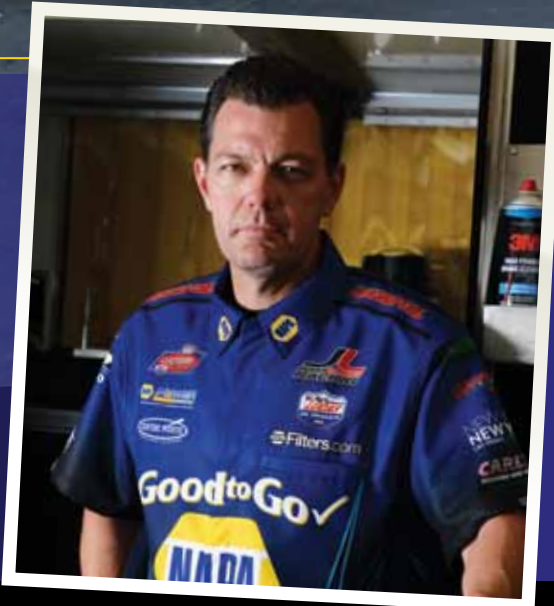




# DREAMS & EMOTIONS

John Lombardo Jr. Discusses A Lifelong Goal





WORDS JOHN LOMBARDO JR. PICS GARY NASTASE

**J**ohn Lombardo Jr. is the son of renowned Funny Car driver Lil' John Lombardo, a successful privateer whose most widely publicized victory was a 1985 win at the U.S. Nationals in Raymond Beadle's Blue Max Mustang.

The younger Lombardo was heavily influenced by summers spent drag racing with his dad and surrounded by some of the greatest drivers in racing. He also successfully developed a string of auto parts stores that he eventually combined to form one of the largest-inventory of NAPA outlets in California. When circumstances were right, the Brea, California-based businessman began driving an NHRA Top Alcohol Funny Car, proudly flying the NAPA colors.

Recently, on the Monday following the NHRA Spring Nationals in Houston, Lombardo reached a lifelong goal when he earned his cross-over license in a Don Schumacher Racing nitro Funny Car. In his own words he details the day and his emotions about the event.



## JOHN LOMBARDO Jr.

**T**his year marks the 40th anniversary of Big Jim Dunn's film *Funny Car Summer*. My dad is in it, both in person and driving his Funny Car, and the movie gives us an inside look at the lifestyle, shows, cars and fans that made drag racing one of the most brutally addictive products of the 1970s. I believe that a great majority of us who simply can't get enough of drag racing can blame or credit our affliction on this era. There is no question that it's responsible for mine. Those earliest of memories evoke emotions men aren't willing to admit.

I vividly remember a Sunday morning in 1971. I was four years old and awoke ready for several serious rounds of cartoons. Instead, I found my mom sleeping in the living room on our couch underneath a red afghan. Something was seriously wrong.

My dad had been badly burned at Irwindale Raceway, and he would spend weeks at a burn ward in Orange County. Though not as clearly, I also remember visiting him in between painful skin grafts and other treatments, and Dad would show us sketches of the new car Steve Plueger had underway.

The following year (1972) Dad was back behind the wheel of that new car once again rising to the top of his field. Between 1977 and 1983, it was all FM rock 'n' roll for us, and the voices of Steve Evans and Bill Donor perked my ears. Hearing Lil' John Lombardo alongside Snake and Mongoose, the Blue Max, Billy Meyer, and Joe Pisano brought the same chills and excitement as fire in the pipes on the last note of our national anthem.

I began drag racing years later and won my first national event in Dallas in 2009, and that was big. But winning the 2012 World Finals in Pomona in dominant fashion was extraordinary; it bookended my



dad's first national-event victory 29 years earlier at the last World Finals held at Orange County Int'l Raceway.

The next chapter for me began the Monday after the 2014 NHRA Spring Nationals in Houston. "Funny Car Monday," as I will refer to it for years to come, was epic.

Just last year in Houston, Centre Pointe Collision Centers owner Rick Jackson's car nipped us in the final by a couple of hundredths. This season we are teamed up with Rick, and his beautiful new Hadman Mustang dons the Good To Go NAPA Batteries, Lucas Oil, NAPA Filters and the rest of our partner's logos. Jackson makes a ton of power, and thanks to Chris Perl, Scott Manning and Lew Larson, we take one of the prettiest and best-prepared Top Alcohol Funny Cars to the starting line. While we posted impressive numbers at the season-opener in Pomona and stellar stats at the spring race in Las Vegas,

we aren't winning many rounds. We qualified in the top half in Houston but Steve Gasparelli ended our weekend there. We knew that if we could make arrangements, testing the Top Alcohol car on Monday would be beneficial.

But the plan was already in place for me to make licensing passes in Don Schumacher Racing's Infinite Hero Dodge Charger R/T that Monday. Driver Jack Beckman and crew chiefs Rob Flynn and Terry Snyder, of course, had this other silly goal in their sights: winning the race on Sunday. They ran extremely well and worked hard from the first session to the final round, throwing several motors and seeing the body of their Funny Car damaged in an heroic race day effort that ultimately yielded a runner-up finish to Robert Hight.

At the end of this exhausting thrash, when even loading up would have been a tall order for a typical team, Chris Spall,

A photo that brings on emotions from back in the day. "Lil John" Lombardo at Orange County Int'l Raceway. "However exaggerated our recollections are, hindsight reminds us how special that time was."





**A.** The fuel-car burnout? “It’s sideways and reeks of unfamiliarity, but I still get it out past the tree and a little steering wheel rights us.”

**B.** While Lew Larson (left) and Chris Perl (right) attend to engine duties on the alcohol car, Lombardo readied himself for a faster rider.

**C.** Teamed this year with Centre Point Collision Center’s Rick Jackson, it is Lombardo’s experience behind the wheel of the alcohol car, which includes three national-event wins that gave him a leg up to wheel the nitro car.

**D.** “After a short debrief we were making noise warming up in the pits. The procedure is quite a bit different from the alcohol car but they are not worlds apart.”

Sterling Van Dusen, Marla O’Guin, Chase Crawford, Jeff Hilliker, Bill Haskins and Nate Archambeault started preparing to do it all over again the next morning—this time for me. DSR Senior Vice President Mike Lewis stopped by and politely reminded me that the spare Funny Car body, which they intended to run in Atlanta in less than two weeks, was in my hands. The trust was appreciated; the responsibility could have been weighed.

Jabs started early in the hotel lobby the next day.

“How did you sleep, John?”

“You know how I slept, Rick. Really well—until about 3:00 a.m.!”

But my Monday began when I received a text message that read, “Battery truck missing.”

My Freightliner FL70 carries up to 370 units of NAPA and Optima batteries to serve our wholesale customers with my single largest product line at my NAPA Store. And it was gone. A stressful situation, but I have observed that the ability to

deal with pressure and adversity is a skill necessary for success at the highest levels of business and motorsports. Pile it on!

I received complete introductions at the DSR pits and thanked the crew again for their dedication. The warm-up went pretty smooth in the fuel car. We had a little window, so LuAnn Bishop (our alcohol car team manager) and I met our NAPA Top Alcohol team in the lanes and made our first hit. It was definitely better. Chase Crawford was waiting at the turnout to shuttle me directly back to the water box to the “big” car.

While I was changing helmets, DSR Director of Racing Todd Okuhara and Rob Flynn reviewed the plan with me, and off we went.

“There is a red cone on your left just a few feet past the 330 clocks, and if you’re comfortable to go there, step off—and get the ‘chutes out for good measure.”

Copy.

Chase and Sterling set the belts to serious tight, Nate pulls the fire bottle pins and Marla installs the protective doghouse. “Be safe and we’ll see you down there.”

I roll up to the water box. Chris spins the motor to clear the cylinders. Ignition on.

“Ready?”

I nod.

Crank, fire, and it goes quiet.

“John, you need to pull the fuel on to start the car.”

“Yes sir, sorry,” while thinking to myself, you only have a couple of levers and



## JOHN LOMBARDO Jr.



With fire in the pipes, John Lombardo Jr. is off and running towards a goal he longed for since watching his father compete with the likes of Snake and Mongoose, the Blue Max, Billy Meyer and Joe Pisano in the early days of the class.

knobs, how about operating them like you belong in here?

Chris backs the motor off and repeats the startup procedure. I pull the fuel lever, smiles turn to game faces, and there's fire in the pipes!

Terry Snyder oversees final engine settings, and Bill—the supercharger specialist and one of the bravest men on the planet—has placed his life in both my judgment and grip on the brake lever as he lowers and latches the body.

I ease out on the clutch, roll through the water box, align with Rob and start the procedure on his queue. I try to do a nice, smooth, throttle-moderated burnout when what the car really wants is to be on the 'stop and "freed up."

Clutch in, reverse, clutch out—but not much is happening. Okay, it's a glide, a centrifugal clutch that requires a second to create momentum. Clutch out just means it can start being a glide again. In seconds we're rolling at an acceptable rate. The steering is slower off center than I'm used to, but it gets quicker. I'm making larger arcs in the lane than intended, but again, it's all fine.

Stop, forward gear, body up, final adjustments and my visor is fogging a bit, but no driver double-checks now.

Body down and I look to Rob for minor directional correction, get off the brake, the crew pushes us up to him for a last check and signal, then I ease into the first light.

I click my visor shut, open the fresh air valve and move my left hand to the fuel shutoff lever while the right maintains a monster grip on the brake lever. My left hand will not leave that lever until it places the fuel pumps on the high side. I will not light the second light without a hand on the wheel; therefore, I physically cannot leave the starting line on the low side.

Fuel lever to the high side, counting "one thousand one, one thousand two," clutch out, now it's only a brake bump in

to the second light. The Christmas tree on a single run is quick to the amber and, boom, we go from idle to explosion and go time *right now!*

The car leaves hard and just a little left, I bring it back, try to tune out the cavernous cockpit and look down course, pick up the red cone, step off and hit the 'chutes.

The crew seems genuinely pleased, both for me to get one done and for themselves. Let's be realistic. It's mid-season, and they're on a mission. While they are 1,000% respectful, driver training is probably not one of their top five things to do between races.

We eventually made four runs in the alcohol car with solid progress and three runs in the fuel car, for a total of seven in one day.

I can tell you a couple of things about those runs: As the big cars continue to develop and apply down force, they *drive* the tires into the pavement. At the beginning of every tire rotation in the big car, the seemingly unlimited power ratchets the car forward. Beckman advised that our Top Alcohol Funny Cars tend to have a lighter feel. They need wheel speed. The nitro car just thunders through, and about the 330' mark, where we start to fight the aero drag, the clutch starts to come in and lets you know who's in charge.

After half-track, the cones and landmarks start going by like I've never seen. It's going to take a couple of more laps to gain the same perception of track position as the alcohol car.

Thanks to the crew, we did qualify for the upgrade. My dad's license number, 735, is now back on the fuel Funny Car roster. Here come the memories again.

To our NAPA Customers, valued sponsors, Infinite Hero founders and supporters: thank you for all you do.

To our NHRA Fans, in both the Mello Yello and Lucas Oil Drag Racing Series, thank you for always cheering us on and supporting us. Stop by and see us at the races, and look up Lombardo Racing on Facebook, follow @LombardoRacing on Twitter, and check out our website at [www.lombardoracing.com](http://www.lombardoracing.com). No matter which class we're racing, it is a pleasure to race for and with you.

To Don Schumacher and the entire DSR team, thank you for a smooth and seamless test day, license upgrade and assaults in one of the most powerful cars on the planet.

It's really not a big deal; I have only been looking forward to it since the 1970s. **DRR**



It's all "thumbs up" from his fan base.