

Jim Cunningham, 73, finally finds success in NHRA

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SONOMA — Jim Cunningham is 73 years old, owns a raceway in Maryland and just won \$50,000 in the lottery. But he doesn't have any plans to stop driving a Pro Stock car on the NHRA circuit anytime soon.

After all, Cunningham might just be entering the prime of his racing career.

After 66 unsuccessful attempts to qualify for final eliminations in NHRA-sanctioned events, Cunningham advanced to the final 16 last week in Kent, Wash., to become the oldest driver to ever make a Pro Stock field.

Cunningham didn't make it out of the first round, red-lighting in his race against No. 1 seed Mike Edwards. But the thrill of being able to compete on a Sunday is something he'll never forget, and he'll try to duplicate it at this weekend's FRAM Autolite NHRA Nationals at Infineon Raceway.

"A lot of people said we would never make it, never make it happen. Never qualify," Cunningham said Friday morning. "But I proved them wrong, didn't I?"

Cunningham was in 16th place entering the final round of qualifying last week with an elapsed time of 6.741 seconds for the quarter-mile. He didn't improve on that time in his fourth and final qualifying run, so he had to sweat out the next race to see if his teammate, Erica Enders, would better his time and knock him out of the field. Enders, though, had problems with her clutch and didn't come close to the needed time.

"My phone was just going crazy, it was unreal," Cunningham said. "My wife (Gloria) called and said everyone was talking about it on the Internet. Everyone's been calling her, people she hadn't heard from in 10 years."

Cunningham began his racing career almost 25 years ago when his brother-in-law convinced him to buy a 1986 Ford Thunderbird. He didn't necessarily want to own or drive a car, yet his brother-in-law sold him on the idea by saying he would be the one to work on the car and that all Cunningham had to do was drive.

"So we got it, took it home, and I've never yet seen him in the garage," Cunningham said. "But that's really what got me deep into this stuff."

Cunningham raced in his first NHRA event in 1990. He spent a lot of his own money and a lot of hours in his shop, but his car wasn't generating enough horsepower to be competitive. So Cunningham's team began to build its own engines five years ago.

Unlike other drivers who receive financial support from their manufacturers, Cunningham, who drives a Ford Mustang, is basically funding his own research and development. This season, his team has two new cars that each cost about \$130,000, even without motors and transmissions. An engine can cost about \$100,000.

"With Jim Cunningham, it just shows his love for the sport," Funny Car driver Robert Hight said.

Ford has become more involved in Pro Stock racing the past two years and has helped Cunningham and other Ford teams with technical support. Actual funding, though, is a little tougher to come by.

"They've had some changes in their (management), and they've been doing what I want them to do," Cunningham said of Ford. "It's really been a help. Of course, they haven't given me any money. I'm paying the bill. But they are being cooperative."

Cunningham has been a little more optimistic about his chances to qualify for final eliminations this season. He plans to enter each of the last eight events.

"I'd like to do it another four or five years," Cunningham said, "maybe longer."

Notes: Cunningham had the 19th fastest time (6.799 seconds, 201.79 mph) in Pro Stock after the first two rounds of qualifying Friday. Allen Johnson set Pro Stock track records for time (6.545 seconds) and speed (210.77 mph). "... Also setting track records was Jack Beckman (4.063 seconds, 311.56 mph), the No. 1 qualifier in Funny Car. "... Matt Smith (6.912, 191.32) is the leading qualifier in Pro Stock Motorcycle. "... Because of the track's 10 p.m. curfew, the second round of qualifying in Top Fuel did not begin. No. 1 qualifier so far is Larry Dixon with track records of 3.839 seconds and 317.79 mph. Qualifying concludes today.

Fram Autolite

NHRA Nationals

Site: Infineon Raceway, Sonoma

Schedule: Today, qualifying, 8:15 a.m. (ESPN2, 8 p.m.); Sunday, eliminations, 11 a.m. (ESPN2, 3 p.m.)

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