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Dodge HEMI® Challenge Celebrates 20th Anniversary at the “Big Go”

- The Dodge HEMI® Challenge celebrates its 20th anniversary during the 2021 Dodge//SRT NHRA U.S. Nationals in Indianapolis Sept. 2-3
- The longest running, continuous, specialty race in NHRA history showcases Super Stock 1968 Dodge Darts and Plymouth Barracudas in head-to-head battles for an iconic custom-made Dodge HEMI Challenge trophy and \$15,000 winner's prize
- Dodge HEMI Challenge Grand Marshal and legendary Mopar Stock and Pro Stock racer Herb "Mr. 4 Speed" McCandless will lead the iconic muscle cars in a parade for fans prior to elimination rounds
- Defending winner Stephen Yantus III, four-time winner Jim Daniels Jr. and inaugural winner Bucky Hess II return to vie for the uniquely crafted trophy and bragging rights

September 2, 2021, Indianapolis, IN - The ever popular Dodge HEMI® Challenge celebrates its 20th anniversary at the National Hot Rod Association's (NHRA) prestigious Dodge//SRT U.S. Nationals, affectionately known as the “Big Go,” at Lucas Oil Raceway in Indianapolis this weekend. The longest running, continuous, specialty race in NHRA history features heads-up, wheel standing, side-by-side racing of vintage HEMI-powered 1968 Dodge Dart and Plymouth Barracuda “package cars” that have dominated the NHRA Super Stock (SS/AH) class for more than five decades.

In celebration of the classic muscle cars that contributed to the Dodge and Mopar brands' legendary reputation and success at the drag strip, Dodge//SRT NHRA U.S. Nationals Grand Marshal Herb "Mr. 4 Speed" McCandless will also serve in the same role for the Dodge HEMI Challenge and lead the field of qualified Darts and Barracudas down the Indianapolis track's fabled return road in a parade prior to Friday's eliminations rounds aboard his own original 1968 Super Stock HEMI Dart.

The winner of the Dodge HEMI Challenge takes home the uniquely crafted 42.6-lb. trophy, made from a 426 HEMI cylinder head. All 16 drivers who reach the elimination rounds will receive cash rewards, with the winner earning an extra \$15,000 prize.

Among the participants vying for the iconic custom-made trophy and bragging rights will be driver Bucky Hess II, winner of the inaugural edition of the (then Mopar) Dodge HEMI Challenge that took place in 2001.

“It was the best HEMI Challenge ever and to be able to share that with my wife and son made it so special,” said Hess. “When we came up the return road at Indy, the stands were full and the whole crowd stood and gave us a standing ovation as we drove by in my HEMI Barracuda. It looked like the wave at a football game. They (NHRA) were running a Pro Stock qualifying session and they stopped them to let us drive through to the front of the tower. Like they say, the first is the one they will always remember and I'll never forget that evening at the 2001 NHRA U.S. Nationals.”

Other previous winners of the fan-favorite event that relives the amazing history of factory-supported drag racing include Richard Beshore (2002), Jerry Jenkins (2003) and five-time NHRA Pro Stock champion Jeg Coughlin Jr. (2004), Charlie Westcott Sr. (2009), Jim Daniels Sr. (2010) and Rick Houser (2007 and 2013). Charlie Westcott Jr. is the winningest HEMI Challenge driver with six titles (2005, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2012 and 2014).

Jim Daniels Jr. returns in his vintage HEMI-powered '68 Dodge Dart as a four-time winner (2016-2019) after seeing his record four-year, 19-round consecutive win streak come to an end last year with a first round loss.

"The success that we have had in the Dodge HEMI Challenge feels like you're on cloud nine," said the 25-year-old Daniels, who remains a favorite as a front runner at this year's event. "Having the opportunity to win one Dodge HEMI Challenge is an absolute dream come true, but being able to win four consecutive events was out of this world. This is a race we prepare for all year so when you are victorious at the end of the day, it's all a big dream come true.

"The competition is definitely going to be tough at this year's event," added Daniels. "You are going to have a handful of cars that are more than capable of winning the event. You can't take any of these guys lightly as they are all gunning for that awesome HEMI cylinder head trophy and the \$15,000 check. The competition will be tough, so you must be prepared. The Dodge HEMI Challenge is extremely important to me. This is the one race we put a ton of time and resources into each and every year and it is by far one of my greatest achievements in my racing career."

A new winner was crowned last year when Stephen Yantus III drove a '68 Barracuda from the No. 1 qualifier position through eliminations, where he set the low elapsed time and top speed of the event with an 8.410-second, 158.65-mph run to earn the victory and coveted trophy.

"The 2020 event was the fourth time we ran at the Dodge HEMI Challenge and the first three times didn't treat us very well," said Yantus. "We started off very green and had to learn a bunch as quick as we could learn it. These elephants (426 HEMI engine) are very difficult to understand and master how to best get them down the track. Not too many people were stepping up to the plate to help us. This class is very competitive and secrets stay secrets. You have to earn your stripes and take your licks in the SS/AH class. But there isn't another class out there like it. Racing these iconic HEMI package cars has always been my dream and they're amazing to watch."

Yantus is among 23 entrants for the 20th anniversary HEMI spectacle.

"It should be a great show for the fans," added Yantus, "and to have that many cars I think that's great to show Dodge that there still is a want and need for these cars and by showing up is telling Dodge thank you for doing this for us."

The Dodge HEMI Challenge will be streamed online via NHRA.TV with subscription-based video-on-demand coverage of live qualifying and elimination rounds at Lucas Oil Raceway on Sept. 2-3.

The final elimination round of the Dodge HEMI Challenge, as well as highlights from the parade of participating 1968 Dodge Darts and Plymouth Barracudas, will be broadcast on FS1 during the qualifying show on Friday, Sept. 3 from 7-9 p.m. Eastern. Fans can also look for HEMI Challenge highlights during the NHRA coverage of the Dodge//SRT U.S. Nationals on Sunday Sept. 5, on FS1 from 11 a.m.- 1 p.m. and then on the FOX national broadcast network from 1 - 4 p.m. EDT.

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