

CHECKER SCHUCK'S KRAGEN NATIONALS

Dixon captures 42nd win

By Mark Armijo

SPECIAL FOR THE REPUBLIC

Thirteen years is an eternity between wins at a drag strip. Just ask Larry Dixon.

In only his second career NHRA Top Fuel dragster start in 1995, Dixon won at Firebird International Raceway, the first of 42 career wins for the 41-year-old driver who is tied with Tony Schumacher for No. 3 on the all-time Top Fuel winning list.

But until Sunday in the Checker Schuck's Kragen Nationals, Dixon had yet to make a return trip to Firebird's elusive victory lane.

Oh, well — better late than never again.

Dixon beat David Grubnic in the finals, unleashing his best quarter-mile blast of the day with a 4.532-second burst measured at a staggering 327.19 mph.

"Since we're coming back (today) for more testing, we kind of went into test mode the last two rounds," said Dixon, the 2002 and 2003 series champion who now trails series leader Schumacher by a point in the standings. "We said, 'Let's do it now, because if it works, great. If not, we're going to lose anyway.'"

It worked, as Dixon's quickest two passes came against Grubnic and four-time defending series champion Schumacher in the semifinals. Schumacher posted a slightly quicker elapsed time in their speedy duel, but Dixon won on a hole shot by beating his opponent off the starting line.

"Any win is special," Dixon said. "(Crew chief) Donnie Bender has been on our team

since 1999, and he's never been on a car that's won here. When you think about it, it would be nice to get that win out of the way. I'm dedicating this win to him."

Good for Bender, but bad for Grubnic.

Until meeting Dixon, however, Grubnic was enjoying a hunky-dory path to the championship finals, peeling off blistering 4.500-, 4.491- and 4.519-second passes during the first three rounds.

But when it counted most, Grubnic's unsponsored dragster owned by Connie Kalitta wobbled after appearing to drop a cylinder or two early in the run and sputtered to a forgettable 5.002-second finish.

Goodbye Grubnic; hello, Dixon.

Dixon shared the heyday with Jack Beckman, who won the Funny Car title over Robert Hight, and Pro Stock winner Vieri Gaines.

Gaines won when Jason Line broke at the starting line, but don't tell the Gaines clan it was an anticlimactic final.

Gaines, 60, last won seven years ago, and the team reacted as if it won a casino jackpot. Who can blame them?

"It's been a long dry spell," Gaines said. "I think you're going to see a few wins out of this team this year."

One upset after another triggered Funny Car eliminations, but none was mightier than No. 16 Bob Bode sending No. 1 qualifier Tim Wilkerson packing in the first round.

Bode, an independent driver with sponsorship for only a partial season, got a big jump at

the starting line and won for the first time since the 2003 season finale.

Bode's celebratory moment was brief, however, as Hight knocked him out in the quarterfinals.

No. 2 Mike Neff and No. 3 John Force, a crowd favorite who is two races back into a comeback after a crash last season that put in a Texas hospital for 27 days with serious wrist and lower extremity injuries, also were first-round losers.

Force's exit was provided by Scott Kalitta, who entered the showdown 0-10 against NHRA's all-time winningest driver.

"The car fell off and dropped a cylinder," said Force, who has 125 career victories. "I'm learning how to drive the car again."

"(Teammate Hight) laughs when I say that. He says, 'You're the best.' I say, 'No, not really.' There was a time, but right now I'm not smooth. I used to roll in with the magic. I felt the car was part of me."

"It's like a person who drove an automatic — you put him with a clutch, he doesn't know how to drive."

NHRA Checker Schuck's Kragen Nationals

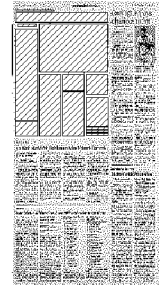
At Firebird International Raceway, Chandler After Saturday qualifying; eliminations today Top Fuel

Larry Dixon, 4.532 seconds, 327.19 mph., def. David Grubnic, 5.002, 259.26. 3. Tony Schumacher, 4. Rod Fuller, 5. Bob Vandergriff, 6. Mike Strasburg, 7. Antron Brown, 8. Brandon Bernstein, 9. Doug Herbert, 10. J.R. Todd, 11. Troy Buff, 12. Doug Kalitta, 13. Morgan Lucas, 14. Hillary Will, 15. Cory McClenathan, 16. Steven Chrsman.

Funny Car

Jack Beckman, Dodge Charger, 4.868, 320.20., def. Robert Hight, Ford Mustang, 8.030, 105.28. 3. Tommy Johnson Jr., Charger, 4. Jim Head, Toyota Solara, 5. Bob Bode, Chevy Monte Carlo, 6. Gary Scelzi, Charger, 7. Scott Kalitta, Solara, 8. Cruz Pedregon, Chevy Impala, 9. John Force, Mustang, 10. Ron Capps, Charger, 11. Tim Wilkerson, Impala, 12. Tony Bartone, Monte Carlo, 13. Tony Pedregon, Impala, 14. Jerry Tolver, Charger, 15. Gary Densham, Impala, 16. Mike Neff, Mustang.

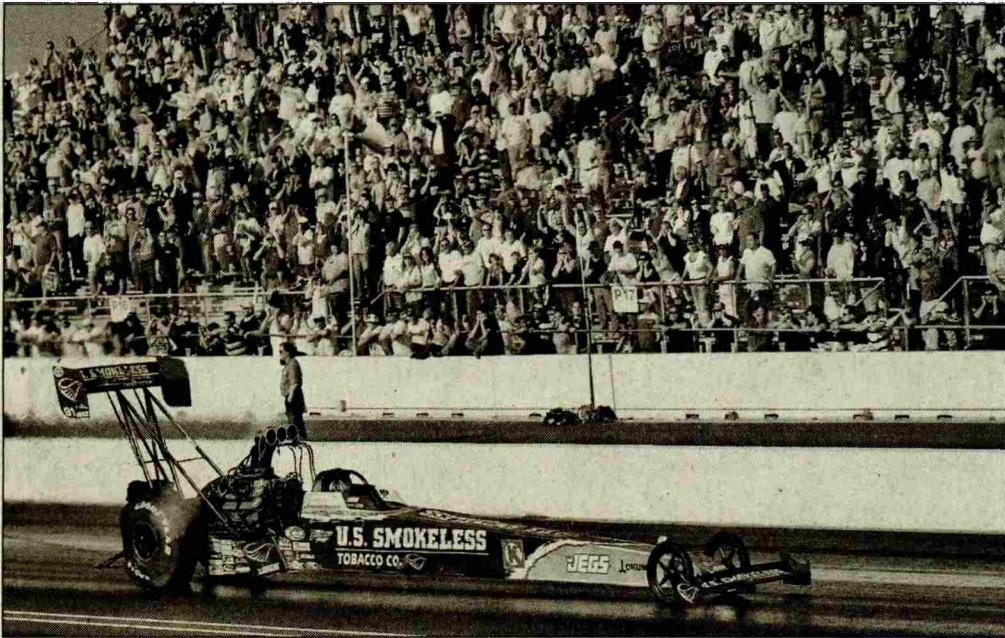
Pro Stock



V. Gaines, Dodge Stratus, 6.702, 205.38., def. Jason Line, Pontiac GTO, 20.239, 39.18. 3. Jeg Coughlin, Chevy Cobalt. 4. Mike Edwards, GTO. 5. Warren John-

son, GTO. 6. Greg Anderson, Pontiac GXP 7. Kurt Johnson, Cobalt. 8. Allen Johnson, Stratus. 9. Ron Krisher, Cobalt. 10. Matt Hartford, Stratus. 11. Max Naylor, Stra-

tus. 12. Johnny Gray, Stratus. 13. Tom Hammonds, Cobalt. 14. Greg Stanfield, GXP. 15. Kenny Koretsky, Cobalt. 16. Justin Humphreys, GTO.



NICK OZA/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Fans cheer Top Fuel winner Larry Dixon during final eliminations at the Checker Schuck's Kragen Nationals at Firebird International Raceway in Chandler on Sunday.