Auto Racing: A force to be reckoned with?

by Jane Miller

In the history of NHRA Funny Car competition there has never been a woman win a race or even qualify No. 1.

Only nine women have even tried and the category has been all-male for six years.

On Tuesday, the 10th one threw her helmet into the ring and she may just be the person to break those barriers.

Ashley Force, daughter of 14-time Funny Car champion John Force, will drive a Funny Car for her dad's team this season.

"There are girls in (NHRA) Top Fuel, Pro Stock and Pro Stock

Motorcycle," Force said. "Now we finally kind of finished off the package. I'll be a girl in Funny Car."

The 24-year-old had been competing in the sport's lower divisions for five years but also spent the last year getting intensive tutoring from her very intense father and the rest of the team.

She earned her Funny Car license last April and the event was immortalized as part of the "Driving Force" reality television program which featured her two younger sisters along with her parents. "I grew up rooting for the Funny Cars," said Force, who spent her last two years in Alcohol Dragsters. "I was raised around them. The cars have such personality to watch them go down the track, not always perfectly straight either, but that's the exciting part about it."

John Force has tried to prepare his daughter well, giving her the finest equipment, letting her experience media interviews and sponsorship commitments.

But when she comes to the starting line for the first time next month at Pomona, Calif., she'll be on her own.

"I said, 'Ashley, it's going to be a journey, kid,' " John Force said. "Where you think you've been in the past, racing since you were 16, it's all going to change 'cause you're playing hardball. You're in the pros." But Ashley will never have to make that journey alone.

"I said, 'Girl, there's no more I can tell you, but to be there with you under the pressure,' " John Force said. "It's a long road. I can only tell you she's got the best money, the best sponsors, the best team behind her. But God only knows what's going to happen because I don't."

SAD FAREWELL

There was no one in NASCAR more loved than Benny Parsons, who died Tuesday morning at age 65.

He had undergone aggressive treatment for lung cancer over the summer, which eradicated the cancer but caused severe damage to his left lung. He later developed blood clots in his right lung and was hospitalized on Dec. 26 and was in an induced coma until his death.

Parsons won a NASCAR Cup championship in 1973 and won the 1975 Daytona 500, amassing 21 wins in his 21-year career. He was named one of NASCAR's 50 greatest drivers during the sport's 50th anniversary season. But most of today's fans know Parsons as a television broadcaster, a role he assumed after his 1988 retirement when he joined ESPN and later NBC/TNT. His keen insights and enduring love for the sport and its people were the highlights of the race broadcasts each week.

Parsons also had a great eye for talent and was most recently responsible for recommending Greg Biffle to Jack Roush.

Everyone who knew Parsons has a touching or funny story to tell about this gentle, common man who rose to greatness but remained so humble. He will be so deeply missed.

COULD IT HAPPEN?

Seeing Juan Pablo Montoya's name at the top of the time sheet from Tuesday morning's Daytona practice made me wonder: Montoya won the Indianapolis 500 in his first try, could he do the same thing at Daytona?

Anything is possible with Montoya on the track.

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