

Stewart Has Solid Debut as Top Fuel 'Rookie' at NHRA Gatornationals, Hagan Takes Dodge//SRT Hellcat to Funny Car Quarterfinals

- Racing legend Tony Stewart may have been a Top Fuel “rookie” at Sunday’s NHRA Gatornationals, but he looked like a veteran with an impressive NHRA National event debut
- Driving the Tony Stewart Racing (TSR) Dodge//SRT® Direct Connection dragster, Stewart proved very quick off the starting line in the first round before losing a close race to Justin Ashley
- After limited testing due to rainstorms during race week, Stewart recorded four strong qualifying runs with a best of 3.729 and produced the quickest reaction time of the entire event at 0.021
- Reigning NHRA World Funny Car champion Matt Hagan opened his title defense in the bright red-and-black TSR Direct Connection Dodge//SRT Hellcat by qualifying fourth at 3.883
- The four-time NHRA World Champion then scored the quickest elapsed time in the opening round with a 3.869 in defeating Daniel Wilkerson and advancing to the quarter finals
- Hagan, a two-time NHRA Gatornationals Funny Car winner (2022 and 2023), smoked the tires in the quarter finals against Chad Green
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March 11, 2024, Auburn Hills, Mich. - Racing legend Tony Stewart may have been listed as a Top Fuel “rookie” driver this weekend in the 55th annual Amalie NHRA Gatornationals, but the NASCAR Hall of Famer looked like a veteran behind the wheel of the 11,000-horsepower Tony Stewart Racing (TSR) Dodge//SRT Direct Connection dragster in his opening 2024 drag-racing event.

Stewart’s Top Fuel debut was one of the most anticipated opening performances in the past decade in the Mission NHRA Drag Racing Series, and the driver known as “Smoke” was impressive all weekend despite limited testing entering the Gatornationals due to rain.

Stewart, a multi-time motorsports champion in NASCAR, IndyCar and USAC competition, replaced his wife Leah Pruett in the cockpit of the popular red-and-black Top Fuel dragster as he entered his first NHRA professional drag race with some apprehension in switching from a sportsman class in 2023 to the highly competitive nitro-burning Top Fuel category. The Stewarts plan to start a family in 2024.

But the 52-year-old driver from Indiana showed he will be a challenger in the Top Fuel division this year as the 21-race campaign moves to the next round at Pomona, California, March 22-24 for the Lucas Oil NHRA Winternationals. Despite being defeated in the opening round by young Justin Ashley, Stewart recorded the quickest reaction time during Top Fuel eliminations Sunday with a 0.021.

Stewart left the starting line first (.021 to Ashley’s .031) and led at half-track before his machine and Ashley’s car both lost traction in the first race of the day. Stewart showed quick reflexes by adjusting the throttle and only losing a tight race at 4.453 to Ashley’s 4.414. In addition, Stewart clocked strong qualifying runs in his debut showing with 3.725, 3.739 and 3.791 to place ninth entering Sunday’s elimination rounds.

“I’m extremely pleased with my first Top Fuel weekend, even with the first-round loss today,” said Stewart. “I cut an 0.21 light against the best leaver in the Top Fuel division, Justin Ashley, and beat him off the line. We were the first pair of cars down the track on Sunday morning, so we really didn’t know what to expect. I felt the tires start to shake and I pedaled the throttle. I got back into the pedal as quickly as I could. But Justin just nipped me at the line. I’m elated with how things went overall this weekend. I feel we showed a solid performance with the car and myself.

There is zero shame in my eyes, even losing to Justin. Seven other guys went home after the first round too.

“As a rookie in Top Fuel, I hope I gained the respect of the other competitors in the class. I feel I was consistent with my starting line procedures. I have learned a lot from Leah and Matt (Hagan) with these nitro cars. Making that first qualifying run Friday afternoon was the most nerve-wracking for me. Going from the alcohol car (2023) to the Top Fuel car is similar to going from a Busch (stock car) to a Cup car. The cars are different, but the procedures are the same for me. I'm not leaving here (NHRA Gatornationals) thinking I know everything about Top Fuel racing. I know it's going to be a long learning process. It's a tough situation for Leah not being in the car right now, but she has been the best coach for me. I would have liked to advance further today, but that's racing and I'm still learning with each run down the track.”

Stewart's TSR Dodge//SRT teammate, four-time NHRA World Funny Car champion Matt Hagan, was attempting to score his third consecutive Gatornationals win Sunday after qualifying fourth in the 16-car field. Hagan looked strong in the opening round of eliminations with low elapsed time of the round at 3.869 in defeating Daniel Wilkerson in the bright red-and-black TSR Direct Connection Dodge//SRT Hellcat.

However, in the quarter finals, Hagan's mount smoked the tires at the start and Chad Green advanced with the win.

“That is obviously not the way we want to start the season and the Gatornationals, as the defending event winner the last two years,” said Hagan. “But that is drag racing and the sport will humble you. We have to keep things in perspective. No one in the trailer was expecting the car to knock the tires off when I hit the throttle. Sometimes these things happen, and you go back to the drawing board. We were trying to be aggressive, and I think it was too much for what the track was going to handle. It's hard for me to be upset with anyone when we're trying to run hard, aggressive and fast. As bad as it is, you just move onto Pomona. That's comforting knowing we have a lot of runs and races ahead of us. We're still in a bit of a test mode ironing some things out. We'll just keep moving forward now.”

At the NHRA Winternationals, nitro qualifying gets underway on Friday, March 22, at 5 p.m. PDT with two more qualifying rounds scheduled for Saturday, March 23, at noon and 2:30 p.m. PDT with Sunday's final eliminations set for 11 a.m. PDT.

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