

# Justin Ashley impresses in Top Fuel debut, looks towards the future

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Justin Ashley had about as good a Top Fuel debut as anyone could have hoped for. This past weekend in Charlotte, the Long Island-native gave an exciting preview of where his NHRA Top Fuel career might be headed.

The 24-year-old Top Fuel rookie blew all expectations out of the water. In Monday's eliminations at zMAX Dragway, he defeated not only fellow 24 year-old sensation Austin Prock, he also beat then-No. 3-ranked Mike Salinas.

Ashley made it all the way to the semifinals before he lost to the eventual winner and current number one overall Steve Torrence.

Prock was one of the many to take notice. He lost to Ashley on a holeshot (a slower elapsed time, but a win due to having a better reaction time at the starting line).

“First time I got beat on a holeshot all season, and you know, it was a good one,” said Prock. “The kid’s new and he was cutting great lights all weekend. He was .040 against me and my .061. So I did a good job, but he did a better job.”

## Justin Ashley is ready

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Although he's a Top Fuel rookie, Justin Ashley has plenty of resources to draw on. One of those is his father and multiple-time Funny Car and Pro Mod champion Mike Ashley.

His father's experience has helped him assemble a quality team. Ashley hired on highly-skilled and experienced tuner Aaron Brooks for his debut race.

It's awesome to have Aaron on our team," said Ashley. "I have a tremendous amount of respect for Aaron as a person and as a crew chief; he's a championship-caliber crew chief and he's an even better person, so to have him in our corner really means a lot."

Another key piece of the puzzle was shoring up quality sponsorship. Ashley accomplished that when he signed with Strutmasters.com last month. All-in-all, it makes for a strong package that put the racing world on notice in Charlotte.

"I got the best team in the world. I'm so proud of them," he said. "This Strutmasters.com Top Fuel Dragster was rippin' all weekend."

## **Staying Focused**

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While Ashley still has competition left in the 2019 season, his impressive debut has many wondering what's next. For now, the rookie is trying to stay grounded.

"I'm just taking it one run at a time, trying not to make anything bigger than it really is," Ashley said. "I've just been focusing on one qualifying run at a time, one eliminations run at a time. I'm just trying to stay in my lane and focus on being the best driver I can be and helping my team to be successful."

As for 2019, the team will compete in the final two races of the season in Las Vegas and Pomona. The reason for the abbreviated season is to allow Ashley to keep his rookie status for the 2020 season.

In doing so, the young driver may enter 2020 as the favorite to win the Auto Club of Southern California Road to the Future Award. The award crowns the NHRA's top rookie across all pro categories.

## **What lies ahead for Justin Ashley?**

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Team owner Dustin Davis, has been impressed with Ashley's mentality

"He's calm and cool and does the same program every time," said Davis.

For now, Davis is trying to temper expectations for the upcoming season.

“After this year, I think we’re still pretty focused on running a limited schedule for 2020,” said Davis. “Obviously, if we get additional funding, we might add to that, but I don’t know that it will go immediately to a full season.”

Strutmasters.com, who signed on to sponsor Ashley’s 2019 races, is expected to extend its deal with the team. Big names RE/MAX IQ and Lucas Oil have agreed to sponsor at least the remainder of this season.

Although he is riding high on his Top Alcohol wins and impressive Top Fuel debut, Ashley is aware of the work he has in front of him.

“I feel pretty confident, but this is a new challenge for me,” Ashley said. “There’s certainly going to be a learning curve, and I expect that, which is why I’m looking forward to spending the time testing and getting some more laps. The more laps I make, the more comfortable I’ll feel.”

“I expect to go out and be successful with this team. However, I know it’s going to take some time for me to get used to certain things in the car. Feeling when it’s spinning or shaking the tires, or when a run is going good or not going good.”

Justin Ashley feels confident that the team strategy of getting experience in the 2019 season was the right move.

“We wanted to give ourselves a chance to win at every race we go to in my rookie season,” said Ashley. “we agreed that the best way to do that was to get a head start this year.”