

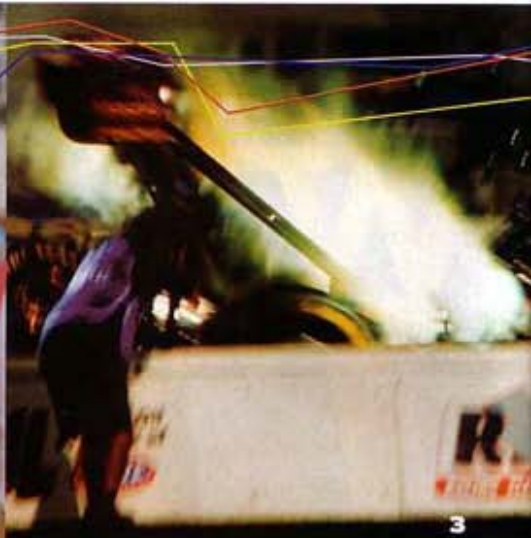
# WHAT A DRAG

Cold beer, smoked tires, and 40,000 fans in search of a little nitro. At the 50th running of the **U.S. Drag Racing Nationals** the races are only the beginning

*By Josh Dean • Photos By Joe Vaughn*







## You don't so much enjoy a Top Fuel drag race as endure it.

A few minutes before I witnessed an actual 300-mph run, I felt one. I was standing at the Nitro Barbecue food stand, quietly topping my brisket on a bun with extra spicy hot sauce, when the first of the Friday night Top Fuel qualifiers rolled through a puddle, powered up his 8000-hp engine, and burned a hundred yards of rubber down the quarter-mile Indianapolis Raceway Park straight. The ground rumbled, my teeth chattered, and I poured hot sauce on my shoes. It was over before I knew it.

Drag racing is speed in its purest form. Hit the throttle and hold on. One quarter-mile in a straight line, from a dead stop, zero to 300-plus miles per hour in under five seconds. Quickest man—or woman—wins. The National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) runs more than 20 races per year, north to south, east to west, but none is bigger than the Mac Tools U.S. Nationals, held each Labor Day weekend at Indianapolis Raceway Park, a paved patch in the cornfields a dozen miles or so west of the city's more famous track, The Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

And no Nationals has ever been bigger than the one held in 2004, which marked the 50th running of drag racing's Super Bowl. "The most anticipated drag racing event of the past decade," trumpeted *National Dragster*, which printed a special on-site daily paper for the occasion.

That meant unprecedented interest in what was already, in the words of John Force Racing star Gary Densham, "the race for drag racers in America."

Densham drives a California Auto Club-sponsored Funny Car, one of the two classes, along with Top Fuel Dragster, that shares top billing at NHRA events and is the realm of stars like Force, Tony Pendregon, Whit Bazemore, Larry Dixon, and Tony Schumacher. Mechanically, the two classes are the same, though they differ dramatically in style. Dragsters are 25 feet long and low to the ground, while Funny Cars sort of resemble production cars like Mustangs with aerodynamically enhanced, one-piece carbon-fiber bodies.

But it's not just about the big stars and their expensive cars; drag racing is very much the people's sport. More than 1000 cars—qualifiers from upwards of 2000 entries—rumbled into Indy for a chance to leave their rubber signature on the historic strip of blacktop. From Top Fuel to Top Alcohol to Pro Stock to Pro Stock Bike to Stock to Super Stock to Super Gas and the welcome-all-comers "Competition" class, America's speed junkies and grease monkeys descended for four days of burned rubber and beer drinking.

And boy do they drink beer. If you aren't holding a can of beer at IRP, you're either eight years old or empty and en route to the concession stand.

Or perhaps you work for the Army. Down on Nitro Alley, where pit crews and corporate sponsors do battle for attention over the whine of a hundred RV air conditioners, stands the U.S. Army Racing Zone. With its giant rock-climbing wall, bike, dragster, and tank simulators, and team of clean-shaven recruiters in search of a few good phone

numbers, it beckons to boys and girls alike, but especially to those between 17 and 34. Two signs are affixed at its entrance: "No Alcohol" and "Shirts Required." This says a little about the Army and a lot about the NHRA: The biggest, loudest fans are drunk and shirtless.

Wandering the pits at any given moment are ambassadors from America's fatty middle, the patriotic, meat-eating land mass between the country's tofu-fondling, martini-sipping coasts. Here are the men of mullets and mustaches, beards and ponytails, bandannas and jean shorts. In few other places will you see so many sleeveless shirts, Oakley wraparound shades, flame shirts, bare chests, American flags, and genuine, actual red necks—as in, sun ravaged expanses at the base of 35,000 baseball caps. (There is also an astounding number of guys who look like Randy Johnson.) If you wonder who voted for George Bush, attend an NHRA race, a rowdy, party-hearty motorsport mecca that at last answered my question: Who buys those "Certified Muff Diver, First Lesson Free" T-shirts?

**If you take away the beer**—and this will be difficult unless you're prepared to fight—the drag races are good ol' family-friendly fun. Sure, you'll find groups of guys partying their mesh caps off, but more common is the sight of husbands with wives, fathers with daughters, and multi-generational family groups waiting outside the pits—which, unlike those at any other motorsport event,





are fully open and accessible to fans—in hopes of getting something signed.

Take the Hess clan from Danville, Illinois. Kevin and Sandee have been coming to Indy for six years, and their love of racing is not for nothing: Their son Lance, now 20 and a sophomore, attends Illinois' Lincoln Tech on a full-ride racing scholarship, the last of its kind to be handed out by the school. (It now awards only partial scholarships.)

Family is certainly what drives Bill Shorts Racing, a no-frills Pro Stock team (that would be second tier below Funny Car and Top Fuel Dragster) competing in a league with megawatt sponsors like Mopar and Mac Tools. Shorts, from Erie, Pennsylvania, can't afford to run the whole circuit—the 67-year-old pays his own way and is, late on Saturday, on his back under the car frantically replacing his own clutch in order to get ready for his next qualifying run, just 15 or so minutes away. Bill's daughter Linda is his crew chief, and wife Patty, daughter Melinda, and even his granddaughters are in the pit, pitching in. "When I had my last daughter I left the hospital and went straight to the races," Patty says proudly.

She waves over her granddaughter Danielle, an adorable brunette who can't be older than eight. Danielle, she says, competes in Miniature Top Fuel Dragster—a junior event for children who find bare-knuckle boxing a tad dull. "I kept my kids in this, and now my grandkids," says Patty. "Racing is a high for them. It's better than drugs."

The Shorts have at least \$100,000 in their tricked-out Chevy Cavalier, which would barely cover the engine on a big money team like Schumacher, Force, or Prudhomme Racing.

Even farther down the food chain is Brian Oakes, an oil-company man who splits time between Saudi Arabia and New Jersey—"one month on; one month off"—using his downtime to prep his '69 Camaro for Super Stock D Automatic races. Prize money at this competition level isn't actually bad; the

winner gets somewhere around 15 grand paid out in \$300 chunks by the various sponsors whose stickers plaster his car—but he's also up against nearly a hundred opponents. Brian is here to win, but he isn't racing cars to get rich, nor to get laid. "I'm single," he says, pointing at the car that consumes a lion's share of his free time. "That's my wife there."

### *I can think of few other sports*

where the smart fan wears earplugs, and I can think of none where he doesn't look like a paranoid freak walking around in a gas mask. On a steamy afternoon in Nitro Alley, brothers Dave and Don Doyle stand along the ropes at John Force's Castrol Oil pit waiting for the money shot. Like a couple dozen other fans clustered around the tented RV area, the DoYLES want a blast of nitro—short for nitromethane, a fuel produced specifically for drag racing because it packs an incredible punch.

VP Racing, exclusive fuel provider for the U.S. Nationals, will go through 130 52-gallon drums of nitromethane over four days of racing, as well as 50 drums of methanol, and countless other containers of the 12 types of fuel used across the various classes of cars represented at Indy.

Force's mechanics, warming the engine for the night's qualifying run—he will qualify first, of course—fire up the 8000-hp powerplant, and the pit canopy flutters with nitro exhaust. Fans inhale, hoot, holler, and then...cough, sputter, and begin rubbing their eyes. Nitromethane exhaust is extremely high in nitric-acid vapor that, when inhaled, irritates the eyes, nose, throat, and respiratory tract, can cause pneumonia with prolonged exposure, and sometimes triggers a muscular reaction that makes breathing impossible. It is like huffing gas while rubbing your eyes with jalapeño peppers—and the Doyle brothers love it. "That's so cool!" they howl, pushing up their gas masks to high-five.

Marty Hough, a reporter for MRN Radio ("the voice of NASCAR"), told me while watching qualifiers from the media tower that if he goes too long between races he finds himself needing a "nitro fix." The first thing he did after dropping his computer off in the press room, in fact, was dash down to the pits and do what the DoYLES did—without a mask.

That is the province of the truly dedicated. On Monday, after Force has again set the tone by putting up the lowest time in the first elimination round (in the process setting a track record), his team refolds his braking chute, replaces the tires, and strips down the V-8 engine piece by piece, inspecting every piston, cylinder, bolt, and valve before rebuilding it.

As the last screw is pneumatically tightened, Scott Robinson, a shorter, better-groomed version of Jerry Garcia, pops in his ear plugs, squares his ample shoulders, and puts his hands on his hips, bracing himself as if preparing for a direct hit from Ray Lewis.

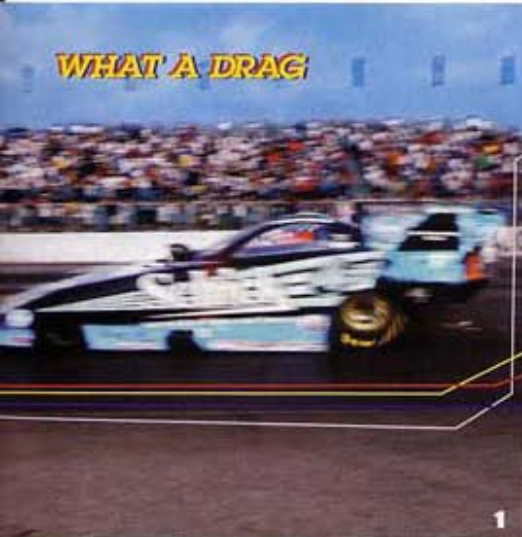
Force's mechanics crank up the engine and the tent ripples. Again, fans cough. Robinson doesn't so much as budge. Fumes pour from the pit and send people scattering. At least one child erupts in tears. But there, as the roar subsides, stands Scott, arms raised in triumph: "Woouoooooooooooo!"

Moments later, as he rubs his red, watery eyes, I ask him why—why the hell would you do that to yourself?

"This is like standing next to the space shuttle as it takes off," he explains. "You stand next to 8000 horsepower when they hit the throttle—you feel it go straight through you." He wipes at his eyes again. "It's almost a religious thing."

"I tell him it's as close to God as he's gonna get," his wife pipes in.





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So have they targeted the John Force pit specially? I ask.

Of course, they tell me, going on to say that Force, the Jordan of the sport, is not only good—he's also always there for his fans.

But what makes him so good?

"He's just blessed," the frizzy-haired brunette says, adding, "and he's a wildman."

**"Balls like coconuts"** is how MRN Radio's Hough puts it. "Pretty big balls," seconds all-time legend Don "The Snake" Prudhomme, now a team owner who runs two Funny Cars and the two-time defending Top Fuel dragster piloted by Larry Dixon. An ornery, well-preserved 63—"all those g-forces kept my skin tight," he says—Prudhomme is quick to point out that Force, who has won 113 career events, more than any driver in history, didn't start winning until the Snake himself walked away from Funny Cars in 1989. "And I remind him of that every day."

"There was only one Don Prudhomme, and he spanked me for 20 years," says Force, fresh from losing the final of the \$100,000 bonus race Skoal Showdown to his teammate Gary Densham, and as cheery and charming as ever ("he's the reason I work for the NHRA," a tour publicist told me). "No matter what the records say, he's the best Funny Car driver of all time."

"It's tough when you race Force, because you know you're racing the best guy that's ever been in

NHRA," Densham says, still wearing his sunglasses and firesuit in the post-race press conference. "No one's done what he's done."

A number of drivers as much as concede the weekend to Force, who is on such a roll heading into the event and through the first few days that public address announcer Bob Fry says over the loudspeakers that, "It is our opinion that John Force, right now, is as hot as he's ever been. In my experience watching over the years, when he's this hot, the rest of the field may as well forget it."

Fortunately for all of us, they do not.

**A few miles east** of the raceway, on old Crawfordsville Road, Clermont Liquors has shown its appreciation for the weekend's bounty of drinkers by offering up the best gift a drag junkie could ask for: cheap beer, in a can. "NHRA Special," reads the store's sign: "\$16.95 16 oz. Lite case."

Nowhere is the drinking more seriously considered than at Gombie's bar on wheels, a '77 Ford pickup outfitted with a picnic table on a platform covered by a canopy and topped off with a 12-foot lighted Old Style sign reading "Gombie's." The proprietor of this establishment is Jon Golembiewski, of Mokena, Illinois. Gombie and his sons Scott, Greg, and Mark also road trip to Joliet, St. Louis, and Talladega, but Indy is their Mecca; in fact, it's the only trip from which women are banned. ("Some wives and girlfriends came once," he told me. "After what they saw, I don't think they're ever coming back.")

The 50th running of the Nationals marks Jon's 30th year at Indy. "I missed one because I was best man in my buddy's wedding," he said, glassy eyes gleaming under the brim of his straw cap. "Pissed me off."

Gombie's three boys sit atop the pickup with assorted friends, pounding cans of Bud, Bud Light, and Miller Lite, with the occasional Schaefer thrown in for budgetary reasons. As Gombie introduces his sons, a stout, bearded redhead shakes my hand. "I'm adopted." This is Hawk, now in his 18th year at Indy. Like many members of Gombie's party crew, he's a family member by association. He just keeps showing up. His claim to fame was a star turn on CNN when he refused to abandon his friend's RV during a flood. Eventually, as the rear end sank into the waters, having safely packed away the beer, Hawk allowed himself to be rescued on national TV. His mom has the whole thing saved on DVD.

This week, Hawk traveled down from his home in Kenosha, Wisconsin, on exactly "fifty bucks." After a Friday night ticket, a case of beer, some ice, and a pack of batteries, he's down to a single dollar.

1 A Hilarious Car. 2 NHRA spring fashion show. 3 Frank Frisbe, keeper of the nitro. He works for VP Racing, exclusive fuel provider. 4 Dave and Dan Doyle on Nitro Alley. 5 Unburned nitro escaping. 6 Reveler caught celebrating his recent Harvard MBA. 7 \$850 worth of nitro. 8 No, they're not real. 9 Rhonda Hartman-Smith's daughter in the pits. RHS is the only female Top Fuel driver. 10 Eddie Smith, owner of West Virginia Racing. Runs cars in various classes, up to Super Stock.



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## The Mack Daddy Wally Parks, the man who started it all

**There would be no drag racing without Wally Parks,** a 91-year-old Oklahoma-born Californian who came of age in the era of speed. Parks tasted the power of the automobile on the dry lakebeds of California—where races were moved to get them off the streets—and never lost a thirst for it, helping to found the Southern California Timing

Association, which spawned the original "Speed Week" at Utah's Bonneville Salt Flats in 1949. Instead of facing each other, racers tackled the stopwatch, and the concept of drag racing was born. Parks would go on to edit *Hot Rod* magazine, then used that platform to launch the National Hot Rod Association in 1951 to set standards for safety and

performance. The NHRA's first official race took place in April 1953 in Pomona, California, but it wasn't until 1955 that the organization had a true capstone event: the U.S. Drag Racing Nationals, originally held in Kansas but then moved around before settling, in 1961, at their permanent home at Indianapolis Raceway Park. —JD

**Even when John Force loses,** he wins. Despite falling in the Funny Car quarterfinals to Gary Scelzi, Force's friend and teammate Densham would go on to the title, in the process dispatching Bazemore—who famously despises Force and lets everyone know it—in the semis. In addition, Force's daughter Ashley won her first ever title in Top Alcohol Funny Car, meaning that a new generation of Forces has arrived on the scene. Plus, Force himself would leave Indy with the lowest elapsed time (a track record 4.749 seconds) and the top speed (323.12 mph). All in all, not a bad weekend for a loser.

As Funny Car and Top Fuel Dragster classes share top billing, they alternate slots in the schedule. On the final day, Top Fuel finishes the weekend and Tony Schumacher, son of über-team owner Don Schumacher (he owns two bikes, two Funny Cars, and one dragster and is sometimes referred to as "The Don"), wins his third consecutive U.S. Nationals. As Schumacher and Densham amble toward the winner's circle, fans pour from the stands, filling the track and the grassy zones to its sides, invited over the PA to join in the revelry. It's appropriate that the people's sport should end this way, with fans and drivers partying side-by-side.

And it's even more appropriate that the last words I should hear—as I trudge to my car parked among many others in an Indiana cornfield—are from the PA: "We started Wednesday at 10 a.m. and here we are just before 5 on Monday. You know what? I'm done. Anybody out there got a cold beer?" mph

"I'll get home," he says, swaying a bit. "I always do." Gombie and the boys estimate they'll drink a case a day, per person, over the long weekend. Some days, none of the guys manages to cross the street, some days, all of them go—well, all but one. "That one over there," Gombie says, "that's the kitty. Camp cat. You know, like he never leaves, just lays around. He's the camp cat."

The side of Gombie's truck holds the wall of shame—choice shots from wet t-shirt contests gone by ("Only the ones we can legally show," which I should note includes a shot of a lithe naked woman sitting on the lap of a man in a wheelchair and preparing to be violated by a flashlight handle; other than that, it's quite tasteful) and choice photos of those unlucky enough to pass out while the party flame still burns hot. One shows a young lout of

maybe 20 duct taped to a telephone pole along the main highway. "When you're bad," Gombie says, "you get pole position."

"That don't sound good, dude," Hawk says, downing another Lite.

Fun comes in many forms for the fellas. For Hawk, it's easy drinkin'. For Gombie, it's the tradition—well, that and the drinkin'. For his son Scott, a goateed kid with glasses and what appears to be zero body fat, it's arm wrestling. One feature of the campground where Gombie pops his tent is nightly arm wrestling complete with padded table, referees in striped shirts, and Popeye, a bandanna-wearing emcee who looks like Willie Nelson and who, according to Hawk, once broke the arm of a state trooper who dared to challenge him on the table.







## Dragster Tech Under the hood of the Top Fuel car, a rocket on wheels

### What sort of fuel powers this rocketship?

Nitromethane, which is basically gasoline mixed with nitrous oxide. Pound for pound, nitromethane is less energetic than gasoline, but you can burn a lot more nitro in a cylinder, resulting in more power per stroke and two or three times more horsepower. And that's just by changing fuel.

### How fast do they burn it?

At full throttle, a Top Fuel engine burns more than a gallon of nitro per second using a fuel pump capable of delivering 50 gallons per minute. In an entire run, including burnout, a dragster will use between 15 and 20 gallons of this \$18-per-gallon fuel. The good

news: no lines at the pump.

### Why do flames shoot out the top—in a Top Fuel dragster—or side—in a Funny Car?

Nitro burns less quickly than gasoline, and at race speeds there's not enough time to burn all of the nitro between when the spark plug fires and when the exhaust valve opens—meaning that still-burning nitro is expelled into the exhaust pipe. It also looks cool.

### How do they get that much air into the engine?

All Top Fuel dragsters employ a supercharger, mounted atop the engine's intake manifold. This supercharger, spinning at 10,000 rpm, will displace 100,000 cubic inches of air per minute.

### What's the engine like?

Most teams employ an aluminum replica of the iconic Chrysler Hemi V-8, displacing a maximum of 500 cubic inches. Throw in cylinder heads, connecting rods, an intake manifold, supercharger, and fuel pumps and you're looking at a minimum of \$50,000 for an

engine that breaks after nearly every run.

### How often does it need service?

Like I said, after every run. An engine on a dragster that makes it to the finals at an event will be taken apart and reassembled eight times over the course of a weekend—a Sisyphean task if ever there was one. The stress of that much power applied so quickly can cause any number of problems—most commonly cylinder burnout—so crew members must inspect every bolt to make sure it doesn't explode on the track. During Sunday eliminations, teams are given a maximum of 75 minutes between runs to get the cars off the track, serviced, and back on the track. It rarely takes that long.

### What about those tires?

Dragsters sit on massive Goodyear slicks that are 18 inches wide and nearly 10 feet in circumference. Air pressure is generally set around four pounds. Two types of front tires are used for those silly-

looking toy wheels that ride up front—small airplane-style tires are used for quicker reaction times, and larger, bicycle-size units for better elapsed times.

### Well, that's all great, but how do I stop it?

The driver can activate rear brakes using a hand lever in the cockpit, but that's hardly enough to stop a 2000-pound car doing 330 mph. The driver's primary braking system is a set of two parachutes that produces up to five negative g forces of stopping power. Enter the six-point harness.

### Okay, now really blow my mind.

A dragster's Hemi produces 4gs during acceleration and turns out more power than 16 NASCAR stockers. How quick are they? A recent mass-mailed email posed this scenario: You are driving a modified Corvette and are given a head start that allows you to pass a stopped dragster at 200 mph. Over a 1320-foot quarter-mile course, you still lose. Put that in your pipe and smoke it. —JD

1 Jon "Gombie" Golembiewski's party on wheels.

2 Lance Hess, 20, of Danville, Illinois. On racing scholarship at Lincoln Tech.

3 The light-off.

4 A sign on Crawfordville Road, just east of the track.

5 Poorer teams make money however they can.

6 At the RV camp outside the track where much of the partying takes place.

7 Some previous parties at Gombie's.

8 Jesse James at the Mac Tools booth. Jesse sponsors Scott Kalitta's Top Fuel dragster.

9 A Very Funny Car.

10 Remnants of a Friday night party.

11 Brian Oakes and his '69 Camaro 427.

