

Millican, Pickens preparing for all 24 NHRA Full Throttle Series races

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By the time the New Year's Eve chimes reached 12, Clay Millican finished breathing his sigh of relief. Year 2008 was officially history. Bring on 2009!

Millican, a fan favorite Top Fuel driver from Drummonds, Tenn., now has a firm grip on what his drag racing future holds – competing in all 24 of NHRA Full Throttle series races. It's comforting because 12 months ago he had no insight on what '08 held.

“We are excited this year because (team owners) Mark and Lauren Pickens said we would be running all of the races,” said a happy Millican. “That certainly was very comforting to know going into this New Year. All we had last year was craziness . . . like being told we weren't going to run.”

Expecting to challenge for his first NHRA race victory and, ultimately, win the championship, was foremost in the minds of Millican, crew chief Lance Larsen and the Top Fuel crew last January. But an unexpected sponsor problem blew up those plans like a supercharger explosion at the finish line. The good news was there were enough strong pieces remaining for Pickens to purchase the team assets and get Millican to seven races with more in store for 2009.

“It is very comforting to know we are going to be racing,” added Millican, a six-time IHRA Top Fuel champion. “We are all working real hard to try to win that first NHRA race and go for that first NHRA championship. It is going to be a good year for the MPE Motorsports team. We are very close to being ready right now.”

Pickens, too, is excited about beginning the season with the rest of the Top Fuel contenders. “We'll see what it holds . . . we'll be on a level playing field with everyone else. We've made a lot of changes and now we're ready to go down the track,” he commented. “We need some runs under our belt so we can find that secret something and move from a challenger to a contender. We are close, but not there yet.

“Our goal is to win races and a championship,” Pickens continued. “We want to run consistently among the top four cars and I think we are capable of that.”

The seven races Millican ran in 2008 provided perfect test conditions for Larsen and he squeezed everything he could from them.

“I thought we were very successful with all the changes made we made to the chassis as well as the new Goodyear tire,” Millican said. “The hard part for us was there was no testing allowed on national event tracks, so we had to basically learn how the car was going to react to those changes while we tried to qualify for the races.”

The team’s performance at Reading, Pa., in its first race in five months was downright stunning. Millican qualified 13th and upset No. 4 starter J.R. Todd in the opening round and then slapped a .039-second reaction time on Morgan Lucas, leading to a 3.994-second triumph over his rival’s 3.963.

Millican showed he wasn’t a bit rusty in the semifinals too, despite losing to eventual race winner and eventual series champion Tony Schumacher. Out of the gate first with a .055 reaction time to Schumacher’s .063, Millican held the advantage until the final nine-thousandths of a second – Schumacher’s winning margin.

“To do that on our first race back was a huge success,” Millican said. “We were fixing to go to the final round in our first race. Cinderella was just about to put her shoe on – and it was going to fit – when Schumacher stepped in. But that performance built our confidence and we qualified for the rest of the races and went a few rounds here and there.

“Lance has done a wonderful job taking care of the parts which, in turn, makes the car run better and makes it safer for the driver,” Millican continued. “We are fortunate because the core team members who were here in 2007 came back. They are the ones who have always been here.”

There are two Brad Hadman-built Hope4Sudan/Motorvation dragsters ready to do battle and the crew is completing work on the trailers before the trek to Phoenix begins in a few short weeks.

Meanwhile, Pickens and Millican continue searching for a marketing partner.

“We are going to continue to work as hard as we can and hopefully we can put together the right business plan for somebody. And then we can put the name of a company on our race car,” noted Millican. “We have a nice lineup of associate sponsors who have been with us over the years and we appreciate everything they do.

“We want to do our best to make it a successful year for Mark and Lauren Pickens.”

The Kragen O’Reilly Winternationals kicks off the new campaign, Feb. 5-8 at Pomona, Calif.

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