

Auto Racing: Fatal accident causes Force Racing to review safety standards

by Jane Miller

John Force Racing intends to be back at the track this weekend, pending the results of an unprecedented test by the boss himself to see if changes made to the team's cars allow them to be both raceable and safe.

Force is funding studies not only of what caused Funny Car driver Eric Medlen's fatal accident but what steps can be taken to prevent a repeat occurrence. He has either conferred with or actually retained experts in the field of safety and injury biomechanics to help in this effort.

But the fact remains that the circumstances of the accident and even the injury to Medlen himself fall in uncharted territory.

John Melvin holds a Ph.D. in engineering and began working at General Motors on safety issues. He is now working for Force.

"I've been involved in racing since 1992," Melvin said. "We've never seen anything quite like this. In fact, as a head injury issue, we've never seen it anywhere."

In simplest terms, what happened during Medlen's accident was a tire puncture, which caused the tire to come apart, followed by violent vibration in the car and the roll cage.

The extreme side-to-side shaking of Medlen's head caused the fatal injuries.

So Force and his team are focusing on the roll cage, cockpit and restraint systems of the car.

"We had to cut the roll cages off of six cars, actually seven, and we widened them," Force said. "We were able to put mountings in to triple the head protection on both sides of the driver. We changed the seat belts not only to the seven belts but also in the locations that we mounted them. We have the R3 neck restraints that not only will protect you in front motion and reverse motion, but side to side." The test Force made Wednesday at Las Vegas, site of this weekend's NHRA national event, would normally not be allowed under an NHRA policy which forbids testing at a race site within seven days of an event. An exception was made in this case. The team had planned to test at Indianapolis last week but the weather was too cold.

"I don't know if it's drivable, what we've done," said Force, who will try to get his team to re-create normal tire shake during the Vegas shakedown. "It needs to be tested. NHRA was good enough to allow us to do that."

This has become Force's new crusade. More important than championships, more important than wins.

"My life has changed to where it's not just about winning the championship," he said. "Safety is my No. 1 priority right now. If the cars are not right, then we will not enter the three cars (for Force, his daughter Ashley and son-in-law Robert Hight). But we fully intend to. We are going (to the test) with the attitude that what we have done will work."

Force admits that he hasn't always been as attentive to safety concerns as he should have been.

"Over the years I wore a helmet just because it was free," he said.

"Never read the data on it. Well, not anymore. We had helmets from every vendor sent to us. We sent them up to Ford and had them crushed. I want answers about these things. I mean, from seat belts, how they were mounted ... I took so many things for granted that you just kept moving on.

"Maybe there is where I failed as the boss. There were so many things that I didn't address myself that I just accepted was OK because somebody told me."

Eric's father, John Medlen, was his crew chief. He is spear-heading the safety initiative for JFR.

"Here is somebody (Force) that is not going to stop and just say, 'Well, we're just going to go on and race,' " he said. "He's going to change and mandate some of the changes that we need to do on these race cars for the long term and the short term.

"I think that's the key to this whole thing: it would be a catastrophe in its own right (but) the largest catastrophe would be to not use it to better the sport and to ensure that this doesn't happen again." Force is using all his resources to make it so.

"I'm not saying this car wasn't safe, but there is room for improvement in anything, especially with me as an

owner," he said. "That's where I failed. I'm not going to fail again."

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