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## Busch Will Attempt To Go Straight This Weekend

[John Sturbin](#) | Senior Writer, RacinToday.com Friday, 11 March 2011



Former Sprint Cup champion Kurt Busch will make his debut in an NHRA Pro Stock car this weekend at the Gatornationals. (Photo courtesy of the the NHRA Full Throttle Drag Racing Series)

Kurt Busch last raced as a rookie a decade ago, when he made the career-altering leap from NASCAR's Camping World Truck Series to a full-time Sprint Cup ride with team-owner Jack Roush.

One championship and 22 Cup victories later, Busch is poised to join a distinguished list



of NASCAR stars who have crossed-over to NHRA drag racing. Busch is scheduled to make his Pro Stock debut today during the first of four rounds of qualifications for the 42nd annual Tire Kingdom NHRA Gatornationals at Gainesville (Fla.) Raceway, the East Coast kickoff of the sanctioning body's 60th anniversary.

"It feels like being a rookie all over again," said Busch, who shared a dais with Top Fuel legend "Big Daddy" Don Garlits and Funny Car icon John Force on Thursday. "To sit on the stage with Big Daddy and John, it's amazing to see what the sport has done over the

years and how the cars were the attention back in the day; on what Big Daddy was building and what those legends of the sport were putting out on the racetrack.

“And seeing it now, seeing it come full-circle, it’s the names that are here that are the attention-makers, and that’s what makes this fun for me to come out. Yeah, I’m Kurt, I drive on the NASCAR side. But I’m just the new guy. I don’t want the extra attention.”

Still, Busch’s Shell Dodge Avenger figures to be seriously scrutinized during each quarter-mile lap as he tries to qualify on the 16-car ladder for Round 2 of the 22-event Full Throttle Drag Racing Series.



Kurt Busch will attempt to win his second race of the year in Florida this weekend. (Photo by Jared C. Tilton/Getty Images for NASCAR)

Busch, who finished fifth in NASCAR’s season-opening Daytona 500 three weeks ago, is competing in Gainesville while the Cup Series takes an early-season weekend off.

Busch “moonlighted” at Gainesville last year as a Sportsman racer in Super Gas, where his Dodge Challenger was trailered after a first-round loss. “Well, last year, with the weather the way it was...we sat there watching rain for four days,” Busch said. “I’m like, really, this is my off-weekend from Cup. I only have three or four a month, we are so busy on the Cup circuit, but I’m a car-guy and I wanted to be here racing and I only got to make two passes.

“It’s just one of those feelings where it gave me that taste. I wanted to go out there and race but I couldn’t and I said, ‘Well, heck, next time around, I’m going to go into the Pro division.’ So we ramped-it-up. I hope we make two passes on Friday and Saturday and that gives us an opportunity to be there on Sunday for eliminations.

“It’s a whole new world; I’m really excited about it. It’s a lot of fun and a whole different challenge, but yet at the end of the day it’s just a race car and a racetrack and I’m here to put my best effort with this great group of guys. I have nobody that I could afford to pay; all of them are volunteers. I told them I would give them a steak dinner and hotel room and they said, ‘All right, we’re in.’ A good group of guys to come down and have some fun and to be competitive and take this seriously.”

The National Hot Rod Association “officially” will mark its 60th birthday during the



weekend. On March 13, 1951, Wally Parks and several business associates signed the incorporation papers that launched what has become the world’s largest motorsports sanctioning organization.

Among the highlights planned are appearances from many legends of the sport, including Florida resident Garlits, who will participate in fan meet-and-greets, autograph sessions and a special legends match-race against former Top Fuel star Darrell Gwynn.

Tony Schumacher (Top Fuel), Tim Wilkerson (Funny Car), Jason Line (Pro Stock) and Eddie Krawiec (Pro Stock Motorcycle) are defending event winners. ESPN2 and ESPN2HD will televise 90 minutes of qualifying highlights at midnight (EST) on Sunday. ESPN2 and ESPN2HD also will televise three hours of eliminations coverage beginning at 6 p.m. (EDT) on Sunday.

Busch, 32, will be competing against the world’s best Pro Stock drivers, including current points-leader and recent Winternationals winner Jason Line; four-time/reigning world champion Greg Anderson and veteran Allen Johnson, who has been Busch’s mentor through offseason testing. Johnson also is providing engines for Busch’s fledgling team.

“Kurt is right on-target,” said Johnson, driver of the Mopar/J&J Racing Dodge Avenger. “His shifting is awesome for a newcomer, he’s got a simulator to work on it and practice, and in my opinion he’s right where he needs to be to qualify for Gainesville.”

Busch, who has earned 12 poles during his 12-year NASCAR career, is aware the “Factory Hot Rod” class is ultra-competitive. “Pro Stock is the tightest Pro category as far as the elapsed time is concerned, and it’s not going to be an easy task,” Busch said. “I

feel me teaming up with Allen Johnson and the Mopar folks, we've given ourselves the best opportunity to make the show.

“We just want to make the show, to go out there and qualify for the top 16. But I hear there are, what, 30 cars registered? That's ridiculous. I thought there would be like 18. It's just like on the NASCAR



Kurt Busch began his drag racing career last year in a Dodge Challenger sportsman dragster. (Photo courtesy of Tom Roberts)

Busch, who won his Cup title in 2004, isn't the first NASCAR champion or high-profile driver from another major motorsports series to give NHRA championship drag racing a try.

In 1965, Richard Petty competed in two NHRA national events as well as countless match-races at strips around the country in his famed Carolina/Petty blue No. 43 "Jr." Plymouth Barracuda. "King Richard" was protesting a NASCAR ruling that banned Chrysler's 426 cubic-inch Hemi engine from Cup. Once NASCAR allowed the Hemi back into competition, Petty – who had earned his first NASCAR series title in 1964 – returned to stock cars. Petty went on to become NASCAR's first seven-time champion.

NASCAR's David Pearson also ventured into NHRA at the same time as Petty. Pearson drove a Dodge Dart station wagon in several exhibition match-races for legendary NASCAR racer/team-owner Cotton Owens. The car, fueled by a combination of nitro and alcohol and powered by a Hemi that sat in the back of the wagon, was nicknamed "The Cotton Picker" and set top speed in the Experimental Class at Bristol (Tenn.) Dragway in '65.

A pair of current and high-profile NASCAR team-owners – Jack Roush and Joe Gibbs – each experienced success in NHRA competition before moving to stock-car racing. Ford loyalist Roush was a competitor in NHRA Pro Stock and later partnered with Wayne Gapp. The Gapp & Roush team raced to multiple NHRA national event victories during the 1970s in their trademark Ford Mavericks and Pintos.

During in the mid-1990s, Gibbs fielded a trio of McDonald's-sponsored NHRA teams, including a Top Fuel dragster driven by Cory McClenathan, a Funny Car piloted by Cruz Pedregon and a Pro Stock Pontiac Trans-Am driven by Jim Yates to world championships in 1996-97.

Five versatile drivers – Art Malone, Danny Ongais, John Andretti, Paul Gentilozzi and Mickey



Drag racer Richard Petty with drag racer Ronnie Sox during the 1960s. (Photo courtesy of the NHRA Full Throttle Drag Racing Series)

Thompson – enjoyed success in other racing series as well as NHRA. Malone was a well-known sidekick of Garlits and set multiple speed records in the early days of organized NHRA racing. Malone also competed in the Indianapolis 500 twice, including a career-best finish of 11th in 1964.

Ongais, who posted four top-10 finishes in the Indy 500, claimed NHRA national event victories in both Top Gas and Funny Car. After driving Roland Leong's Hawaiian dragster to his first NHRA victory in Top Gas at the 1964 Winternationals, "On-the-Gas" Ongais earned two victories in NHRA Funny Car competition, including the prestigious Mac Tools U.S. Nationals in 1969.

Andretti, nephew of open-wheel icon Mario, started his career in Indy-car but gave Top Fuel a try in 1993 behind the wheel of former major-leaguer Jack Clark's Taco Bell dragster before moving to NASCAR. Andretti advanced to the semifinals at Atlanta Dragway in his first start in a 7,000-horsepower dragster.

Gentilozzi was a drag racer well before his Rocketsports Racing team became renowned for its road-racing championships, standout SCCA Trans-Am and IMSA efforts and class victory in the 24 Hours of Daytona. Gentilozzi campaigned a D/Gas Plymouth Arrow in the late 1970s and also drove an ex-Bob Glidden Arrow in the early 1980s in Pro Stock.

The innovative Thompson blazed a trail for motorsports in off-road racing as well as land speed competition. But Mickey's roots firmly were planted in NHRA, as he widely is credited with designing and building the first slingshot dragster in 1954. His designs revolutionized Funny Car and his team of drivers, including Ongais, were considered among the era's toughest competitors.

Busch indicated he has been brushing up on all that history, and truly appreciates NHRA's innovators. "I understand that there's a lot of responsibility that comes with it," Busch said, "and I'm going to enjoy the weekend for what it's worth and go out and compete with the best of the best as far as what's going on out here. But also live up to what these legends have done for our sport – this sport – because it's amazing.

"Nobody does it alone. It's all a big group effort. This is like family and I feel like how the group here has accepted me as part of their family, and now we have to go out there and have some fun."

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