

# The Force is with her

## Ashley Force follows famous father into family business

We've seen men named Earnhardt and Andretti build auto racing empires with an eye on the horizon, trying to picture the day when one of their sons would go zooming by.

John Force did the same over the past two decades, but with a twist: On Tuesday, the biggest name in the drag-racing game handed the keys to one of the family cars to his 24-year-old daughter, Ashley.

The 2007 drag-racing season opens Feb. 8 in Pomona, Calif., and ends there in early November. Somewhere in between, at one of the nearly two dozen tracks where the NHRA Powerade Series puts down stakes for the weekend, 14-time series winner and defending champion John Force and rookie Ashley will wind up waiting at the same traffic light.

Once it turns green, each will be trying to keep a funny car traveling at speeds over 300 mph glued to the cen-

ter line of the quarter-mile road stretched out before them. They will be part of the four-car team John Force owns, but they won't be teammates, at least not for the 4.5 or so seconds it takes to reach the finish line.

"The tough thing is, when I look at her in the cockpit, those are the same fierce little eyes I'd see when we put her on a tricycle the first time," John Force said. "She's not a yell and screamer like me. She handles pressure a lot different than I do."

When Ashley won her first big race two years ago in Indianapolis, still competing on the NHRA's Triple-A circuit, John got so emotional he ran behind the grandstand and threw up.

Force is 57, but he won't be retiring anytime soon. Not only does he have expectations to meet and sponsors to satisfy for five more years, but now he's also trying to build an audience for a real-life comedy series on the A&E network called "Driving Force."

It's a weekly, wacky, half-hour look at the man who planned on having sons struggling to groom three daughters to run his empire instead.

"So if I'm going to stay in the game and on top long enough for that to happen," Force said with some resignation, "somewhere down the line I'm going to have to beat Ashley."

Ashley is hardly a pioneer in one sense. Three women had reached drag racing's winner's circle even before Shirley Muldowney began regularly clocking male rivals in the 1970s and early 1980s, inspiring "Heart Like A Wheel," the first movie made about a drag racer of either sex.

On the other hand, the John Force-Ashley Force duel almost certainly will mark the first time a father and daughter have competed against each other in pro sports. And in what is definitely a sign of the times, the story didn't even dominate the day's racing headlines.

Part of it, no doubt, was because NASCAR champion and broadcaster Benny Parsons died the same day. Another part had to do with drag racing's niche status. And for sheer man-bites-dog quality, the Force family announcement was competing with 72-year-old James Hylton, who

returned to the Daytona 500 more than four decades after he first raced there to try and qualify again.

Even more telling, though, is how accustomed we've become to women in general, and superstars' daughters in particular, making their marks in what were once men-only pursuits. Laila Ali dominates women's boxing the way her more famous father once did on the men's side. In the WNBA, Cheryl Ford delivers points and rebounds with the same reliability that earned her dad, Karl Malone, his NBA nickname, "The Mailman."

Like those two, Ashley Force has been groomed for success.

*Jim Litke is a national sports columnist for The Associated Press. Send comments to jlitke@ap.org.*



Jim Litke



AP PHOTO

Ashley Force, 24, the daughter of 14-time Funny Car champion John Force, will join her father in the NHRA's Funny Car drag racing division this season.

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The nonsmoking, family atmosphere features a racing motif, with checkered flag tablecloths and racing memorabilia. The restaurant is open Monday through Saturday, 6 a.m. to 8 p.m.

The specials include:

- \* Grizzly Club Special, a cheeseburger, French fries and cola, for \$5, which includes tax. This is available daily from 3 to 8 p.m.
- \* House Special, \$5.95 meatloaf, available Monday through Friday.
- \* All You Can Eat Fish, \$6.99 on Fridays.
- \* Senior citizens always get a 10 percent discount

The Checkered Flag has an extensive breakfast menu. You can get a variety of breakfasts that include two eggs and your choice of bacon, sausage patties, ham, smoked sausage, 8-ounce chopped steak or corned beef hash.

Omelets, all under \$5, can be made with cheese, bacon, sausage or ham, as well as Western, Veggie or Country style.

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For lunch, try one of Checkered Flags 14 different sandwiches, which include burgers, BLTs, chicken breast or strips, tuna salad, Reubens, patty melts, tenderloins or fish. Make it a meal with fries, cole slaw, cottage cheese, vegetables, cheese fries, baked potato, onion rings or onion tangles.

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