

THE FIRST WINNER

Clare Sanders Was *The First* Official Funny Car Winner In 1969

BY JOHN DIBARTOLOMEO
PHOTOS DAVE MILCAREK

Things were quite a bit different in 1968.

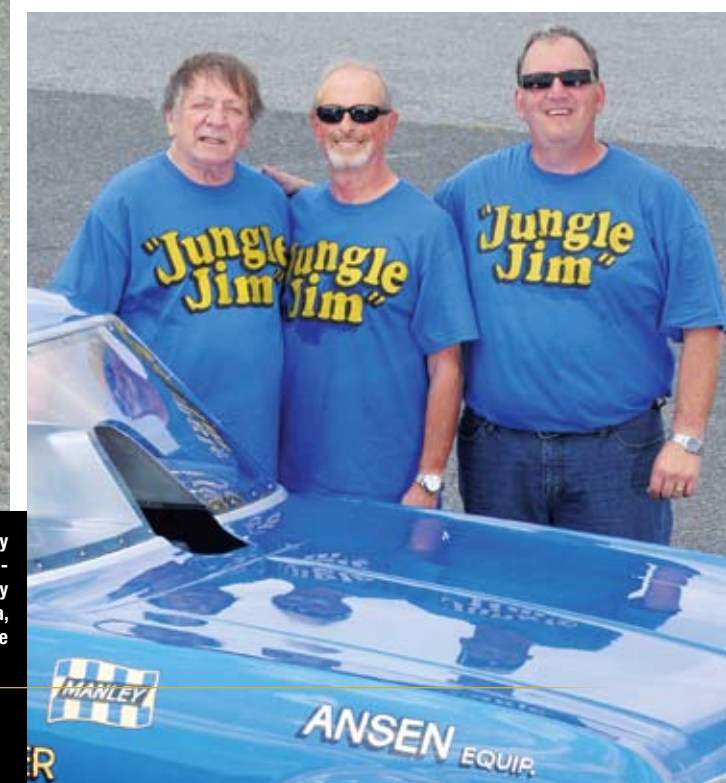
First, there was no Funny Car Eliminator. While those cars were seemingly popping up everywhere at that time, in order for them to run at NHRA national events, of which there were only four – Pomona, Englishtown, Indy and Tulsa; those cars usually had to compete in Super Eliminator, which included a wide array of cars.

Second, and more important to those Funny Car racers, there was loads of match race to be done, enabling many to survive and pay their bills.

For 1969 though, seeing the handwriting on the wall, NHRA announced the Funny Cars would have their own class. One of those who spent his entire waking moment on the match race circuit was Jungle Jim Liberman. A master showman, Jungle was able to book more match race dates than just about anyone.

In '68, realizing that he couldn't be everywhere at one time, Jungle built a second Chevy II Funny Car and looked for a second driver. He didn't have to look too far.

Clare Sanders had driven a variety of Funny Cars over the years and spent considerable amounts of time with Jungle sharing shop space on both coasts. Prior to that, Sanders had been a mechanic at a Plymouth dealership, but as he says, "I was the worst mechanic there ever was, but I was the only one who knew all about the 'new' smog equipment debuting on new cars at the time.



Reunited in 2010 is the team of Larry Petrich (left) and Clare Sanders (center), the winners of the very first Funny Car title at national events in Pomona, 1979. Dave Bany (right) now owns the fully restored car that won it all.

CLARE SANDERS

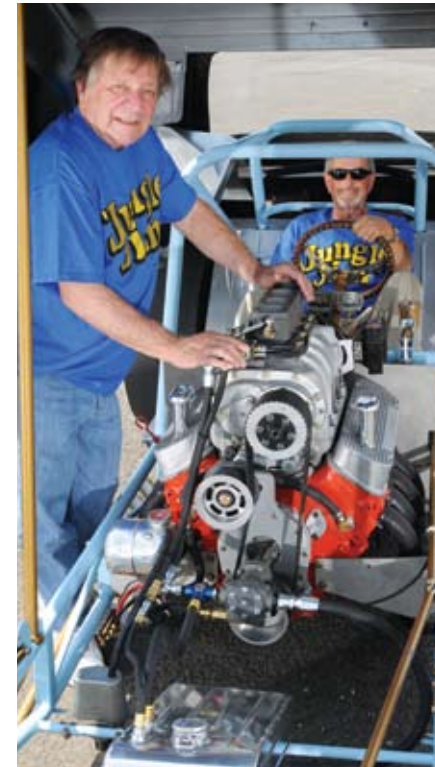


A then-young Clare Sanders proudly accepted the trophy at only the 9th edition of NHRA Winternationals. The Wally trophy had yet to make its appearance, but did later in 1969.

"During that period," Sanders said, "I became involved with the northern California Hairy Canary Funny Car and Jungle would stop in when he was on the West Coast. We eventually found some money and built the Lime Fire Funny Car, match racing it all over out west. When we were on the East Coast, we'd share some shop space with Jungle and the Brutus car."

Near the end of the '68 season, with the Lime Fire team dissolving, Jungle had built the second car and tabbed Sanders as the driver. When the '69 season debuted NHRA announced the debut of Funny Cars at the Winternationals.

Sanders said, "Jungle was a king at getting ink for his efforts and he figured that with everyone being at the Winternationals, we had better go there and try to win that race and get some more ink."



Reprising roles that competitors feared most in '69, Petrich turned the wrenches while Sanders cut the lights.

The idea was sound, over 30 cars showed up to battle for only 16 qualified spots. Because it was to be the first Funny Car trophy awarded, everyone wanted to be there. Unfortunately, Jungle himself never qualified, while Sanders, driving the second Jungle car, made his way into the show.

"With Jungle not qualifying," Sanders said, "it worked out good for me because he came over to tune on my car. He had brought in Larry Petrich to be my crew chief, and combining his with Jungle's abilities, it just worked out great."

As things turned out, Sanders worked his way through eliminations to face Ray Alley in the Engine Masters car. Alley would later go on to fame with Kenny Bernstein and as the NHRA fuel car czar for a couple of years.

"I remember that at that race Tom McEwen was running faster than us but he had problems in eliminations," Sanders says. "The thing I remember most is that the Tree had five ambers on it and they counted down just like the sportsman tree does today. That meant it took having a rhythm and that was my big focus for that race and I left on everybody. Between that and having a great car, it all just worked."

In 1969, a 427-cubic-inch Chevrolet (yes, Chevrolet) engine utilized a Hilborn injection system, Mallory ignition and a single fuel pump. Sanders said, "Chevy cars used Chevy engines, Fords used Fords and Chryslers used Chrysler. That's when you could recognize what the car actually was."



Forget SFI-approved firesuits, full-face helmets, breathing apparatus or even roll bar padding, for that matter. In '69 this is what the well-dressed Funny Car driver wore.



Yes, front suspension! Coil-over shocks allowed the cars a little bit of front end movement to help weight transfer.

The Chevy II was put together by Jungle Jim and utilized a Logghe chassis, Al Bergler aluminum and a Ron Pelligrini body. It was first class all the way. The engine of choice back then was simply a big block Chevrolet fueled by only 60- to 70-percent nitromethane. On top of the engine was a unique Hilborn injection system while most everyone used the Enderle setup.

Sanders said, "Jungle was about the only one using the Hilborn setup but it was a lot easier on the engine and you could get on and off the throttle without having a problem. It was just another one of those Jungle secrets that won us a lot of races."



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Jungle Jim had Al Bergler tool up these larger aluminum fuel tanks, which allowed both Jungle and Sanders to do those long smoky burnouts that the crowds loved.

"The transmission was my job," Sanders added, "and it was a three-speed 727 Torgueflite that we shifted by feel. We didn't need no stinkin' tach back then!"

Dave Bany, who presently owns this particular car, also purchased the twin to this one, which was the car driven by Jungle himself. He says, "We had purchased an alcohol car to go racing with and my driver, Ron Huegli, mentioned that he had heard about these two Jungle Jim cars to be auctioned off at the Icons of Speed & Style auction at the Peterson Museum in LA.

"One thing led to another and I bought them both because I really didn't want to see them broken up," he added.

With the Clare Sanders-driven car restored, Bany brought it down to the 50th running of the Winternationals. Bany said, "I had never met Clare but contacted him earlier to ask about the authenticity of the car and he was really gracious and helped me out. So I asked him to come down to Pomona for the big 50th celebration where we would have the car on display.

"While it's there," Bany added, "a gentlemen comes up to me and says he used to wrench on the car. Now sometimes you hear this all the time so I didn't think much about it, but this guy continues to hang around.

"Eventually Clare happens to call me from the front gate to let me know he's there and this guy, Larry, happens to overhear me and asks if that was Clare Sanders. So I tell Clare that there's some guy here named Larry asking about him and Clare says 'Oh my God, that's Larry Petrich, my old crew chief. I haven't seen him since 1970!'

"The two hit it right off and everything's been great ever since," Bany said. "Everything this guy Larry said was true and he even tuned on this car a little that weekend in Pomona."

Once tire technology advanced, more nitromethane was put through the Chevy engine but it started to take its toll, which precipitated teams switching over to the Chrysler powerplants. However up to that point, a Chevy Funny Car ran a Chevy engine; a Ford a Ford and Chrysler a Chrysler. It was great for brand awareness and the fans knew what the car was just by looking at it; just another thing that's quite different today.

While the look of the cars back then was quite crude by today's standards, Sanders said, "It was safe back then, so I really don't know. It was the best they had to offer then and it really was pretty safe. We were only, and I say only 'cause it wasn't 300 mph like today, but we only ran in the mid to high eight-second zone. Maybe we just didn't know any better. We built the whole Lime Fire car ourselves and we only used .049" thick tubing. I don't know how it ever made it down the highway without flexing right in half. But we learned.

"We hauled our cars on a flatbed trailer," Sanders added, "and in '69, we got a Chevy flatbed truck to haul the car on and we were pretty classy then.

"After we won the Pomona race, the telephones lit up with track operators looking to book us," Sanders said. "I remember that at one point in '69, through the months of May, June, July and August, we were racing somewhere every other day. Some of them were four-day races, but... Jungle drove his car mostly on the East Coast and Larry and I ran the Midwest circuit, basing our operation out of Chicago."

It was a time when the more you raced, the more money you made and with the Jungle name, it opened up a lot of doors.

Sanders said, "When we won the Winternationals, it was a \$15,000 paycheck, which at the time was pretty good. But we were averaging \$800 to \$1,200 a night match racing.

"Jungle was a pretty wild guy but up to that point," Sanders said, "he was pretty mild. When things started getting crazy, I got out of there."

Sanders moved on to other rides, most notably with the Ramchargers.

In 1972, with the first gas crisis hitting the United States, Sanders felt it was time to hang up his helmet and look for a "real job" as he put it. A Snap-on tool franchise kept him busy for a year before moving into the corporate world with Snap-on. Retired today, Sanders spends his time with golf, his grandchildren and designing websites, primarily for notables in the drag racing world.

"I had done some website, computer and graphic design towards my last years with Snap-on," Sanders added. "I had done my own website (www.claresanders.com) and Don Garlits happened to be at a race and was complaining to journalist Jon Asher about his lousy website, as he put it, and Jon mentioned for him to call me. I've been doing Don's website ever since along with several others. People can say what they



At the 50th celebration of the Winternationals in Pomona this past year, the team of Clare Sanders and Larry Petrich reunited for the first time since 1970. Petrich even tuned on the JJ car a little just in time to get it warmed up for the Cacklefest portion of the show.

want about Big Daddy, but he really is a cool guy to work with, maybe because I talk his kind of language but he really is great."

Sanders continues to travel to only a couple of events each year, but he said, "NHRA doesn't give past winners any passes, so when Don Schumacher heard that he said, 'That's bull@#\$%.' So he said he'd make sure I always had passes to the events and I'm welcome in his hospitality suite anytime I want. He said, I'll keep doing that until NHRA steps up and does it and what that means is I'm going to be doing that for a long time'."

Sanders is a unique individual in a sport that has many. But none were ever the very first Funny Car champion. **DRR**



After leaving Jungle's team at the end of the '69 season, Sanders went on to drive a number of other notable cars before hanging up his firesuit to enter the corporate world. Now he enjoys golf, his grandchildren and even designs websites for other notable drag racing clients.