SPORTS

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St. Albert team wins 'Super Bowl' of funny cars

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NATHAN SITKO/Photo

The Pacemaker Racing team poses with the Bubble Up car shortly after winning the NHRA U.S. Nationals Legends Nitro Funny Car competition held Sept. 1 at the Lucas Oil Indianapolis Raceway Park. The team last won this race in 1979 using this car's ancestor.

A legendary St. Albert race car team roared into history last week by winning the Super Bowl of nitro funny car racing for the second time in almost 50 years.

Nathan Sitko and the Pacemaker Racing Bubble Up Funny Car team took first place in the NHRA U.S. Nationals Legends Nitro Funny Car competition held Sept. 1 at the Lucas Oil Indianapolis Raceway Park. Sitko was behind the wheel of the renowned green-and-white race car as it roared down the track at about 378 km/h (235 mph), covering about 305 m in 4.757 seconds.

Celebrating with the pit crew was team owner Ron Hodgson, St. Albert resident and owner of Ron Hodgson Chevrolet Buick GMC. The team last won this prestigious race in 1979, when Gordie "240" Bonin set a speed record in a very similar car.

"This is the Super Bowl of drag racing," Hodgson said of the U.S. Nationals — the biggest event there is in the sport.

"It's pretty emotional to come back there and win 43 years later with the same name on the car."

Racing legacies

Hodgson said he got interested in funny-car racing in the 1960s and built the first such car in Canada. By the 1970s, he and his cohorts were racing as the Pacemaker Bubble Up team — Pacemaker was the name of his car shop, and their sponsor was Canada Dry, which made a drink called Bubble Up.

The team went on to win about 11 major competitions (the trophies for which are lined up in Hodgson's office on Renault Cres.), often with the same green and white livery and Bubble Up logo on their cars.

Hodgson said the team brought in Sitko as a driver two years ago after their regular driver — his son Ryan Hodgson — had his retinas shaken loose by the G-forces of racing. A third-generation drag-racer, Sitko came in with 20 years of funny car experience.

"I've been driving race cars since I was seven years old," said Sitko, 40.

Nitro funny cars are so named because they run on nitromethane fuel, Sitko said. In the 1960s, these cars were heavily modified stock cars whose altered wheelbase made them look "funny," hence the name.

Sitko said Ryan (now the team's crew chief) and the team have spent countless hours and well over $200,000 building, testing, and refining the Bubble Up car from the ground up. This latest iteration was built two years ago.

A purpose-built Pontiac Firebird drag-racer, the car consists of a wedge-shaped carbon fibre shell with the classic Firebird logo on the hood mounted on a bare-bones frame with four wheels, a gigantic engine, and a seat. For controls, the driver has a yoke the size of a smartphone, a brake/drag chute lever, the usual pedals, and a button to switch from first to second gear.

As driver, Sitko wears a helmet, a seven-point seat belt, and a fireproof suit, as he sits with the rear tires to his sides, the transmission between his legs, and the deafening 6,000-horsepower engine to his front.

"It's actually a little bit louder on the outside of the car than it is on the inside," he said, on account of the helmet.

Car go fast

Sitko said the Pacemaker team typically does test runs at the RAD Torque Raceway near the Edmonton International Airport on weekends and runs about a dozen races a year. They compete in the Heritage Nitro Funny Car series (which is open to cars from the 1960s–1980s), of which the U.S. Nationals are considered the premiere event.

Funny car races are head-to-head sprints down a 1,000-foot track, Sitko said. You peel rubber a bit beforehand to get some traction, then stomp the gas pedal as soon as the light turns green. The first one across the finish line wins.

Sitko said he definitely felt the pressure in that last race, knowing he was on national television. (In a post-race interview, he joked he felt like puking in his helmet.)

"When you step on the gas, it's a big adrenaline rush," Sitko said.

The engine roars, and sometimes wings of fire spew from the exhaust pipes. About 5 Gs of acceleration crushes your body like an elephant on your chest, Sitko said. Time seems to slow down, and you become super-aware of your surroundings — good thing, too, as you need to wrestle with the wheel to keep the car on course at these speeds.

"There's a lot that happens in that five-and-a-half seconds," Sitko said.

Sitko blasted across the finish line about seven seconds ahead of his opponent, Jon Capps. Sitko credited his team's expertise and a last-minute tweak to the car's clutch to account for track conditions as the deciding factor in the race.

Sitko said this win was the biggest achievement of his racing career, and he was very thankful the Hodgsons had given him the opportunity.

"It's pretty darn cool."

Sitko said it was the friendship and camaraderie of funny car racing that kept bringing him back to the sport.

"I can't tell you how many amazing people I've met because of drag racing," he said.

"They're your family away from home."

Visit youtu.be/HcPXZP6NKjs to view the team's win at the U.S Nationals. ■



KEVIN MA/St. Albert Gazette

Nathan Sitko of St. Albert's Pacemaker Racing team took first place in the 2025 NHRA U.S. Nationals Legends Nitro Funny Car competition on Sept. 1, 2025. The team last won this event in 1979. Sitko is shown here with the team's 1979 and 2025 trophies from the event. Behind him are trophies from some of the team's other wins in the last 40-odd years.