

The Unstoppable John Force: Interview With an NHRA Legend

 automoblog.net/unstoppable-john-force

David Straughan Magazine Last updated: July 30, 2023

July 28, 2023

John Force is the winningest driver in National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) history in any category. But unlike the quarter-mile tracks he dominated on his way to earning that distinction, his path to racing greatness has been anything but a straight line. Automoblog was fortunate enough to catch up with Force and speak to him about his life, his career, and where he thinks [the NHRA](#) and the sport of drag racing are heading.

Tour de Force: Life and Career of an Icon

Force was born just outside of Los Angeles in Bell Gardens, California in 1949. Growing up, he moved around constantly and survived a childhood bout with polio before going on to play quarterback on his high school football team. Then, in 1971, Force made his professional racing debut in the funny car division, which he would stick with for his entire career.

However, Force didn't find success on the track right away. Quite the opposite, according to his own website.

“John Force was so bad in the early years that Larry Sutton, the official starter at Irwindale Raceway, once banned him from the track as a safety risk to both himself and everyone else,” the site says. “Force's less than stellar reputation was prevalent among the established Funny Car racers of the late 1970s and early 1980s.”

In fact, it wasn't until 13 years after his dubious debut that he would win his first drag racing title – the 1984 American Hot Rod Association (AHRA) championship. Force won his first NHRA event in 1987 in Montreal and finally, his first NHRA championship in 1990 at the age of 41.

Following his first championship, the California native amassed a record that stands among the most unbeatable in any sport in history. Force won 11 straight NHRA Funny Car championships as part of a run that included 16 titles in 23 seasons 1993 and 2004.



Photo courtesy of [John Force Racing](#).

That success has carried over to John Force Racing (JFR), the driver's drag racing team, as well as to the next generation of Forces. John's daughters Ashley Hood Force, Courtney Force, and Brittany Force all competed in the NHRA. Brittany won the NHRA Top Fuel championship in 2017 and 2022, and continues to be a regular contender each year in one of the sport's premier divisions.

However, neither the success of his team and progeny or the years and miles of racing have slowed John Force down. At 74 years old, Force still competes in the NHRA Funny Car division and still has his eyes set on yet another championship for his jam-packed trophy case.

John Force: The Interview

Could you talk a little about your path to where you are now and how you got into racing?

I came from playing football in school. I was a quarterback. I still hold the record at Bell Gardens High School. We lost every game for three years straight, so that's a record they'll never break. I'm proud of it. But I had polio as a kid, and I knew that I wasn't going to make it. I wasn't going to play for the LA Rams – wasn't going to happen.

I was going to go to college, but just couldn't do it. I had no money in those days, whatever the excuse. I started driving a truck because my dad was a truck driver and some of my family members were, too. That eventually led me to racing.

When you grow up in a little trailer park with five brothers and sisters, you want to escape from it. You want to get on your motorcycle when you get one or when you get a car, you want to get as far away as you can. So I got a race car to do the running for me.

How have you seen the sport change over the course of your career?

I've seen it all. It's changed because the technology has changed, but I've watched the older generation that evolved into the funny cars and top fuel, the kind of cars they drove in those days back in the 50s.

It used to be in the old days, if you wanted to drive a race car, you had to own it, and you chased the money, you did it all. Now it's evolved to where they're hired guns. It's changed the evolution of the driver. You're up against a kid that's young, that's strong. He can live in the gym every day. I have to do it at my age just to stay up with these kids, so I call them hired guns. They're doing their job and they're tough and they're really good at it.

But the sport has changed. The money's changed, and it's getting crazy. The NHRA is fighting every week. They're trying to bring us deals, like the races within races. They're doing everything to help because they know what it takes to run it. These days, there are a lot of rich people in this sport. I'm not one of them, but there are a lot of rich people in this sport.

How have the cars and technology changed since you started racing?

It's so different, because we're going so fast and quick and the safety of it all had to evolve. I got into that years ago when we lost Eric Medland in a car crash. I didn't know anything about safety at the time. Then a lot of people got involved. The military got involved. We went to them asking, "How do we build better helmets? How do we build better race cars?"

The technology in the cars has also evolved. Along comes these computers with technology where a car tries to do the thinking for you. That don't work so good for me.

It's only four seconds, but boy, a lot goes on in four seconds. Half the time, I can't even think about what took place. I just react to it. People go, "How do you do that?" I don't even know how, I just do it.



Photo courtesy of [John Force Racing](#).

What made you choose Funny Car as your division?

I was just always a car guy. And growing up, I was always a Chevy man. But when I was in school, I had a front-engine dragster. I drove a lot of stuff.

But I had relatives that drove Funny Cars. My cousin won the Super Nationals driving for Plugger. That's my role model. He's been in the sport for years.

I guess I just always liked them. They called them "plastic fantastic cars." They were just sexy to me. I love to get in them and drive them and do the big old smokey burnouts. I love seeing the header fire and flames belching out of the pipes and all the noise.

I was always a Funny Car guy, but I love Top Fuel too. Hell, I love Pro Stock bikes. When I get beat, I go into the stands to watch the other races. I'm a fan. People don't get it, like, what are you doing up here? I want to see what you guys are seeing.



John Force remains a fan favorite in the NHRA. Photo courtesy of [John Force Racing](#).

Do you have a favorite win from your career?

My first race I won in Montreal. I was driving the Wendy's car and in those days we didn't get money, we got free food. We all jumped up and down when they got a salad bar. I remember we showed up to a Wendy's store in Montreal and the girl that was supposed to be Wendy didn't show up. And I said, what's the pay? They said, 'Oh, they gave her like 25 bucks or something.'

I went in the store, put on the dress and the wig, and I went outside. Everybody was all over it. My old hairy legs and stuff. Everybody thought it was funny, but it was fun to me. And yet other drivers were like, 'How embarrassing. You're a driver. You're out there in a dress.'

But I did that because it was a way to make some money to feed the crew and it was a way to make the sponsor really like me. I ended up getting a sponsorship. When I sent the contract to Wendy's, they sent it back. I wrote it originally and they said, 'Have somebody write this thing that can spell.' So, my wife wrote the contract and I got the deal.

I'm hoping they're going to go back to Canada because I raced in Edmonton, Ontario, Calgary, Montreal.

What have been the keys to building a successful racing team beyond your own individual success?

Well, it had always been mostly me on my own early on. I never had any money in the beginning. It's changed because now, it ain't like you put it together in your garage like in the old days and drag it out to a racetrack. But it's also changed because you can't do it without the right people and without training people for the future. You're not just running the 18 wheelers down the road or just the machine shops.

We build our own engines. I build everything. I mean, I build blocks, I build blowers, I build heads. I don't build crank chassis, rods or pistons. But I build everything else. We own the molds of the Chevrolets that we run.

So the big thing that's changed is that you have to have money, that's the key. It's sad, but you've got to have money. And when you get the money, you put together the right team and that is the key. Then you figure out a way to win and that's what I've been able to do.

What's it like watching your children race in the NHRA? How does it compare to driving?

Well, there's nothing compared to driving. But your children, I mean, I've got to watch myself.

When my daughter Ashley beat me in Atlanta, that was her first national win. I was down there jumping up and down and everyone goes, 'You lost in the final.' But, it was my kid, you know?

It is just amazing to watch them win, there's nothing like it. I never drove the [Top Fuel] dragster, but I go up to watch Brittany because she teaches me. Brittany, Robert, [Austin] Prock, they come to me and as long as I've been doing it, I'll still go, 'Something is changing here, I'm getting screwed up. Can somebody help me?'

They all try to help me and we're just a team. I love watching my kids. Courtney drove, Brittany's driving now, Ashley drove. So no, there's nothing better than your kids when they win or when they lose, just seeing them be a part of it.



Brittany Force won the NHRA Top Fuel championship in 2017 and 2022. Photo courtesy of [John Force Racing](#).

What do you see for the future of the NHRA and drag racing?

The sport will survive. It always does. I watched it go through when they took away the nitro and we couldn't run nitro 40 years ago. We got through that short period of time. I've watched changes. I've watched the technology change, the safety they had to build to protect the drivers.

In drag racing, all you've got to do is put on a helmet and buckle your seatbelt and you're a driver. Take grandma's car out there racing. I can say that, I'm a grandpa.

But what I'm saying is drag racing will survive. I sometimes go down to a little track down here towards San Diego to watch my grandkids race in their little junior dragsters. And when I roll in there, there are big old buses and 18 wheelers. It's like Little League Baseball, except the parents can be part of it. They go out there and run these cars for their little kids. So racing will survive because it's a great product.

The NHRA has been doing this a long time. We're going to be okay. We've got to get our crowds back from what we lost during the pandemic. These days, people can get everything on their phone. But they can't get the real smell of nitro. They can't feel what it's like to be there. They've got to be at the races.

So I'm going to pitch the NHRA and drag racing until I drop and I don't plan on dropping soon. I'm going to live to be 110.

Anything else you'd like to add?

Yes: I give you my word. The sport of NHRA drag racing will not fail.

As a bonus, we're including a video that may just be the most John Force moment ever. Truly one of a kind.

At the time of publishing, the 2023 NHRA Funny Car title is still within reach for John Force heading into the DENSO NHRA Sonoma Nationals. With just nine races left on the [2023 NHRA schedule](#), Force's John Force Racing teammates Brittany Force and Austin Prock are also in contention for the 2023 NHRA Top Fuel title. John Force Racing driver Robert Hight is also within reach for the 2023 NHRA Funny Car championship as well.