1982 PONTIAC TRANS AM "PEPSI CHALLENGER" FUNNY CAR

The Snake's record-breaker

David Newhardt, courtesy of Mecum Auctions

Drag racers spend countless hours and dollars for a few thousandths' advantage, yet with this car, "The Snake" obliterated the national record by two-tenths of a second

VIN: N/A

by Tom Glatch

- First Funny Car in NHRA history to run 250 mph in the quarter mile; set national record at Baton Rouge, May 1982
- Set national record 5.73 elapsed time at the 1982 U.S. Nationals at Indianapolis
- First Funny Car in NHRA history to run in the 5.6-second range: 5.637 seconds, Indy, September 1982
- Posted NHRA National event victories at Montreal and Englishtown, NJ; the 33rd and 34th career wins for Don Prudhomme
- No. 1 qualifier four times: Baton Rouge, Columbus, Indy and Orange County
- Original engine
- Original body designed by Pontiac Motorsports

ACC Analysis *This car, Lot T231, sold for $113,400, including buyer's premium, at Mecum's 27th Original Spring Classic 2014 in Indianapolis, IN, on May 15, 2014.*

For the NHRA's 50th anniversary, experts ranked the top 50 drag racers in their history. Don Prudhomme was slotted as the sport's number 3 driver, just behind Don Garlits and John Force. He was just 20 years old when he won his first Top Fuel event at the 1962 "Smokers March Meet" in Bakersfield, CA. He won three U.S. Nationals Top Fuel titles (1965, 1969, 1970) before switching to the Funny Car class.

Prudhomme joined forces with Tom "The Mongoose" McEwen and Mattel to create the Hot Wheels team, as told in the recent movie "Snake and Mongoo$e." Back on his own, his Army Monza dominated the 1975–76 NHRA Funny Car seasons, winning 13 of 16 events. Like baseball, drag racing runs on statistics, and Prudhomme was batting 0.813 those two years (and 0.660 lifetime).

The U.S. Nationals are to the National Hot Rod Association what the Daytona 500 is to NASCAR — the biggest, most prestigious event on their calendar. By the end of his driving career in 1994, Don Prudhomme won the U.S. Nationals a legendary seven times, and for the 1982 edition of this historic event, he came ready to dominate.

A new record

Experts call it the greatest Funny Car run in drag-racing history. On September 4, 1982, fans at the U.S. Nationals in Indianapolis witnessed something special. Don "The Snake" Prudhomme destroyed the Funny Car national record with a 5.637-second pass at 244.56 mph. What the fans didn't know at the time was the magnitude of the accomplishment: It would take almost three years before this record was officially broken.

Right off the trailer, Snake's Pontiac Trans Am "Pepsi Challenger" Funny Car was fast. Very fast. His first qualifying run was a 5.82 at 242.58 mph — equaling Billy Meyer's national record. The next day he dropped it to 5.73, all the more shocking considering the engine blew just before the finish line.

Then on Saturday, Prudhomme lined up against Kenny "The King" Bernstein and stunned the world with his famous 5.637 at 244.56 run. Drag racers spend countless hours and dollars for a few thousandths' advantage, yet that weekend "The Snake" had just obliterated the national record by two-tenths of a second.

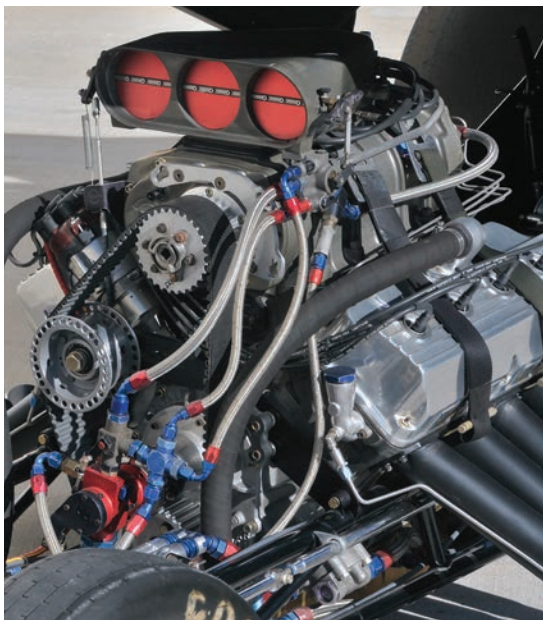
Don Prudhomme would not win another U.S. Nationals crown that weekend — the extra horsepower he was generating was shattering wrist pins on almost every pass. But it didn't matter much, as Prudhomme had just added another legend to an already storied career.

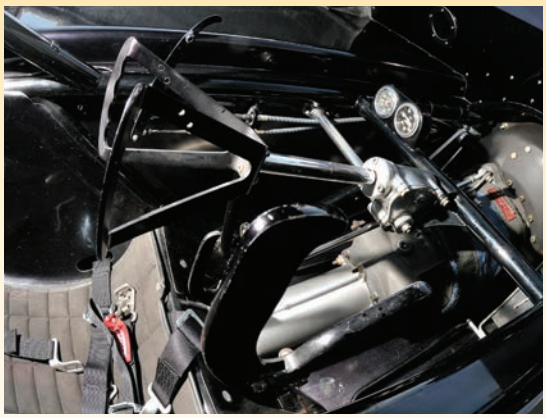
Upping the game

As both owner and driver, Don Prudhomme often advanced the engineering of the era with his racers. His "Pepsi Challenger" Trans Am was no exception. The sleek fiberglass body was one of the first to utilize advanced aerodynamics, designed by GM engineers in their wind tunnel. Although powered by the same nitro-burning Hemi engines as their Top Fuel cousins, Funny Cars are inherently slower and more unstable due to their short wheelbase, full body and front-mounted engine, but the aerodynamics of the "Pepsi Challenger" went a long way to addressing those issues with reduced drag and increased downforce.

The real secret to its engine-shattering horsepower was its fuel system. Nitro cars at the time used a gear-type fuel pump that flowed about 20 gallons per minute (today it's 110 gpm), but Prudhomme found a military-surplus vane-type pump that flowed a number of gallons more. "We had a lot of compression on it and a really good blower, but the difference was the pump," he told NHRA.com. "We knew it was going to really haul ass at Indy because the pump just happened to have the right fuel curve. It would deliver the right amount at the bottom end and taper itself off at the top end without even using a jet."

What's scary is this car could have gone faster. "We didn't have enough fuel on the other end, and we didn't have a computer on the car then to know what it really needed. At half-track it was a missile, but it never made it to the lights under full power."





From winners' circle to collectible

For his private collection, Prudhomme restored the "Pepsi Challenger" to the exact condition when it competed in 1982. It's powered by the original 484-cubic-inch, all-aluminum Hemi engine, built by Keith Black, along with original 2-speed Lenco transmission. The chassis and Trans Am body are original, too.

When Mecum auctioned the "Pepsi Challenger" in May 2012, it marked the first time Don Prudhomme had offered a racer from his collection. Its $265,000 price achieved there didn't seem to fully appreciate the significance of the car and its owner, but the money wasn't completely unrealistic, either, considering the challenging market for vintage drag cars.

The car was offered again at Mecum's Kissimmee sale in January 2014, where it was bid to $120,000 but didn't sell.

The car returned to Mecum Indy this past May, where it generated less than half the money it did when it sold in 2012. Why? Well, for one thing, this car was auctioned on Thursday, rather than on Saturday when the event's best vehicles are featured, and a lack of well-heeled buyers may have been a factor, too — but above all, this is a special piece of equipment aimed at a very limited market. A vintage drag car just isn't as usable as something like a Hemi 'Cuda or vintage road-race Corvette, and prices in today's market reflect that.

Regardless, vintage race cars with clear, documented provenance are hard to find. Legendary race cars loaded with provenance, and restored and sold by their original owner/racer, are beyond impossible. With all that in mind, I'd say this sale was the equivalent of one of The Snake's "hole-shot" wins, and the new owner should be elated with the deal. Call this one very well bought.

(Introductory description courtesy of Mecum Auctions.)

Detailing

Year produced: 1982
Number produced: One
Original list price: N/A
Current ACC Valuation: $175,000–$250,000
Tune-up/major service: $5,000
Distributor cap: N/A
Chassis # location: None
Engine # location: None
Club: Wally Parks NHRA Motorsports Museum
More: www.museum.nhra.com/
Alternatives: Don Prudhomme's 1989 Pontiac Skoal Bandit Funny Car, Snake & Mongoo$e Funny Car and Hauler set, Tommy Ivo's Wagon Master exhibition car
ACC Investment Grade: C

Comps

1968 Plymouth Barracuda "West Virginia Hemi"
Lot 2431, VIN: B029M8B390378
Condition: 2
Sold at $115,500
Leake Auctions, Dallas, TX, 11/24/2013
ACC# 231561

1968 Race Car Specialties "Stone Age Man"
Lot S756, VIN: N/A
Condition: 2
Sold at $93,500
Russo and Steele, Newport Beach, CA, 6/22/2013
ACC# 225759

1966 Mercury Comet Funny Car
Lot 1306, VIN: N/A
Condition: 2+
Sold at $176,000
Barrett-Jackson, Scottsdale, AZ, 1/18/2010
ACC# 155047