

NHRA Gator Nationals

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Hagan powered to a run of 3.926-seconds at 329.34 mph in his 11,000-horsepower Dodge Direct Connection Charger SRT Hellcat, winning the Gator Nationals for the second straight season. Both Hagan and Todd posted identical reaction times on the starting line, but Todd ran into trouble late in the run and Hagan claimed his 44th career win. He also defeated Tim Wilkerson, Bob Tasca III and Alexis DeJoria, making three straight runs in the 3.80s to reach the final round. After going his entire career without winning in Gainesville, Hagan, a three-time world champ, now has back-to-back wins at the historic race.

"For this team, we were just running strong, and to come out and win the first race of the season, it's just amazing," said Hagan, who is fourth all-time in Funny Car wins. "I'm just in awe of our team right now.

"I knew it was going to be a good race and honestly J.R. poked out there in front of me, and then something happened over there to him and we drove around him and turn on the win light. This car is just running strong. It's just it's an honor to just even be in that caliber of drivers is incredible. it's a huge honor for me to be able to be fourth all the time."

Todd, who won in Gainesville to open the 2021 campaign, also impressed on Sunday, beating Blake Alexander, Robert Hight and Chad Green to reach his 42nd career final round.

In Top Fuel, Salinas won for the first

time in Gainesville and the eighth time in his career, slipping past Steve Torrence in the final round with a 3.700 at 330.31 in his 11,000-horsepower Valley Services dragster. After winning a career-best four races last year, Salinas was determined to improve upon that in 2023. He impressed throughout eliminations, too, beating Justin Ashley, defending world champ Brittany Force and Leah Pruett to reach the final round, running as quick as 3.669 on raceday.

"I think we're going to be really good all year long, but we're fighting with the best in the world," Salinas said. "The teams out here are no joke. You better bring your 'A' game every time, but everyone is beatable. It's special what we have right now. These guys have taught me how to win and it's a mindset. You appreciate wins like these because they're so hard to come by."

Torrence, the four-time world champ, reached the final round for the 82nd time in his career, knocking off Scott Palmer, Tony Schumacher and Doug Kalitta, who set the track E.T. record with a run of 3.646 earlier in the day.

Coughlin's magical weekend in Pro Stock ended with his first Gator Nationals victory, as he closed out the day with a run of 6.637 at 208.71 in his JEGS.com/White Castle/Elite Motorsports Chevrolet Camaro to defeat Mason McGaha in the final round. It's the third career win for Coughlin, who also qualified No. 1 and beat Larry Morgan, Deric Kramer and Dallas Glenn to set up the matchup with McGaha. Coughlin was excellent on the starting line and cemented his strong start to the 2023 campaign.

"I was a little fired up today," Coughlin said. "At Elite Motorsports, it's a little newer than the JEGS so-called legacy. It

doesn't date back to 1960, but it's the same type of honor to me. You look at Erica (Enders), she's a five-time world champion and you're driving for a team that wins championships. They have that same demeanor when they drive through the gates. They expect to win and we're one big family. That's the coolest thing about it. When one car is out, we all work together."

McGaha knocked off Fernando Cuadra, Kyle Koretsky and five-time world champ Greg Anderson to reach his second final round.

Herrera finished off a star-making weekend with one last dominant performance in the final round, going 6.706 at 202.15 on his Vance & Hines/Mission Foods Suzuki to beat Angie Smith and earn his first career NHRA victory. It was also Herrera's first career race with Vance & Hines, and the young standout put together a marvelous performance, qualifying No. 1 and setting

the track speed record in the process. He knocked off Ron Tornow, teammate Eddie Krawiec and Jianna Evaristo to reach the final round, making the quickest pass of each session before finishing the job in the finals.

"This is a dream," Herrera said. "Vance & Hines is such an awesome team to work with. They help so much and it shows. I'm at a loss for words. I'm just out here having fun and I can't believe I'm holding this Wally. To make this Vance & Hines team happy, it's just an unbelievable feeling. To win out here and to do it in front of all these fans, it's just amazing."

Smith advanced to her second straight final round in Gainesville, going 6.845 at 181.84 in the championship round. She knocked off John Hall, Joey Gladstone and rookie Chase Van Zant earlier in the day.

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