

## Pedregon escapes flames

### NHRA NOTEBOOK

By Louis Brewster  
Staff Writer

POMONA — Twice over a two-day span, John Force demonstrated just how tight the fraternity of drag racers really is.

On Saturday, Force ignored the pain of a broken left ankle still on the mend and tried to run into the sand to try and help fellow Funny Car driver Bob Tasca III, who failed to stop in time but escaped injury.

On his first run of the day Sunday in final eliminations for the Winternationals, Force was running next to Tony Pedregon when the defending NHRA Powerade Drag Racing class champion literally blew up near the end of the quarter-mile. Distracted by the explosion, and a piece of debris slicing through his Ford Mustang, Force was late in deploying his parachutes and also went into the sand.

But his immediate concern was Pedregon, who won the 2004 championship while driving for Force. Even after being told Pedregon was OK, Force interrupted interviews asking about Pedregon's status.

Force consoled Pedregon crew chief Dickie Venables and then hobbled to the ambulance to hug Pedregon before he was transported to Pomona Valley Medical Center Hospital. The driver was treated and released, with bandages on a burned left hand.

"There was no warning," Pedregon said about the explosion that ripped the body off the car. "A lot of times when something happens to your car, like when you drop a cylinder, you feel it, and I would have reacted. But it blew up, and I had instant flames, like a flame-thrower in my face and the scary part was I didn't know where I was.

"I hit the wall very hard and I feel very lucky. I knew that my hands were burned and I knew that I got beat up a little. When I got out of the car I thought, 'I can't believe the car finally stopped and I'm going to get out of it.' In terms of safety, to have a high-speed wreck like that, blow a motor and go into the wall a couple of times at close to 300 mph, I think it proves a lot about the safety features we've added to these cars."

### PRO STOCK

Greg Anderson tied Top Fuel legend Joe Amato for fifth on the all-time NHRA win list with his win over Jeg Coughlin, who beat him for the championship last year on the same track.

Anderson won his fourth Winternationals in five years, but he knew he was in for a battle against Coughlin. In the battle of GM cars, it was Anderson's new Pontiac GXP against a Chevrolet Colbalt and mail-order rivals Summit Racing Equipment and Jeg's as sponsors.

"Anytime you match up against Jeg you better bring everything you've got," said Anderson. "I knew no matter what we ran, he'd be right there and he was. We're going to try to win every race this year, but it's going to be the toughest year in the class because these guys out here aren't going to give an inch."

### HONORARY CREWMAN

Rich Gaspers of Redlands enjoyed Sunday at Pomona with a unique perspective, as part of Ron Capps' NAPA Funny Car crew.

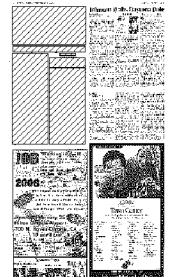
The 61-year-old mechanic for the city of Redlands escorted the Dodge Charger to the staging lanes and rode the team's Durango tow vehicle to retrieve Capps after the first round.

"This was the chance of a lifetime and I want thank everyone," said Gaspers, who was named as the winner in the Don Schumacher Racing hospitality area Sunday morning. "It was more exciting than I ever expected and Ron Capps and the crew couldn't have been nicer. I was very impressed with that.

"I've been a drag-racing fan since the 1960s and I never expected to get this kind of opportunity. It's the highlight of my career of going to the races."

### PIT STOPS

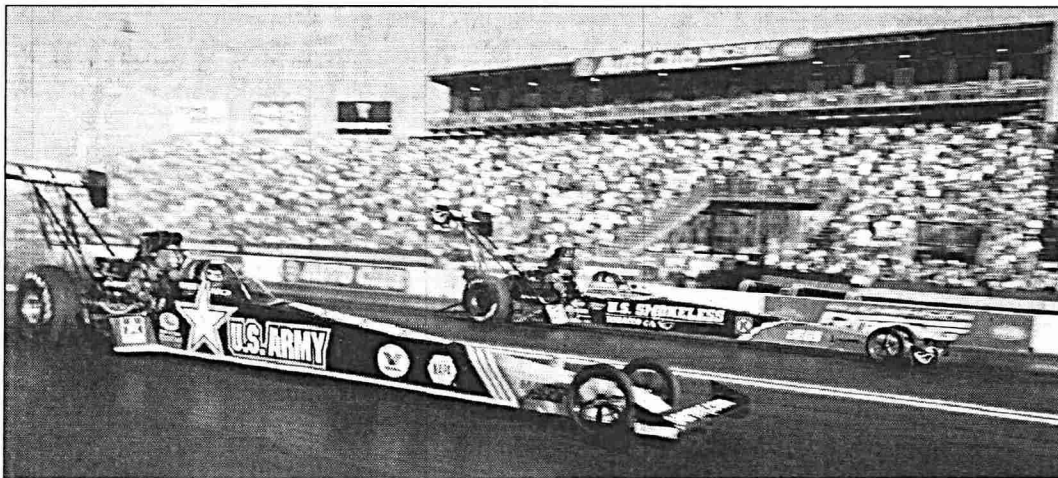
Thomas Bayer of Fontana was a first-round loser to Chris Demke in alcohol dragster while Claremont's Jay Payne, the top qualifier in alcohol Funny Car, advanced to the semifinals before losing to eventual runner-up Brian Hough. Sean O'Bannon of Ontario and Apple Valley's Bernie Harrington were ousted in the first round ... John Milhovetz of Ontario advanced to the third of five rounds in Competition Eliminator. ... Ryan McClanahan of Rancho Cucamonga and La Verne's Fred Moreno went the furthest among local drivers in Super Stock, reaching the fourth of seven rounds. McClanahan also went three rounds in Stock Eliminator. ... Robert Nabor of Ontario and Edwards Fischle of Twin Peaks survived three rounds in Super Comp.



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Will Lester/Staff Photographer

Tony Schumacher (left) defeats Larry Dixon in the top fuel semifinals Sunday in Pomona. Schumacher defeated Cory McClenathan in the finals at Pomona Raceway.