

Justin Ashley, NHRA’s “Giant Killer” Talks About His Hot Start

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To say that Justin Ashley has taken the drag racing world by storm would be an understatement. After being named the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) Rookie of the Year in 2020, the Plainview, New York native’s success on drag racing’s biggest stage has only accelerated.

Before the start of the 2023 season, Ashley had already collected seven wins in the NHRA Top Fuel category. In doing so, he’d beaten out several NHRA legends along the way – by the age of 28. The second-generation racer then kicked off 2023 by winning two of the first three races of the season with back-to-back first-place finishes at the NHRA Arizona Winternationals and Lucas Oil NHRA Winternationals.

Automoblog was able to catch Ashley sitting still just long enough to have a conversation about the blazing hot start to his career, his plans for the future, and his love for drag racing.



Justin Ashley, 2020 NHRA Rookie of the Year has already become one of Top Fuel’s premier drivers by the age of 28. Photo by Gary Nastase/Auto Imagery.

Can you describe the feeling of being named NHRA Rookie of the Year in 2020?

“It was an amazing feeling because for us that year, that was ultimately our goal going into the year. It wasn’t necessarily to compete for a championship or lead the points. Our goal was to win Rookie of the Year. That seems like an individual award, but it is a team award.

For us to be able to achieve that our first year out with so many good rookies and the Top Fuel competition that award was meaningful. It was an important notch in our belt for our team and for the program as a whole.”



Justin Ashley celebrates being named NHRA 2020 Rookie of the Year. Photo by Ron Lewis.

To what do you credit your growth and increasing success since your debut season?

“It certainly would be a disservice to credit one person because it’s really been a complete team effort. Top to bottom you need to surround yourself with good people and then good things happen. And I’ve been fortunate to be surrounded by a lot of great people.

My father, Mike Ashley, has been very meaningful in my life and has been very influential. Dustin Davis is a guy that has done a tremendous job of running the day-to-day operations of the team, bringing in the right personnel and bringing in the right people to ensure that we have success both on and off the racetrack.

Ultimately, we were able to take it to that next level of success when Phillips Connect came on board in 2022, and they have allowed us to take that strong foundation and build upon it and find even more success.”

You’ve been called a “giant killer,” and as someone under 30 winning against big names in the Top Fuel standings, I can see where that comes from. What’s your first reaction to hearing accolades like that?

“It’s very humbling, because when I have my name included with some of the greatest racers of all time, and people that I grew up watching, it really is a tremendous honor. When you get mentioned with guys like Doug Kalitta, Antron Brown, Steve Torrence, Tony Schumacher, and the list goes on and on.

Those guys who have found so much success and have won so many races. It is an amazing feeling and certainly something that’s very humbling. It’s something that I don’t take lightly.”



Photo by Gary Nastase/Auto Imagery.

What are your goals for the 2023 NHRA Top Fuel season?

“We take it one race at a time, no matter what. Our team goals are the same as everyone out there: win the 2023 NHRA World Championship. We know it’s a tall task, but we know that the competition is tougher now than it’s ever been before.

But that's why we go to the races we expect to win. It's going to be a long, difficult road that will probably have plenty of ups and downs, but that goal will stay the same."

I believe you had your Top Fuel Dragster debut at Charlotte Motor Speedway? Does another Nationals event there mean something a little different to you?

"It's certainly a special place in my heart because I did make my debut there. It's a beautiful facility and one of the nicest tracks on the tour. It's a place that I always look forward to going to because we've had success there in the past. I really enjoy racing in Charlotte."

What would you say has been the highlight of your career to this point?

"Winning the Winternationals in 2022, because that was our first race with Phillips Connect and our first race with Toyota. It was really a brand-new program with brand new sponsors.

We were working on our foundation and to be able to come out at a historic race, like the Lucas Oil Winternationals, and that win was a dream come true."



Justin Ashley and his team celebrate winning the 2022 Winternationals. Photo by Ron Lewis.

What are some of the qualities that a driver needs to be successful at this level of the sport?

“Discipline and a short memory. I think discipline is important because it comes with the approach. I approach every round the same way, whether it’s the first round of qualifying or the last round of eliminations. I think the best drivers in the world are the ones that can do that and not focus on everything else that’s going on outside the car.

You have to keep everything underneath the visor. You must have a short memory because all of us make plenty of mistakes. We’ve made lots of mistakes in the past, we’re going to make mistakes in the future. You have to learn from them and then put them behind you.”

What would you suggest for someone who is interested in drag racing and wants to learn more?

“The best thing is to come to the racetrack. It’s a great experience and you can really learn a lot about the sport itself, how it works and the entire landscape of the sport.

I think that would be the best thing if there’s a local event in the area in which you live. I think you can learn a lot over the course of anywhere from one to three days simply by attending an event.”

What makes drag racing different from other popular types of racing for drivers and fans?

“Our cars go from zero to 330 miles per hour in under four seconds. They are 11,000 horsepower cars that are the fastest accelerating vehicles on the planet that fans not only smell them, they feel them. That is a huge differentiator.

It’s an incredible sensory experience and then you add in the access that fans have to be able to engage with the teams and drivers, it is a second to none experience. I don’t know any other sport that’s like that, where the fans are literally outside and up close and personal with what’s going on track. That’s something that certainly sets our sport apart from any other sport out there.”



Justin Ashley's Top Fuel dragster takes off en route to his win at the 2022 Winternationals. Photo by Gary Nastase/Auto Imagery.

How would you describe the culture around NHRA drag racing and how does it differ from other types of car racing?

“I am not too familiar with other racing series, but what I can say about NHRA races is we have a family atmosphere. We all care for each other, and we all love each other.

We all have a mutual respect because we know that you know what one team does, the other team does and we're all trying to accomplish the same objective, which is not an easy thing to do. There's mutual respect and appreciation. There's a family atmosphere, something that's unique about our sport and it stands out.”

What advice would you give to someone who is attending their first NHRA race?

“Do everything you can to put the phone away. Just take it all in because it's not something that you just see, it's something that you smell and feel. I think it's important since this is a sensory experience to do everything you can to just take the whole thing in and have an appreciation for the mechanics, the engineering, the speed, and everything that goes into making these cars run. These cars are so fast. They are going 330 mph in under four seconds.

What you might miss is what goes on behind the scenes. I would advise people to go out to the pits and take in the full experience. Watch the teams, watch the drivers engage with the fans, but watch the teams break down the car – tearing them apart and putting them back together in less than an hour.”

Automoblog will be live in attendance at the 2023 Circle K NHRA Four-Wide Nationals at the zMax Dragway in Concord, North Carolina to watch Ashley attempt to add another win to his total. Stay tuned to the website for more NHRA content and a follow-up report on the race.