

Millican's 'fantastic day' brings runner-up finish at Topeka **by Joe Sherk**

Clay Millican parlayed an important first-round victory into one of his finest days at an NHRA race Sunday by finishing a close second to Larry Dixon in the Top Fuel title round of the O'Reilly Summer Nationals at Heartland Park Topeka.

It was Millican's fourth NHRA final and his first since May 2004. His three round wins came at an important juncture in his bid to capture a berth in the six-race Countdown to the Championship that begins in September. He was 11th in points when the day began, 105 behind Joe Hartley, his first Sunday foe. Now, he is within 38 points (360-322).

'It was an awesome day at the track,' said Millican. 'Our car went down the track on every run and we were very consistent with times of 4.050, 4.026, 4.020 and 4.056 seconds. And we got a lot closer to 10th place in points.'

His 4.056-second time (293.41 mph), came against Dixon, who trailed Millican off the starting line (.028-second to .064), but caught the Hope4Sudan/Motorvation dragster with a 3.971 (301.74) closing effort to take home the trophy.

'We decided before the finals that we didn't need to beat ourselves, that we needed to do what got us there . . . and that's what we did,' Millican said. 'Lance (Larsen, team crew chief) came up with a tune-up that really works in the heat. We couldn't get much more consistent than we were Sunday. The car was smooth as silk to drive.

'I drove the car the way I used to and had fun with it. But it was a bit disappointing when I saw Larry's front wheels creep past my windshield a little bit, and I knew he had the win. Our guys have nothing to be ashamed of. I'm very proud of them. We needed a performance like this really, really bad.

'We might not have turned on the win light, but it was still a great day for us.' Millican had an excellent day driving, leaving the starting line first on every run. He opened with a .064-second reaction to Hartley's .122 and led all the way, stopping the 1,000-foot timer in 4.050 seconds at 299.93 mph to Hartley's 4.203 at 251.58

The popular driver from Drummonds, Tenn., made it two straight with a resounding victory over nemesis Brandon Bernstein. Millican unleashed a near-perfect .005 reaction and never looked back with a 4.026 at 295.46 to a 4.097 at 280.31. In the semifinals, rival Shawn Langston's car couldn't back up after the burnout and Millican soloed into the finals with a 4.020 at 299.00 mph.

Millican and the crew continue their quest for series points Friday when the United Association Route 66 Nationals begins its three-day run in Joliet, Ill.