



With Sprint Cup off, Kurt Busch set to dabble in drag racing

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By **Nate Ryan**, USA TODAY

The backstory of [Kurt Busch's](#) professional drag racing debut involves revenge for a race he technically didn't lose.



Chris Simmons, MoparAllen Johnson, left, who is supplying Kurt Busch's car, crew chief and engine, says of Busch, right, his Team Mopar teammate, "He's got a good feel for the car and

a fire in his belly." [Enlarge](#)

By Chris Simmons, Mopar

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On a "NASCAR night" at zMax Dragway in [Concord, N.C.](#), a few years ago, Greg Anderson hopped into a 1,200-horsepower Dodge Viper in a match race against [Kasey Kahne](#). The four-time NHRA Pro Stock champion handily defeated Kahne while

destroying the standard-issue clutch in the Viper, a special edition (the 25,000th off Dodge's assembly line) owned by the 2004 Sprint Cup champion.

"He thought it was a lease vehicle, and I said, 'Dude, this is my car,' " Busch says, laughing. "I said, 'I'm going to get my license, go to drag racing school, come back and drive your car.' "

At this weekend's Tire Kingdom Gatornationals in Gainesville, Fla., the [Penske Racing](#) driver will try to beat Anderson's Pontiac instead of borrow it.

IN FOCUS: [Kurt Busch in photos](#)
SCHEDULE: [2011 NHRA Full Throttle Drag Racing Series](#)

In one of the season's most prestigious events (NHRA will celebrate its 60th anniversary this weekend with a match race between [Don "Big Daddy" Garlits](#) and Darrell Gwynn), the 28-time NASCAR winner will make his debut in NHRA's most competitive pro class. There will be at least 23 drivers vying for 16 spots in Sunday's Pro Stock eliminations, and Busch's goal is to advance to the quarterfinals.

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"That's very high expectations," he said.
 "These guys are tough. I know they'll make me chew on humble pie."

Busch tested his Dodge Avenger this week at Bradenton (Fla.) Motorsports Park for the third time in two months, making about two dozen runs that have impressed teammate [Allen Johnson](#) (who is supplying the car, engine and the assistance of crew chief Mark Ingersoll).

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"I'll give him an A," says Johnson, the Team [Mopar](#) driver-owner who was sixth in 2010 points. "He's got a good feel for the car and a fire in his belly. He's meticulous."

Though he reviews the graphs of data that are spit out by telemetry after each run, Busch's natural instincts helped him a cclimate, too, as he quickly divined he'd spun his tires in first gear. He posted 6.61-second passes Tuesday that were 0.03 seconds slower than Johnson, but he might need to improve to qualify in the field's top half (and earn first-round lane choice for eliminations). In last month's Winternationals, 0.087 seconds separated the top and last qualifier in the 16-driver field.

Aside from learning new lingo for setup adjustments, Busch (who honed his skills at Roy Hill's drag racing school) also must master a discipline demanding precision. Pro Stock drivers shift five times in roughly 4 seconds and must be within 50 RPMs in each gear for optimum. Dashboard shift lights help navigate the 210-mph joyride.

"It's a rush," says Busch, who will be wheeling 1,400 horsepower (vs. 850 for his No. 22

Dodge in Cup). "It takes usually a 2-mile racetrack to warm up to 210. It's like running a 100-meter dash in drag racing vs. a marathon in Cup. This spikes so high and drops so fast, it's a whole different adrenaline fix. I'm loving it."

Though he has sponsorship from Dodge and Shell, Busch (who lost in the first round of the Super Gas sportsman class with a Challenger in last year's rain-plagued Gatornationals) is funding the project partly out of his pocket. He is renting a hauler from [Penske](#) and has an all-volunteer crew that he says "feels like a return to grass-roots racing."

Anderson, though, jokes he isn't convinced Busch is motivated only by having fun.

"I think the real reason might be trying to exact some revenge from a certain drag racer who killed his clutch," Anderson says. "He's going to be in a fast hot rod, and he could definitely surprise a lot of people. We had better be on our toes, or that clutch could turn out to be pretty expensive."

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