

Garlits finds challenge with door car

By Evan Jones
MGR Communications

There's no separating Don Garlits and his Swamp Rat Top Fuel Dragster.

When fans think of "Big Daddy" and his long drag racing career, it's hard not to think of the long, black and sleek nitromethane powered machine racing to yet another victory. In fact, it was Swamp Rat that won the first NHRA Nationals at Maple Grove Raceway back in 1985.

However, Garlits isn't piloting a Top Fuel dragster any more. He's still racing at 79, but the horsepower has been toned down.

These days, Garlits goes down the quartermile in a 2009 Dodge Challenger in the NHRA Stock Eliminator Class.

It isn't necessarily a new concept for Garlits; running door cars is going back to his racing roots. Way back.

"I had those cars back in '62 and '63 when they had the lightweights," said Garlits during a break between rounds at the recent NHRA Supersnationals at Englishtown, N.J. "I had one of the first '62 Dodges and then I got one of the aluminum 63s and I was really doing well with a dragster then, so I decided to drop that and go to the dragsters a hundred percent."

Garlits will be back at Maple Grove Raceway for the inaugural MOPAR Action @ The Grove on June 25-26. He will be running his Challenger in a match race against J.C. Beattie and his ATI Performance '09 Challenger.

The event, which kicks off at 8 a.m. each day, will also have appearances by Herb "Mr. 4 Speed" McCandless and Duane Beers in "Fuelish Behavior." The always-popular HEMI Challenge presented by West Coast Hemis will be contested, along with five other bracket classes, including a Quick 32 sponsored by Indy Cylinder Head. Shoppers can visit a manufacturers midway, a car corral and a swap meet.

Garlits will also take part in the car show portion and will present his Top 25 picks on Saturday. Other car show awards will be on Sunday.

The big reason why Garlits is still racing while his peers have since retired the golf course or bass boat is his competitive nature.

That shouldn't be a surprise for someone who made a living driving a car that went over 300 mph.

"I couldn't stand it," Garlits said. "I go to sleep when I'm stopped like that."

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Getting his new ride was part of a compromise with his wife Pat, who didn't care for his return to Top Fuel in 2002.

"I came back and ran dragsters in 2002 and '03 and went 323 (mph)," Garlits said, "and my wife really didn't like that. It scared her. She didn't like that and said she wished I'd quit doing that, so I did. I didn't know it was scaring her."

A few years later Garlits was invited by Chrysler Corporation to run in a '08 Challenger.

"They built the two Challengers, the 2008 car, 1 and 2, and they took them to Denver," Garlits said. "Judy Lilly and I, I got No. 1 and she got No. 2. When we got back from Denver, my wife and I talked and she said 'you seemed to have a lot of fun doing that' and I said it was fun. She said when they come out with the '09s, why don't you go out and get one? I called up Dodge and I got one. I've been playing with it ever since."

"It's a fun car. I haven't won



Don Garlits will be driving this Dodge Challenger at the MOPAR Challenge against J.C. Beattie.

anything with it, but I've made a lot of runs in it. It's a fun deal."

At Englishtown, Garlits ran just over 10 seconds during Stock qualifying, but didn't make it into eliminations.

He also thrilled the fans by running a special exhibition race against Darrell Gwynn in an electric-powered dragster.

Driving the Challenger has presented, well, new challenges for the veteran racer.

An innovator with engines and horsepower, Garlits has entered the 21st century with his car.

No longer is it as simple as taking a wrench, taking the engine apart and putting it back together. Technology has changed the game.

"It's challenging because I've had to learn all about how to drive differently; it's totally different from driving a dragster," Garlits said. "The tune-up is all done with a computer. You don't

rebuild the engine between rounds you try to program the computer.

"You look at the run and you overlay it with your fuel map and your part maps and you look at the graphs. If the engine seems to be off, you look to try to see if it was rich or lean, or too much or not enough spark. You change it right there."

In other words, more technology doesn't necessarily make life easier for a racer.

"It's time consuming because there's hundreds of squares on those maps and you have to decide which one you want to fiddle with," Garlits said. "It has my complete tune-up right now and it runs nice and clean. It's a challenging deal and the driving is hard."

Taking the car on the track can be a challenge, too. It isn't simply getting a good reaction time and going full throttle. It led to a mistake that ended his weekend at Englishtown.

"(At Englishtown), I made a stupid mistake; I didn't really red light, I just pulled through the beams I've made three good runs prior to that," Garlits said. "There's a button on the brake pedal that's an interrupter that holds it to certain RPMs, whatever you put in the computer and you must have that button pushed out. It's really sensitive because you can't have that button pushed too far because when you take your foot off you want it to immediately release that button so it goes back to eight cylinders."

"I didn't have it pushed down correctly."

Still, running that Challenger keeps Garlits active in the sport he loves and he will be bringing the car to The Grove.

"I like Maple Grove," Garlits said. "It's in a beautiful part of Pennsylvania. I like to come up there. There's good food and the people have always been nice to us at Maple Grove."

"It's like a big recreational park and a lot of the drag strips you go to are in the middle of a big field somewhere in the middle of nowhere to get away from the people. But Maple Grove is always kind of a real comfortable place to go racing."



J.C. Beattie will be running against Don Garlits.