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Stewart Goes to Top Fuel Quarterfinals in NHRA Reading Event, Hagan Out Early in Funny Car as NHRA “Countdown” Gets Underway

- Top Fuel “rookie” Tony Stewart, a NASCAR, IndyCar and USAC champion, advanced his Tony Stewart Racing (TSR) Rinnai Dodge//SRT dragster to the quarterfinals Sunday at the NHRA Reading event
- Stewart, seventh in the Top Fuel points standings, continued his strong qualifying efforts by taking the TSR Dodge//SRT machine to fourth with a 3.741 in the NHRA “Countdown”
- It marked the third consecutive race in which Stewart qualified inside the top four in the 16-car Top Fuel field and scored a first-round win over Billy Torrence, advancing to round two
- In the quarterfinals, Stewart was quick off the line against former Top Fuel World Champion Shawn Langdon, but the Rinnai dragster lost traction off the starting line and Langdon won
- Stewart remains seventh in Top Fuel points at the Reading event with the series headed to zMAX Dragway for the NHRA betway Carolina Nationals Sept. 20-22
- Four-time NHRA World Funny Car Champion Matt Hagan, seeking another solid “Countdown” start, qualified his TSR Operation Healing Forces Dodge//SRT Hellcat sixth
- The defending World Champion, a former Maple Grove winner, posted a 3.897 qualifying pass on Friday evening in his 11,000-horsepower, nitro-burning Funny Car
- Unfortunately, Hagan failed to advance out of round one Sunday when former World Champion J.R. Todd nipped the TSR racer at finish line with a 3.943 to Hagan’s 3.934
- Hagan currently sits fifth in the “Countdown” Funny Car points as he now moves to the Carolina Nationals at zMAX Dragway, a track where he won his 50th career race in April
- Ida Zetterström, the NHRA Top Fuel “rookie” from Sweden, showed another impressive performance in just her third NHRA national event, recording a 3.745 in a first-round loss
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September 16, 2024, Auburn Hills, Mich. - After another strong qualifying effort, Top Fuel “rookie” Tony Stewart, a champion in NASCAR, IndyCar and USAC competition, drove his Tony Stewart Racing (TSR) Rinnai Dodge//SRT dragster to the quarterfinals Sunday at the NHRA Reading event.

After campaigning in the first 14 races to secure a Top Ten points position for the NHRA “Countdown,” both Stewart and his TSR teammate Hagan came through qualifying with stout showings, as the NASCAR Hall of Famer took the TSR Dodge//SRT Top Fuel dragster to fourth while the four-time World Funny Car Champion drove his TSR Operation Healing Forces Dodge//SRT Hellcat car to sixth in the 16-car field.

Stewart continued his three-race stretch of solid qualifying runs with another top four starting spot at 3.741 entering Sunday’s final eliminations, while Hagan, a former Maple Grove NHRA national race winner, recorded a strong 3.897 pass for sixth.

Stewart, who continues to have one of the best reaction times in the Top Fuel division, proved it in round one of eliminations Sunday when he matched up against Billy Torrence. Tony left the starting line first and never looked back with a winning showing to advance to the quarterfinals against former World Champion Shawn Langdon.

With the six NHRA "Countdown" races remaining, gaining valuable points was the mission for Stewart and his TSR Dodge//SRT Top Fuel squad led by Neal Strausbaugh (crew chief), Mike Domagala (co-crew chief) and Ryan McGilvry (car chief), as the Brownsburg, Ind.-based operation fought some difficult track conditions with hotter temperatures.

Against Langdon in round two, Stewart was quickest off the line over the veteran Top Fuel racer and both drivers had their nitro-burning machines lose traction just off the line. Both racers were on and off the throttle, but Langdon took the win with a 4.076 to Stewart's 4.351. The quarterfinal finish kept Stewart in seventh in the NHRA Mission Top Fuel standings with the "Countdown" now headed to Charlotte, N.C., for the annual NHRA betway Carolina Nationals on Sept. 20-22.

"I had to pedal the car the first round, which I'm not sure I do well," said Stewart. "I think the team needs to tell you whether you did well. I got a lot of pats on the back when we got to the pit, so that made me feel good from the driver standpoint. I'm really proud of Neal, Mike and the team. That's three races in a row we've qualified inside the top four, so we're having good qualifying efforts. We're doing the right things, just need a little bit of luck to put the whole thing together on race day."

Hagan, a previous NHRA national event winner at Maple Grove Raceway, won last year's series title with a robust "Countdown" performance, including two wins in the final four 2023 events. And his Dickie Venables-led TSR Funny Car team was ready for the fight on Sunday.

Unfortunately, Hagan had the toughest first round Funny Car matchup against former World Champion J.R. Todd, the No. 11 qualifier. Hagan had defeated Todd in the semifinals two races ago in Brainerd, Minn., and was seeking a repeat win over Todd Sunday at Maple Grove.

Both drivers recorded stellar times in the race, but Todd was a little quicker off the starting line and scored a "holeshot" victory with a 3.943 to Hagan's 3.934. Despite the early defeat, Hagan remains in the top five in the current NHRA Mission Funny Car points as he heads to Charlotte this weekend (Sept. 20-22). Hagan won the Four-Wide Nationals at Charlotte last May, one of his two 2024 NHRA victories, and collected his 50th career NHRA Funny Car national event win.

"It was a pretty tough weekend starting the 'Countdown' in Reading," said Hagan. "We obviously lost in the first round on a 'holeshot.' The driver didn't get the job done, so I have to get home and get back on the practice tree. We're working on running a little harder with the car and being more aggressive. So hopefully in the next five races, especially the two coming up, we can have some better luck."

In addition, young Ida Zetterström, the Top Fuel "rookie" driver from Sweden, recorded her quickest time in just her third NHRA national event in the JCM Racing/Dodge Top Fuel dragster with an impressive 3.745 in the opening round but lost to Langdon.

"I've got a lot of confidence in my team," said Zetterström, "We're basically treating every pass as a test pass. We're changing things and we're working in the right direction. Obviously, we're not out here chasing a championship, we're out here to find consistency and be ready to chase a championship next year. We had a really tough competitor in Shawn Langdon. I was just starting to feel like I'm coming back into it right now after just three races. I know what our team is capable of. I feel like by the end of this season, we should have a really good combination. Looking at our numbers from today is indicative of that."

The NHRA betway Carolina Nationals, round two of the six-race NHRA Mission "Countdown," begins this Friday, Sept. 20, with nitro qualifying scheduled for 5 p.m. EDT and 7:30 p.m. EDT followed by Saturday, Sept. 21, qualifying at 1:30 p.m. EDT and 4 p.m. EDT. Final eliminations are set for 12 p.m. EDT on Sunday, Sept. 22.

Fox Sports 1 coverage of the NHRA betway Carolina Nationals will be televised on Friday, Sept. 20, at 7 p.m. EDT with qualifying rounds, and the final eliminations will be aired on FS1 at 3 p.m. EDT on Sunday, Sept. 22.

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