



Harry Strunk, former editor in chief of the Daily Nebraskan, is currently working on a biography of Don Schumacher and the history of his racing teams as well as a novel set within the world of drag racing called *Burning More Than Rubber*. To gather research for these projects, he's signed on as a crewmember for Don Schumacher's Jack Beckman-driven Mail Terminal Services Funny Car during the Western Swing and will chronicle his adventures for NHRA.com readers. Strunk can be reached at hstrunk100@gmail.com

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Winning on my first day out

WOW!

Super Bowl, Kentucky Derby, The Masters, Wimbledon, World Series, the Final Four ... can they possibly come close to matching the adrenaline of winning four rounds and claiming a nitro Funny Car victory on Sunday afternoon?

I was dropped off at 9 a.m. Sunday at Denver's Bandimere race track with suitcase in hand to finally catch up with the Mail Terminal Services Funny Car team I've been assigned to join. Feeling the butterflies of a new kid on their first day to school, I was relieved when *National DRAGSTER* photographer Jerry Foss soon showed up to help break the ice by "staging" several photos with crew members. Little did I know that 10 hours later I would be writing about what it is like to be a member of a winning Funny Car team.

Where do I start? The fast-paced action in the pit rushes the heart and keeps the juices flowing unlike anything I've ever experienced. In between runs the MTS crew quickly picked apart their blue and yellow Funny Car like vultures on a carcass. It gave the term Chinese fire drill a whole new perspective. My contribution was dumping used oil into a barrel, carrying fuel bottles for mixing, and helping driver Jack Beckman pack his chutes. We packed them three times to be exact; that's the number required to win it all. Oh, and I stayed out of the way.

Lunch wasn't an option and bottles of water and POWERade were gulped down during rides to the staging area and breaks for track maintenance. While the crew occasionally came up with a quick joke or two, there wasn't much talking throughout the day. Chatting takes too much concentration away from missing a damaged part or loose fitting.

During the semifinals, cylinder head specialist Jim Marcellus sacrificed his pants when they were shredded by the starter. Beckman later said it was tough concentrating before the start with all of the Fruit of the Loom flying around. Marcellus was fortunate. There were no injuries and I scrambled over to the Oakley/Mopar team and found colleague Rod Centorbi, another cylinder head specialist. Not only do Jim and Rod have the same size cylinders, but they share the same waist size.

On the ride to the staging lanes before the final round, I absorbed the electricity in the air as the clouds started hanging over the Rocky Mountain foothills. Weather had nothing to do with it. This was the high energy connection which awakens one's senses when everything around them seems like a dream. This final wink on an eye moment – 4.93 seconds to be exact - was what had held tens of thousands of fans together all day, and I was standing in the middle of it.

So with camera in hand, I recorded for history the joys and hugs, delight and exultation, of the nine young men I had only met hours before as they watched their driver scream down the track and into the Bandimere record books on July 15, 2007. I say they are young men since I have bragging rights as the oldest team member at 49. Perhaps time to shave the beard?

On the way to the shutdown area to retrieve Jack, I wondered why I was the only one sitting inside the Durango. I soon found out. The guys were standing on the vehicle and hanging out the windows waving and cheering to the crowd in what is the victory lap of drag racing. Better I stayed out of the way again. People coming up to shake my hand and congratulate me, the imposter, brought on some feelings of guilt. It was soon tempered, however, with the warmth and camaraderie of the MTS members. These guys are great!

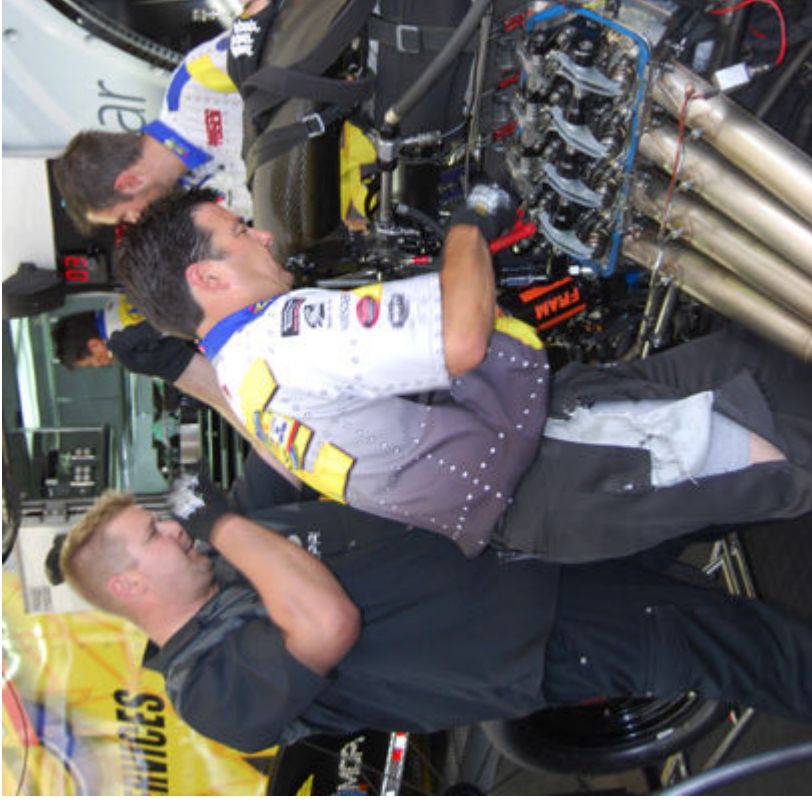
Afterwards, I just stood there and stared at it: "POWERade 2007 NHRA Event Champion." To some it may have only been a hat, but to me it was much more.

That hat represented the weeks and months of sweat, effort and disappointments for the MTS team; and I was truly humbled. Team member Dave Fears received the traditional POWERade shower for first time winners. It took Dave 16 years to finally make it into the winners circle as a crew member, yet I was standing next to him on my first day on the team. Life certainly isn't fair.

The winner's circle included a continuous stream of photos taken with a dozen different sponsored hats. Crew members along with Beckman and crew chief Todd Okuhara were given a new hat every couple of minutes for promotional shots. In a flurry of camera shutters and photographer commands, I couldn't help but wonder where all of these pictures were going to end up.

But what was really puzzling were all of the hats. Certainly a windfall for me, but none of the crew members I was around all day even wore hats. Where do all of these hats end up?

At the end of the day, I asked team owner Don Schumacher I'm working for free, but he is absolutely correct. The



about my bonus for the win and he replied that I'm already overpaid. compensation I received Sunday in being accepted by a band of

men that so love their work and each other that it finally exploded onto the race track in the form of a Jack Beckman MTS victory is a memory that will last forever. As they say, priceless!

Signing off,
From the Road
