

After long wait, Dixon tastes success at Firebird again

NHRA NATIONALS

Veteran earns Top Fuel win with new team

By RICHARD GRAY
FOR THE TRIBUNE

Larry Dixon, sporting a new NHRA Top Fuel team, new colors and a new sponsor, muscled his way into victory circle Sunday at the Checker Schuck's Kragen NHRA Nationals, putting to rest an old statistic.

It's only Dixon's second win at Firebird International Raceway near Chandler, the first coming in his rookie 1995 season, and his 42nd NHRA Nationals victory. His team nearly gave up hope Sunday after qualifying in the middle of the field on Saturday, but crew chief Donnie Bender found something.

"We were going to stay here Monday and Tuesday to do some testing and we decided to do it now," Dixon said. "If it doesn't work, we're going to lose anyway. I'm dedicating the win to him."

Dixon bested Dave Grubnic, running 327.19 mph with an elapsed time of 4.532 seconds and held the lead from start to finish.

To get to Grubnic, Dix-

Schumacher faced each other in the semifinals, with Dixon gaining an advantage with a hole shot at the start to win with a 326.87 mph run in 4.534 seconds, .005 quicker and 1.35 mph faster than Schumacher.

But Schumacher leaves the Valley still holding the Top Fuel points lead.

Dixon, who, marched to the top from his eighth-place qualifying position, took the quarterfinals win against third-place qualifier Brandon Bernstein, who dismissed himself when his car faulted a heartbeat after the start.

Despite a bout with the flu, Funny Car's Jack Beckman came from the back of the 16-car field to beat John Force's son-in-law, Robert Hight.

He felt so poorly he wanted to take a flu medication, but the label warning said not to operate heavy machinery, and he said a Funny Car qualifies as that.

It's Beckman's fourth win in six final-round appearances, and this time it was against one of Funny Car's strongest teams. But Hight shook and smoked the tires off the starting line and never had a chance.

The Force Team, now in a learning stage with new safety equipment and added weight, failed to qualify Ashley Force for the show and Force himself lost to Scott Kalitta in first-round competition. Beckman predicted when Funny Car teams get ahead of their new curve, the competition will come from every team.

"It's going to be a dog fight," he said.

Pro Stock veteran V. Gaines of Texas earned his first NHRA

SEE NHRA • PAGE B5
on had to pass Tony Schumacher, whom Dixon beat at his first Firebird outing all those years ago.

In a classic duel, Dixon and



Nationals win in seven years with one of the best drives of his career. The 59-year-old bested John Line in the championship run, beginning with near-perfect reaction time, .007, in the semifinals and .014 for the championship run.

"It proves us old guys can shoot at these young guys and occasionally hit them" he said. "It's been a long dry spell."

Gaines ran 205.38 mph in 6.702 seconds against Line, whose car lost power a moment after the start.

Two Pro Stock drivers made NHRA history Sunday.

Never before in Pro Stock had two drivers in the same race executed perfect reaction times, .000. But Jeg Coughlin and Mike Edwards changed that Sunday. Coughlin did his part on the first round Sunday and Edwards followed on the second round.

Both drivers made Pro Stock's semifinals, and lost. Gaines beat Coughlin's .030 reaction time with .007.

Edwards and Jason Lines each reacted in .024 seconds in the semifinal with Lines advancing to run against Gaines.

Former NBA forward Tom Hammonds lost to Coughlin in the first round after they tried to muscle a psychological advantage in the staging sequence.

Checker Schuck's Kragen Nationals

Results from Sunday's NHRA finale
 Chandler

Top Fuel

1. Larry Dixon. 2. David Grubnic. 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 Chrisman.

Funny Car

1. Jack Beckman, Dodge Charger. 2. Robert Hight, Ford Mustang. 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 Tojiver, Charger. 15. Gary Densham, Impala. 16. Mike Neff, Mustang.

Pro Stock

1. V. Gaines, Dodge Stratus. 2. Jason Line, Pontiac GTO. 3. Jeg Coughlin, Chevy Cobalt. 4. Mike Edwards, GTO. 5. Warren Johnson, 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, Stratus. 12. Johnny Gray, Stratus. 13. Tom Hammonds, Cobalt. 14. Greg Stanfield, GXP. 15. Kenny Koretsky, Cobalt. 16. Justin Humphreys, GTO.

FINALS

Top Fuel

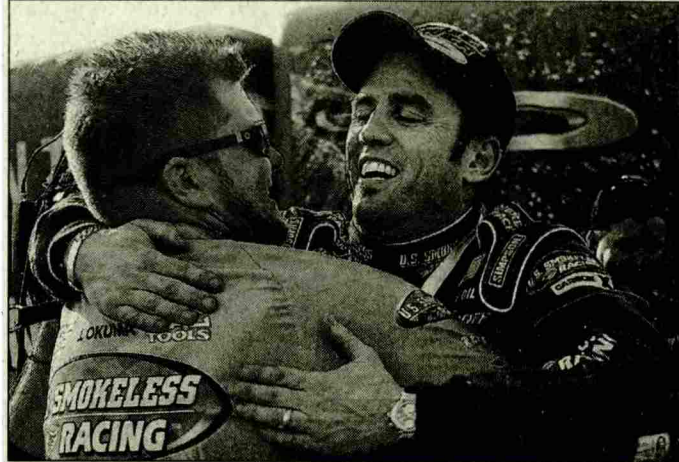
Larry Dixon, 4.532 seconds, 327.19 mph., def. David Grubnic, 5.002, 259.26.

Funny Car

Jack Beckman, Dodge Charger, 4.868, 320.20., def. Robert Hight, Ford Mustang, 8.030, 105.28.

Pro Stock

V. Gaines, Dodge Stratus, 6.702, 205.38., def. Jason Line, Pontiac GTO, 20.239, 39.18.



JULIO JIMENEZ, TRIBUNE

TOP MAN: Larry Dixon celebrates his Top Fuel victory Sunday in the Checker Schuck's Kragen NHRA Nationals at Firebird International Raceway near Chandler.

BURNIN' RUBBER:

Larry Dixon won the Top Fuel division of the Checker Schuck's Kragen NHRA Nationals Sunday at Firebird International Raceway near Chandler.

JULIO JIMENEZ, TRIBUNE

