In-N-Out and its rich car culture and

our family's history in drag racing to come together with NHRA and blend both cultures,” she said. “I make different decisions every day at work thinking, ‘What would my family think?’ and I just feel like this is something that they would absolutely approve of, especially my dad.

“I wanted to sponsor and be a part of a sport that's near and dear to our hearts. It just seemed like the right thing to do and, for sure, seeing the brands together is exciting, especially to see In-N-Out's name on a racetrack. Most of my family on my dad's side has passed, and to have them in my heart, knowing that the dragstrip is a place that I connect with my dad and knowing that he would be so happy that I'm here racing. This track has so much rich history for my family, and so the 75th anniversary event here is going to be huge. People are just going to be blown away when they see what we have for them. This is very exciting.

“I really love that we're bringing more fans to drag racing because In-N-Out has quite a following around these parts, and there are a lot of people who want to check it out and see what it's all about. I'm excited because I think that there's a lot of people that should come check out the races.”





TONY STEWART

competitor, owner of Tony Stewart Racing

With 13 driving championships and 28 owner championships on his résumé, it's no surprise that Tony Stewart is a Hall of Fame player in the world of motorsports, and now the NHRA is benefitting from his notoriety, huge following, and his presence on major forums in broadcasting.

Stewart, the first and only driver to win championships in stock cars, Indy cars, and Midget, Sprint, and Silver Crown cars, started a two-car team in the NHRA Camping World Drag Racing Series last year with three-time Funny Car world champ Matt Hagan and Top Fuel star Leah Pruett, who combined for four wins during the 2022 season. Stewart's high-profile presence as a team owner invoked instant interest from his fans and fellow competitors in other motorsports.

Stewart's interest in and growing love for NHRA Drag Racing became even more evident when he made testing runs in a Top Fuel dragster and then licensed in and competed in Top Alcohol Dragster last fall, then won his first event at the 2023 NHRA Four-Wide Nationals. His hands-on participation has made him a true fan and believer in the sport, a dedication and respect that he regularly professes during his time as a color commentator on NASCAR's widely watched television coverage.

"When Leah and I started dating and I was able to come to more of the races, I just fell in love with it," he said. "I love all forms of motorsports, but to be able to really be a part of it and hang around Leah's team and be there for a whole weekend and start learning more about the sport, it was like going fishing: It set the hook, and I've been passionate about it ever since.

"That doesn't mean I'm less passionate about any other forms of motorsports, but I'm very passionate about NHRA right now. I feel like every weekend that we're at the track we're seeing more and more people from NASCAR; they still love their NASCAR, but now they're learning to love NHRA

as well, and that's something that I'm proud of, that I feel like we're helping make an impact on the sport and bringing a new fan base that may or may not have been fans of NHRA Drag Racing.

"I've said from day one, you just have to get them here one time, and I feel like they're fans for life, because this is an experience that you can't get at IndyCar, you can't get in Formula 1, you can't get at NASCAR, or any other form of sports, so I think this is a great arena. I think it's great for fans, it's great for sponsors, and I personally just like the atmosphere among the crews and the teams. Everybody hangs out, talks to each other, and it's really a giant family atmosphere, and that's something we've been missing in other forms of motorsports for quite a while."



ALEX TAYLOR

YouTube personality, co-host of *Hot Rod Garage*

Alex Taylor is currently building an empire around drag racing and the hot rod culture, and at this point, it doesn't seem like anyone, or anything, is going to stand in her way.

Taylor first gained notoriety as a teenager competing in Hot Rod Drag Week. With the help of her father, Dennis, Taylor transformed her '68 Camaro "Badmaro" into an eight-second street car, and she documented her adventures via her various social media outlets, including her YouTube channel, *Riding with Alex Taylor*, which currently boasts well over 100,000 subscribers.

More recently, Taylor has moved up to a six-second '55 Chevy and is the co-host of *Hot Rod Garage* on MotorTrend TV. She also spends quite a bit of time promoting her many corporate sponsors, including Isky Cams and Peak, and those are just a few examples of her handiwork.

While social media has made her a near household name in the racing industry, it does not define who Taylor is, and she's got the grease under her fingernails to prove it. From welding to fabrication or simply turning wrenches, Taylor will happily tackle almost any project, and she treats the majority of them as a learning experience, which she often shares with her audience.

"First off, when people take notice of you, it's humbling, and I try to always make sure I'm doing this for the right reasons," said Taylor. "When people come up and say that they wanted to get into racing or try building a car because of something you did, it's an honor. I want to help grow the sport, and that's one of the biggest reasons why I do this. I want to help carry this industry further because I love it so much."

NHRA fans will have a chance to see Taylor in action at the upcoming

Gerber Collision NHRA Route 66 Nationals in Chicago when she takes part in a special eight-car exhibition featuring several of the sport's quickest drag and drive vehicles. This marks the first time that Taylor will have the opportunity to race in front of an NHRA Camping World Drag Racing Series audience, and naturally, she's excited about it.

"It's a little intimidating, but it's also very cool," she said. "It's a chance to show what we do to a totally different audience. I'm excited, and the folks at Peak are excited. It's going to be a great show."



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TAYLOR VETTER Top Alcohol Dragster driver

Despite the fact that it's an A to B sport that plays out in mere seconds at a time, there is actually very little about drag racing that is easy. In some subdivisions of categories, the challenge is of considerable significance, and Taylor Vetter welcomes the challenge of driving one of the only supercharged Top Alcohol Dragsters in competition on the NHRA tour. Not only is she willing to tackle the tall order of performing the burnout at the correct rpm, mastering the clutch pedal, swapping feet at the right time, and hitting the shift points – she's thrilled to do so and shudders at the thought of driving a more straightforward A/Fuel combination.

Las Vegas native Vetter, who also races Super Comp and Top Dragster, was a quick study behind the wheel of the Nick Januik-tuned blown Top Alcohol Dragster. She made her debut late in 2021 as the only female to opt for the supercharged combination and committed to a full season in 2022. At the Charlotte NHRA Four-Wide Nationals that year, Vetter reached the final, locked down top speed of the meet, and had the only car to dip into the 5.2-second zone on Sunday. She exceeded 280 mph multiple times during the season and was the lone female to reach such speeds with a blown combination.

In a most spectacular (though wildly unsettling) manner, Vetter capped the year with a win at the 2022 NHRA Finals. En route to securing the win over Joey Severance, her dragster became unruly and tumbled onto its side, smashed into the guardwall, and slid to a stop in the shutdown area.

Vetter was unhurt and soon settled into redemption mode. She returned at the beginning of 2023 with a new car and a full year of experience to build upon.

"I really want to win a national event the normal way," said Vetter. "It was hard for me to celebrate that win – it still is – but the team was

so excited. I've learned a lot about the car, and I feel much more comfortable now, but I'm striving to be a better driver.

"The biggest lesson for me has been patience with the process. I'm extremely competitive, so I had to remind myself that there is a learning curve for all of us. When I look back, I'm proud of what we accomplished the first year doing this. We've already accomplished things a lot of others haven't. I know I'm very lucky to be where I am, and I'm excited for the future."



ELON WERNER owner, Werner Communications

Driving a race car is probably the easiest part of a drag racer's job, but for everything else, there are people like Elon Werner, who has redefined the role of team publicist into a combination team and NHRA ambassador over a 30-year career in the sport.

Werner graduated from Austin College as a business major, but he also worked in the college's Sports Information Office, which is where he first contemplated a role in sports PR and journalism. An internship with the Dallas Mavericks led to an introduction to Texas Motorplex, where he worked from 1993 until 2000, the last two years as publicist and general manager. He left the Motorplex to work public relations with Tony Fay PR until he was hired to assist Dave Densmore at John Force Racing. Werner was a steady hand through the team's tough years, which included Eric Medlen's death, John Force's Dallas accident in 2007, and he helped Brittany and Courtney Force with media training. He took over the lead role after Densmore's retirement and worked with John Force through 2019 before launching Werner Communications, which today represents young talent such as Justin Ashley, Josh Hart, and Camrie Caruso, as well as the Flexjet NHRA Factory Stock Showdown program. He's also done public relations for Shane Tucker, TJ Zizzo, Kalitta Motorsports, PRO, Buddy Hull, Cory McClenathan, Cruz Pedregon, Alexis DeJoria, Del Worsham, Tim Wilekson, Jon Capps, Jason Rupert, Ed Federkiel, and for Don Prudhomme's post-drag racing activities.

"I worked with NHRA for 30 years, so it has been a huge part of my life," he said. "I love the personalities. I love the teams and the companies that are associated with the sport. I've been involved from every side of the table —

from the track operator side, from the sponsor side, from the driver side — and I'm a storyteller. I like to meet interesting people and help them get the word out about what they're doing.

"Working with established teams like Force was great, but I really like working with younger teams that are really starting at ground zero. Being able to be a part of their operation and help them is probably the most fulfilling part of my job. I try to anticipate their needs, both on the PR side, sponsor management, and on their personal day-to-day side so they can concentrate on what they're there to do, which is win races and keep their sponsors happy."





JIM AND ANNIE WHITELEY racers, sponsors, and owners of J&A Service

Jim Whiteley has been gripped by drag racing since he was old enough to walk. He recalls being enthralled by hot rods on television or at the local dragstrip, and he's raced everything from Super Pro to alcohol and Pro Mod. He calls it a passion, and he and wife Annie, a Top Alcohol Funny Car champion, pour into it. They are both racers competing under the YNot Racing banner, but they don't race alone. Their business, J&A Service, graces a multitude of race cars in NHRA Drag Racing.

J&A Service is a professional oil and gas service company that performs completion, flowback, and production operations for exploration and production companies. In simple terms, they build oil field and industrial equipment, and they sell, lease, or operate it for the customer. The business has benefited from drag racing, and drag racing has benefited from the business. In addition to backing various drivers and teams, they've also sponsored select series within the sport, including the NHRA Pro Mod Drag Racing Series for several seasons.

Whiteley says that when their children were young, they used racing as an incentive to keep their grades up. If the grades were good, the children

were allowed to run their Jr. Dragsters. Young Steven Whiteley was bit by the drag racing bug at age 6 and made his Jr. Dragster debut as soon as he was the then-legal age of 8. Steven found his way to Pro Mod, while stepbrother Cory Reed opted for the two-wheeled sector. The J&A Service logo can also be found on the Pro Stock Motorcycle ridden by Joey Gladstone, the Top Alcohol Dragster wheeled by reigning world champion Joey Severance,

Top Dragster entries piloted by Delaina Whiteley and Anita Strasburg, and on the Top Sportsman cars manned by John and Kyle Baker.

"It's simple; we just love drag racing," said Whiteley. "I'd love to see more support for the Sportsman racer, all the way from Jr. Dragsters up to alcohol. For as long as we're capable, we'll continue. There are a lot of variables out there, with the economy and the way the world works right now, but we want to see drag racing succeed.

"We have a large area that we cover in our line of work, so businesswise, we're able to bring clients out to the track. Racing has always been company-oriented for us, but it's also been a big part of our family."

