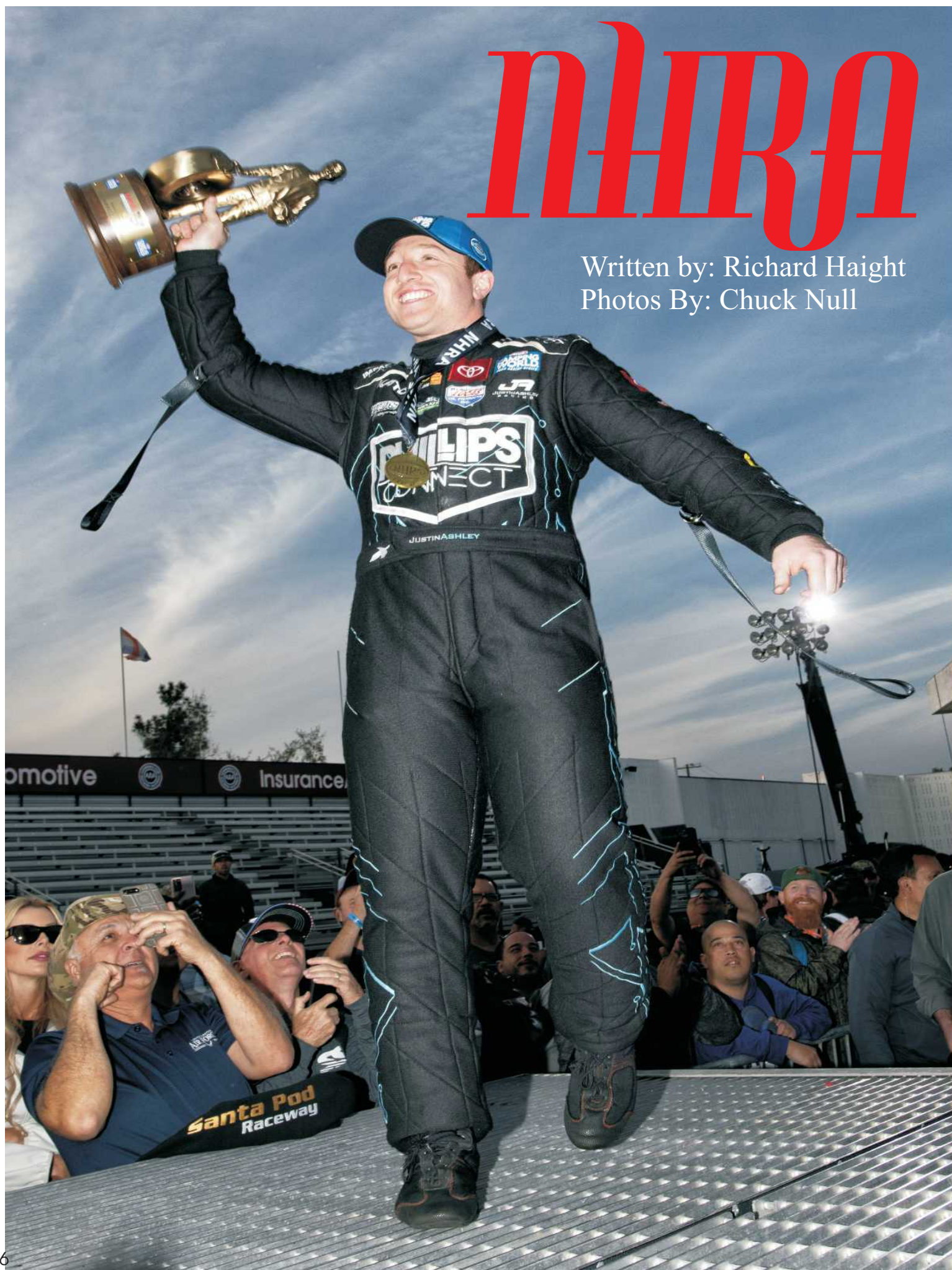


NHRA

Written by: Richard Haight
Photos By: Chuck Null



The National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) opened the season with the traditional “WinterNationals” event held at their home track, The FairPlex in Pomona, California. In addition to being a warm, clear California weekend, everyone was looking to see what performance would be like, as the track surface was recently completely re-ground and polished to better level out the entire track.. A smoother surface equals better traction and more speed. In addition, as we noted after last year’s Camping World Finals, there have been big changes, lots of movement and new teams. DSR or Don Schumacher Racing lost 3 of it’s 4 drivers, and others started new teams, like World Champions Antron Brown, and Matt Hagen. Add to that, 3-time NASCAR Champion Tony “Smoke” Stewart, started an entire new team, and brought Top Fuel Winner Leah Pruett to the team. Well, actually to the family, as Tony and Leah were just married! New teams, new cars, a new track surface, and everyone was starting back at “Square one” for this event. If you know Drag Racing, you know that there are lots of different classes, from the Hairy-Ass 11,000 Nitro fueled cackle monsters known as “Top Fuel Dragsters” and Funny Cars, down to the “Junior Dragster” classes. The Juniors run small engines which were originally based on the Briggs and Stratton engines we all used to see on our Dad’s Lawnmowers. Or, if you were old enough, the Briggs and Stratton’s YOU used to mow those lawns! They may look a look like Briggs and Stratton’s, but if you look closely, you will see, that much like the engines used in the Top Fuel classes, they are a conglomeration of precisely made, CNC machined billet aluminum, Chrome-moly steel and the occasional bits here and there of Titanium and carbon fiber. The Junior Dragsters may not trigger alarms at Jet Propulsion Lab (JPL) like the Top Fuelers do on race day, but the competitors are just as serious about winning! More importantly, these are the “Stars of Tomorrow” the John Force’s, Antron Browns, Matt Hagens and Erica Enders of tomorrow who will keep this sport alive long after the loons try and force us all into electric “appliances” on the roads. The attendance was not as large as usual, due to the various Covid restrictions, and ticket sales were severely limited, that is, until 3 days before the event, when the restrictions were lifted by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health! By then, a lot of People had made other plans or spent their entertainment money on other events. It sure as hell didn’t reduce the enthusiasm of the fans who were able to attend! As mentioned, by the time the first round of Top Fuel lined up, it was 11:00AM and the temperature was in the high 70’s. Near ideal conditions with no breeze! The track temperature was



Warm and the air was still reasonably dense. The track resurfacing obviously worked, and the results were there. 3-time Champion Antron Brown laid down a 3.72 second elapsed time to defeat the new Mrs. Leah (Pruett) Stewart with a 3.74 ET at 328.86 Miles per hour. How would you feel if you just ran a time only 9/100’s of a second from the all-time Low ET record, and lost in the first round? To top it off Leah ran a 328.86 MPH to Antron’s 327.66! The other winners in the first round were Austin Prock over Clay Millican, who lost an engine. Brittany Force ran a 3.699, only 7/100’s slower than the absolute low ET record of 3.623 which she already holds, to put Ron August on the trailer! As a side note, Brittany also holds the all-time fastest speed record for a top fuel dragster at 338.17 Miles per hour. But it was an expensive win, as she punched out the #6 rod through the block, and welded the #8 intake valve to the top of the piston. Let’s just guess \$15,000 on the low side! Then it was Justin Ashley running a 3.699 to defeat Jim Maroney at 4.056, Mike Salinas over Buddy hull 3.718 over 3.966 and last years Top Fuel Champ, Steve Torrence with a 3.72 pass at 328 Miles Per Hour defeating a limping Doug Foley who ran a 6.629 at 100.66 MPH with a broken car. Continued –





In Funny Car, it was the 1st and 16th qualifying drivers meeting in the first round of races. John Force, the biggest personality in Drag racing, if not the entire sports world, faced off with Ron Capps. Luck was not with John as he had problems and ran a 10.41 at only 76 MPH to Capps pass of 3.92 and 329 MPH. J.R. Todd took out Bobby Bode with a 3.957 run to Bode's 4.039, a decent side-by-side race. But a few others had problems either with machinery or with the track surface and tires. They often "shake" their tires when the thin sidewalls flex and lose traction, causing a bit of wheel hop. They momentarily lose traction causing them to spin and "go up in smoke". Cruze Pedragon, or "The Cruzer" laid down a good run of 3.95 seconds at 323 MPH, while Terry Haddock couldn't keep it stuck to the ground, losing with a 6.011 time at only 120.36 miles per hour, only a third of Pedragon's top speed! One of the ladies, Alexis DeJoria, driving the Rokit/Bandero Tequila car ran a strong 3.97 ET over the number 12 qualifying Jim Campbell to match her up with "The Cruzer" in the 2nd round. John Force Racing's Robert Hight pulled off a great 3.89 second win over one of those with problems, Jason Rupert who lost power and barely made it to the finish running only 231.79 miles per hour, a hundred miles per hour slower than Hight. It was Tony Jurado by pure luck over Wilkerson with a 5.416 ET (elapsed Time) to Wilkerson's 5.972 as both encountered trouble and both ran less than 200 MPH. Traditional superpower Matt Hagen was next up and squared off in another troublesome match-up with both running almost equally slow times. After identical .072 reaction times, Hagen lucked out to finish 5/100's of a second ahead of Chad Green, but a much slower top speed of only 260 MPH to Green slower but faster 282.13 top speed. Both Hagen and Green ran more than 55 MPH slower than the over 325 MPH fast times. The final race of the 1st round was another of those rounds where someone, no matter how slow, had to be declared the winner. Perennial Powerhouse Bob Tasca

squared off against the number 11 qualifier Jeff Arend, and both were lucky to get to the end. Tasca at 4.268 edged Arend at 5.038 with Tasca and Arend running 115 and 170 miles per hour slower than the rest of the group! The second round of Top Fuel started out with Brittany Force and Josh Hart running near identical times of 3.726 to 3.728 with Brittany at 322 MPH to Hart's faster 329. But Brittany had a .052 reaction time to Hart's .073 to take to win. But this time she punched 2 rods through a \$15,000 block to put her crew to another frantic hour's worth of thrashing to replace the entire motor in time for the third round! The track was not done with the racers yet, as Tony Schumacher, off for most of 2021, was back for a full season in 2022 with sponsorship from SCAG Power equipment, squared off with Austin Prock in the Montana Brand/Rocky Mountain Twist /John Force racing car. Prock pulled off a hole-shot with a .043 reaction time to Schumacher's .099, and Tony encountered serious problems as the Multi-Time National Champion could only muster a 8.516 ET at 74 MPH to Prock's 3.780 at 329 Miles per hour. The next race pitted Justin Ashley against ex-World Champion Antron Brown, with both netting identical .053 reaction times. Justin however, pulled a near record ET of 3.692 and 333.33 MPH to Brown's excellent, but lost 3.742 ET at 326 MPH. The last race of the round netted 2021 Champ Steve Torrence a 3.718 ET at 326 MPH as the track continued to plague the competitors as Mike Salinas ran a 10.541 losing time at 76.35 MPH. The "Pro-Stocks" were up next as 5-time National Champion Erica Enders, and newly crowned 2021 and 5-time National Champ Greg Anderson were both out to start out 2022 as winners. Out of the 16 top qualifiers Erica Enders, Dallas Glenn, Greg Anderson, Deric Kramer, Aaron Stanfield, Roger Brogden, Fernando Cuadra and Bo Buetner waded their way through the first round with speeds running all within the same 2 mile per hour window! The low was 208.23 to Erica's best at **210.05. The high and low**



Elapsed times were even closer with only 46/1000's of a second separating the entire field. Talk about close! Next up was the third round of "Top Fuel" or Semi-Finals. You earn Championship points for each round you win, so it is important to get as far in the elimination rounds as possible. It is not a "Winner Take All" system, so consistency is critical. By now, it was down to only 4 cars, and the first pair were Austin Prock versus Brittany Force. It is tough when you have to run your own team-mate. While both Austin and Brittany have different primary sponsors, they are both part of John Force Racing. This promised to be a "Barn-Burner" of a match-up as both qualified in the top 4 for this event, and were less than 6/100's of a second apart in Qualifying. When the lights went green, both had sub 50/100's of a second reaction times, and it was Barn-Burner in more ways than one. Both hit half-track in the 2.9 second range but it was Prock with an 11/1000's of a second lead! But at the finish line both of them blew their blowers off simultaneously!

Prock took the win by 3/1000's of a second, and got there only by way of a 14-thousandths of a second hole shot at the start! The results? Well, another very expensive 60 minute thrash before the next round. The second pair of Semi-Finalists were the new National Champ Steve Torrence against Justin Ashley, the number 2 and number 6 qualifiers. Torrence is pretty consistent, with 51 Top Fuel Wins from 82 final round appearances, and he rode that record to his 4th consecutive National Championship at the end of 2021. The guy has to be tough, as he survived cancer as a teen. But it left him with complications that almost killed him with a heart attack 15 years later in 2016 as a result! Justin is the talented up-and-coming youngster of the pair with only 8 career final round appearances, 2 in "Sportsman" class and 3 in Top Fuel. But when the lights went out, he took a 6/1000's of a second hole-shot, and virtually identical times at 60, 330 and 660 feet to a 28/1000's win over the more experienced Torrence in the CAPCO/Torrence Racing Team car. The Semi's in Funny Car were all veterans, with Ron Capps and Cruz Pedregon going off first, and Robert Hight and powerhouse Matt Hagen running second.

Capps and Pedregon squared off for a good side-by-side race, but a vastly slower (for a drag racer) reaction time left the Cruiser 3/100's and 24 Miles per hour slower at the finish. The last pair was John Force Racing's Three-Time National Funny Car Champion Robert Hight, matched with another three-time National Champion Matt "Hulk" Hagen! Robert holds both the Low Elapsed time and fastest Top Speed records in a Funny Car, and both are fierce competitors at the track. Although Hagen "Left" on Hight recording a much quicker reaction time of .048 to .059, Hight literally drove past Hagen, recording a 3.861 second pass at 332MPH to Hagen's 4.026 / 317.64 Miles per hour run.

I would hate to run a 317 mile pass in 1000 feet and lose! Next up were the Pro-Stock semi's, featuring what was expected to be one of the best races of the week-end. It was 5 time National Champion Erica Enders against the 2021 and 5-time returning National Champ, Greg Anderson. While we are used to seeing quick reaction times, this round was borderline robotic, with Erica hitting a .012 (That's 12/1000's of a second folks!) to Anderson's 26/1000's of a second! Anderson ran a 6.797 ET, but Erica showed those detractors who claimed that she was "Getting Old" that it ain't so kids! She ran a 6.569 to double her start line advantage and cruised to a 209 MPH top speed. Last up it was the pairing of Aaron Stanfield against one of the Cuadra brothers (Fernando). At the top end, it was Stanfield over Cuadra with both guys running within the same Mile Per Hour at 208.71 to 207.78. Erica means to make sure that all of the boys know she means business in 2022. All that was left was the Finals. The match-ups were:

TOP FUEL = Austin Prock versus Justin Ashley

FUNNY CAR = Ron Capps versus Robert hight

PRO-STOCK = Erica Enders versus Aaron Stanfield

Erica had an easy go at it, as the Enders / Stanfield match didn't go well for Aaron. He broke right out of the gate. Erica ran a smoking fast 6.559ET at 210.31 Miles Per Hour,

leaving Aaron to effectively coast home with a 13.25 ET at 67.26 Miles Per Hour. The penultimate round of the day rolled up at 4:25 PM as the sun was beginning to dip a bit by now. John Force Racing's Robert Hight faced off against multi-event winner and 2021 National Champ Ron Capps.

Capps was the number 1 qualifier, and started off with a 19/1000's of a second jump on Hight. But it didn't last for long as Hight pulled away slowly with a .016 lead at the 60 foot mark, a .012 lead at 3330 feet, an .020 lead at 660 feet and a .019 second lead at the finish. Close? The difference between the cars at the finish line was 1 foot!

The final "Final" of the day put the youngster, Justin Ashley up against Austin Prock. At the lights, they had reaction times one 1/1000th of a second apart with the advantage, if you can call it that, going to Prock. However 60 feet and .77 of a second later, Ashley was .012 ahead and at the line, he had a lead of just 2/100's of a second, running a slower 314.53 to Prock's 333.00, but arriving sooner! The crowd went nuts as the margin of victory was literally inches.

The fans (as many as there were) loved it and all I can say is that if the rest of the season goes like this, we are in for some thrills! Photos to continue -



YUMMY









