

ERIC MEDLEN 1973 – 2007



Whether he was riding one horse, as he did as an aspiring rodeo cowboy, or riding herd on 8,000, which he did for slightly more than three seasons as driver of one of the 300 mile-an-hour Ford Mustangs in the John Force Racing stable, Eric Medlen lived his life flat-out: no regrets; no apologies.

He loved his dad, John, alongside whom he raced for 11 seasons. He loved his job, he loved his team and he loved the extended family with which he traveled the NHRA POWERade drag racing circuit.

“Getting paid to do something you’d do for free” is how he characterized his drag racing job even before 2004, when he became the driver of the Castrol SYNTEC Ford Mustang, one of the most powerful race cars in the world.

At 33, he was a rising star, winner of six tour events, eight times a No. 1 qualifier, a media favorite for his running commentary (on the differences between his two passions, “it’s all horsepower; it’s just a different exhaust system”), a fan favorite for both his accessibility and his enthusiasm.

Teammates loved him; rivals, too, which is why, when he succumbed to injuries following a testing accident in March, 2007, it left those in the sport collectively gasping for breath. The initial outpouring of grief quickly was followed by a universal show of support that resulted in the creation of The Eric Medlen Project, the thrust of which was the design of a safer race car and creation of a safer environment in which to compete.

Toward that end, project manager John Medlen has worked with Ford Motor Company, the NHRA, SFI, chassis builder Murf McKinney and a host of others in an unprecedented display of bi-partisan cooperation.

The program paid its first dividend in 2007 when initial changes were credited with saving the life of team owner John Force when he crashed at Ennis, Texas. Although he broke bones in his hands and feet, he had no serious head or neck injuries.

The improvements that made his survival possible included a wider roll cage, extra padding within it, the switch from five-point to seven-point harnesses and a head-and-neck restraint system that limits side-to-side movement as well as front-to back. It’s a legacy with which the younger Medlen would have been pleased.

Raised in Oakdale in northern California, Eric grew up around his dad’s machine shop where he learned to love all things mechanical.

However, when his parents divorced and his father moved to Arkansas, he found himself at a crossroads. He wanted badly to race with his dad but he knew that, unless there

was a major change, he had little chance of doing so. As a result, he gravitated to one-horsepower competition as calf roping protégé to two-time PRCA World Champion Jerold Camarillo.

A high school rodeo champion, Medlen was preparing for a career as Camarillo's team roping partner when his father called to offer him the job he always wanted. With a nudge from Camarillo, he headed south to JFR where, for eight years, he worked in relative obscurity as a member of the crew.

That all changed at the end of the 2003 season when, after winning the NHRA POWERade championship, Tony Pedregon left JFR to form a new team with brother Cruz. Eric was Force's surprise choice to replace him.

"My dad was my hero growing up," Medlen said of his opportunity, "and I always dreamed that we'd wind up racing together, but I never dreamed that I'd be driving and he'd be the crew chief on the same car, especially at a place like John Force Racing."

Of course, it's not like he just climbed off a horse and into a Funny Car.

Building on the foundation laid by his father, he studied mechanical engineering for three years at Terra State Community College in Fremont, Ohio. Moreover, while he hadn't driven professionally, he did have extensive experience in go karts and shifter karts and went through Frank Hawley's Drag Racing School on several occasions, paying for the tuition himself by selling off his karts and a custom chopper motorcycle he had built himself.

His biggest dream was to follow in Force's footsteps and win a championship. That was his focus every day. It drove him to be the best that he could be. No regrets. No apologies.

