

Follow A Dream/Permatex TA/FC team overcomes numerous changes in 2016, looks forward to stronger 2017



MARSTONS Mills, MA (January 3, 2017) - As 2016 morphs into 2017, Jay Blake reflects back on a good season and anticipates an even better season to come.

The owner and founder of the Follow A Dream/Permatex NHRA Top Alcohol Funny Car, Blake and his team went through a number of changes in 2016, including hiring a new driver and a new tuner, replacing longtime veterans on the team.

Phil Burkart replaced Todd Veney behind the wheel, while Anthony Terenzio stepped into the shoes of legendary tuner Tom Howell.

"The season for 2016 was really very different overall," Blake said. "It was the first year we raced without Tom Howell, our tuner, which was a major change in so many different ways.

"The driver change was a big change, as well. Having Todd go and Phil come in as driver was different, too, but it wasn't as big of a change as Tom was."

To their credit, Burkart and Terenzio stepped in and performed well with their new team.

"The season got out to a rough start kind of," Blake said. "Gainesville, Florida was a tough weekend in so many ways. The car had issues, the generator in the trailer had issues and it was the first race of the year. There were all kinds of things.

"But, it got progressively better, and then in Virginia, we ran our first-ever .40 (5.40 seconds), and we ran two or three of those, which was a great accomplishment for the team, but it also was bittersweet because Tommy wasn't there to experience it with us.

"We were real excited, thought things came together, we did well at Maple Grove and then we won Lebanon Valley, which was great.

"Then we went out to Chicago and didn't qualify, and that was a kick in the teeth. We didn't expect that at all, especially after leaving Lebanon Valley with a win and the car responding. When we got to Chicago, we had to put another motor in it, which we weren't expecting. And then we went to New England, did okay and went from there."

The Follow A Dream team had hopes of winning its regional division championship, as well as finish in the top-10 in NHRA national competition. While there were certainly high points in the season, the team fell short of its goals.

"If I had to describe 2016 in one word, it was 'challenging' because at the end of the year, we're No. 2 in the region and No. 14 in the country, which we're disappointed with that," Blake said. "There's a lot of people that would give up a lot to have that for their season. So, I try not to lose sight of where we came from. You always want to do better, you always want to do more. Phil hadn't driven an Alcohol Funny Car in many years and this was a new deal for Anthony. There was so much new and uncharted waters, we pulled together as a team and found success through it all.

"Most importantly, we had some struggles but the team never gave up and everybody kept pulling together and working harder, which was great. We were disappointed in our finish at the end of the year, but we learned a lot throughout the year."

Those lessons will help the team going forward as it prepares for 2017. With both Burkart and Terenzio entering their second season, there will be a better familiarity and communication, which should translate into even better performances on the racetrack.

"The team is going to stay together and we're going to build off this year and move forward," Blake said.

In 13 races in 2016, the Follow A Dream/Permatex team recorded one victory (Lebanon Valley) and one runner-up (Virginia). Blake hopes to build upon that performance and have even greater regional and national success in 2017.

When the 2016 season began, the core dynamic of the Follow A Dream team had changed dramatically. Howell (illness) was replaced by Terenzio, while Veney (new full-time job) was replaced by Burkart.

"There was more pressure because the nucleus was different," Blake said. "Tommy was not with us and became very ill. It's not like he left to go race for another team. And Todd, who was such an integral part of the team as well, left. All that was gone. We had a very tight-knit group and it kind of all hit me on the way to (the season-opening race at) Gainesville. It was go, go, go, go, try to pull everything together and make it happen. It was all different; it wasn't the same comfortable shoe you put on. It was a rough part of time as we headed into the season.

"So, there was more pressure and more things to think about and be aware of. Anthony stepped in and did a phenomenal job. He's a great tuner, he's a great person, has been around the sport forever and has a huge passion for the sport. He wants to do better and better and it's really good."

With Burkart and Terenzio both returning for 2017, Blake is excited about the team's prospects and anticipates even greater success going forward.

"We'll have a couple new crew guys, but overall there won't be any major changes," Blake said. "The team is good. I feel that the nucleus is rebuilding and it will be stronger than before."

"The adversity that I went through as a team owner will make me better, and in turn, I will work to make the team better. It was not an easy year in many ways, but the team was 100 percent behind me and everybody worked their tails off to be successful."

Even though the new season won't start for nearly another three months, Blake is already in high gear when it comes to preparation. He plans to put the race car through several test runs prior to going to Gainesville, Florida, which hosts both the first regional event of the season, as well as the fabled Gatornationals national event the following week.

"Phil is a great driver, he has a great feel, his reaction times got better as the year went on, and Anthony likes working with him and has a great feel for the car," Blake said. "So, 2017 is going to be good."

"As for our goals, we want to win our local region and I want to finish in the top-10 in the country (nationally). I'd like to finish better than seventh in the country - that'd be the best we've ever done (twice previously, including 2015)."

The team will also add a 14th race to its overall schedule, with a new event at Cecil County, Maryland.

On a personal level away from the racetrack, Blake will continue to have a busy public speaking schedule both during the current offseason and into the 2017 racing campaign, as well as continuing to advocate for those, like him, who are vision impaired.

"There were races this year that we had students attend, we brought some blind kids out too, and that's really such an important part of the Follow A Dream program," Blake said. "The race car and the performance is too, but it's also about making a difference in people's lives."

While he started the 2016 season with a number of challenges, Blake is ready to turn those into advantages once the 2017 racing season gets underway.

"I'm excited about 2017," he said with a big smile. "I think a lot of things are going to be in a good place and it's going to be a great year."