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SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

Parity in the series sets the stage for a wild season with the possibility of multiple winners and a down-to-the-wire championship battle

by Phil Burgess and
Jim Luikens

The 2014 NHRA Pro Mod Drag Racing Series

will kick off at the Amalie Motor Oil NHRA Gatornationals, and with very few rules changes this season, the parity between the three major engine combinations — nitrous, turbocharged, and supercharged — should continue. Last year, supercharged entries captured six of the 10 spots atop the standings but with a best finish of just fourth because the nitrous machines of Rickie Smith and Mike Castellana sandwiched second-place Troy Coughlin's turbo Corvette.

Also new for this year is a slightly modified eliminations format in which the Pro Mod cars will run their first round early Sunday instead of Saturday afternoon as in previous years.

Defending season champ Smith spent two months in Qatar helping tune one of his old cars that was purchased by Sheik Khalid Al Thani and only arrived back in the United

States Feb. 23, giving him scant time to prepare for his title defense. Smith, who won the championship last year with his nitrous-assisted IDG Camaro, opted against the retirement he had been planning all of 2013 to take another shot at the championship thanks to the urging of IDG's Joe McCormick and Charlie Lingenfelter. Despite his absence

stateside, he and right-hand man Chad Hester have been busy.

"I think we found two- or three-hundredths in what we were doing in Qatar, so we'll bring the Camaro to Gainesville, but I also had Jerry Bickel build me a turbo car, a '69 Camaro, over the winter," said Smith. "We'll see where we're at with the nitrous car in Gainesville

and then make the decision on whether to stick with it or switch to the turbo car, or maybe build another '69 Camaro for nitrous. I've never driven a turbo car before, but I'm not worried about it. If it has a steering wheel on it, I can drive it.

"I don't think that one combination has anything over the



RICKIE SMITH



MIKE CASTELLANA



TROY COUGHLIN



JIM LAURITA

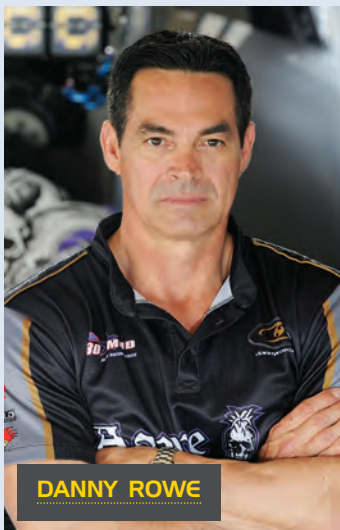
other right now; it's more about who has their act together. The turbo cars have a power advantage, and if they could get them to 60-foot better, they would outrun us four- or five-hundredths. It can happen, but it hasn't happened yet."

After winning the championship in 2012, only Smith was better than Coughlin last year, so Coughlin will stick with his battle-tested turbocharged JEGS Corvette for another season. The talented Steve Petty will again twist the knobs for the sleek yellow screamer, one of just two turbocharged cars (along with Chip King's Dodge Daytona) to finish in the top 10 last year.

"There's not been any major rule changes, so we've just been working on testing and making things a little better, just crossing our t's and dotting our i's and being as efficient as possible," Coughlin said. "We still believe in the turbo setup because we have Steve Petty in our corner. It's hard to go wrong with him; we've tried it with him and without him, and it's a tough class to adapt to when you've run your whole life on carburetors and gasoline to go to electronic fuel injection and methanol without someone with expertise.

"The nitrous cars seemed to have a bit of an edge last year,

first with Rickie and Mike Castellana, then with Jim Laurita, and the supercharged cars of guys like Mike Janis, Von Smith, and Danny Rowe are always going to be tough, but we have a



DANNY ROWE

championship-caliber team and a championship-caliber car and all of the great support in the right areas, so we're coming back with the same loaded gun we had last year. We think the parity is going to be good all around."

Last year, the quickest run of the

season wasn't made by Smith or Coughlin but rather by Laurita's nitrous-powered Camaro. Laurita, a relative newcomer to the NHRA Pro Mod Series, stunned the crowd in St. Louis with a 5.82 to lead the field. Laurita's car is tuned by nitrous expert Brandon Switzer of Switzer Dynamics, and should they elect to contest a full season, they will likely mount a challenge for the top spot.

For 2014, the NHRA Pro Mod Series continues its solid upward trajectory. For the season opener in Gainesville, the 28-car Pro Mod field filled quickly, and several teams were unable to submit an entry. Exactly half of the Gainesville pre-entries, 14 out of 28, are supercharged. Eight nitrous-powered cars closely lead

the six turbocharged entries that round out the pre-entry list. While one race does not define a season, it does provide a good indicator of what's to come throughout the rest of 2014.

After a year on the sidelines, Harry Hruska, owner of Precision Turbo & Engine, returns to Pro Mod competition with the '68 Camaro that he had previously campaigned with driver Brad Personett. Donnie Walsh Jr. is now behind the wheel of the car, which is a previous winner. A turbocharged 521-cid engine from Brad Anderson Enterprises powers the entry, and Hruska hints that he'll have big news to announce later in the season.

Nine different body styles are on the Gainesville pre-entry list. They consist of old and new Camaros, old and new Mustangs, and an old and new Firebird plus two new Corvettes, two Dodge Daytonas, and Doug Winters' '57 Chevy. Later this season, fans will likely see David Hance's '57 Chevy and Pete Farber's swoopy Dodge

Daytona, which is actually a new car even though it still carries the familiar look of last year's entry.

With Canadian Kenny Lang parking his Corvette and planning a return to his Summit-sponsored '69 Camaro, the field will not feature early Corvettes for the first time in a while. The '63 Corvette was once the staple of Pro Mod racing, but much like the '41 Willys that preceded it, it appears to have fallen out of favor, at least temporarily

Canadian drivers continue to support NHRA Pro Mod racing in a big way; five entries from four provinces will be run in Gainesville. In addition to Lang, who hails from Manitoba, Jim Bell of Alberta, Craig Cawte of British Columbia, and the two Ontario-based entries of Raymond Commisso and Eric Latino give fans north of the border a lot to cheer about.

Another big announcement made during the off-season revolved around Steve Matusek, who parked his turbocharged Mustang in order to drive a second Camaro for Danny Rowe Racing (DRR). Both cars will be tuned by DRR's crew chief, Jimmy Rector, and will carry the colors of Rowe's sponsor, Agave Underground Tequila.

One of the big questions for 2014 is how will Jim Whitely fare in Pro Mod? The two-time and reigning Top Alcohol Dragster champion has elected to join the Pro Mod class and plans to race as part of a two-car effort along with his son, Steven. **ND**



MIKE JANIS