



# THE BIG CHA

## It's All About The Business Of Sponsorship

**W**ith two wins so far this season, 2014 is shaping up to be a big change from the past for the Kalitta Motorsports Tequila Patrón-sponsored Funny Car team, piloted by Alexis DeJoria.

After representing the Patrón Spirits Company's signature brand, Patrón Silver, for two years, the team surprised fans when they debuted a whole new look at the opening race of the season in Pomona. Gone were the lime green and silver colors that fans had come to identify the team with, and in its place was the sleek and dark imagery of Patrón XO Cafe, a blend of Patrón Silver and the essence of fine coffee. The 2014 hot rod is a matte black stunner with gold leaf, purple detailing, and the image of the XO Cafe bottle painted on the Toyota Camry body.

WORDS ALLISON McCORMICK PICS GARY NASTASE

The start of the 2013 season brought big changes for the Patrón team with the addition of champion crew chiefs Tommy DeLago and Glen Huszar, but the biggest change was yet to come. Just prior to closing out the 2013 season, a major change came about from the sponsorship department. Patrón marketing executives approached DeJoria and her marketing team about changing the car from the Tequila Patrón car to the Patrón XO Cafe car. There had been casual conversations in the past about possibly running a different paint scheme at a few races here and there, but Patrón suggested the idea of completely revamping the race operation's whole image and doing away with the old look entirely.

The makeover meant an extremely busy 2013-2014 off-season for DeJoria and her marketing/public relations team. Dur-



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ing the 88-day break between the World Finals and the Winternationals, every last detail of the Patrón Funny Car operation needed to be changed over to reflect the XO Cafe brand. New merchandise needed to be designed, crew shirts needed to be updated, the hospitality area was transformed into The XO Cafe, the website needed revamping, hero cards needed to be redesigned, the old promotional photos were no longer useable, and staff apparel needed to be changed. You name it, and it had to be changed.

Making things even more complicated was the

Hoisting her first Wally in the professional ranks, Alexis DeJoria has come a long way to rise to the pinnacle of her profession.



For the past two years, she has carried the sponsorship of Patrón Silver Tequila while the powers-that-be suggested the big change this year to the Patrón XO Café, using the NHRA to help build that brand.

fact that the team did not want to spoil their new look at the widely attended winter test session in Florida at the end of January. This meant the Patrón camp had barely two weeks to get the Toyota Camry body repainted, trucks

re-wrapped, and the tow van decaled from the time they returned back to Kalitta Motorsports' headquarters in Michigan after the test session to the time the trucks headed west for the opening event in Pomona.

DeJoria said, "Last year was a little bit of a rough ride for us. We really thought we were going to do better than we did."



**A.** As part of the Kalitta Motorsports team, it isn't uncommon for team patriarch Connie Kalitta (left) to keep an eye on her advancements through the sport.

**B.** The two women of Funny Car, DeJoria and Courtney Force have been a hit with the fans.

**C.** One last tweak by co-crew chief Tommy DeLago and DeJoria instantly became the first woman member of the elusive 3-second Funny Car club at the season opening Winternationals.



While only in attendance at certain races which fit his hectic schedule, “Dad” isn’t afraid to jump right in and pick up a tool.

We were able to move up a point in the standings from the previous year, and we went more rounds overall and ran some really great numbers, but we didn’t win, and that was a disappointment for our whole team. Towards the end of the season, things really started to come around and the car was making noticeable progress so we knew we would have a good foundation to build off of going into this year. To have the opportunity to start fresh with a new look and a new brand just felt really good. It felt like we were starting with a clean slate.”

And just two races into the 2014 season, DeJoria turned on the win light at the Phoenix national event, her first ever Funny Car win. She followed it up two races later with a win at the Vegas stop on the NHRA Mello Yello Series tour. Add in a final-round appearance at the 4-Wide Nationals in Charlotte, and a history-making run where DeJoria became the first woman in Funny Car to join the elusive “3-second club” in Pomona, and the new look XO Cafe car might have just been the change the team needed.

While the transition was tedious and extremely time-consuming, everyone agrees that it was completely worth it and the perfect fresh start for the team, which had struggled in their first two years competing in the Funny Car class.

“It’s been an honor to represent The Patrón Spirits Company with XO Cafe and get ‘first place coverage’ for them by putting our hot rod in the Winner’s Circle not once but twice so far this year,” DeJoria said. “They’ve been extremely supportive throughout the years. Patrón is such a well-known brand, with instant name recognition. When people think of Patrón, the signature green Patrón Sil-



**LEFT:** Married to television icon Jesse James, the pair know a thing or two about celebrating.

**ABOVE:** While it's DeJoria who sits behind the wheel, it still all comes about as a team effort.

ver bottle typically comes to mind. With our new car, I think we've been able to expand people's perception of Patrón, which at the end of the day is the sole

purpose of sponsoring a team to positively affect the bottom line."

"The goal is to introduce XO Cafe to those who may have bypassed it be-

fore," she added, "and turn them into long-term fans. Now when NHRA fans think of Patrón, they also associate XO Cafe. I'm quite certain we've

turned some Silver fans on to XO Cafe and gained many new consumers."

The team hears it all the time. According to DeJoria, "People try XO Cafe for the

first time in our hospitality pit and love it, or fans will send us a picture of them with a bottle of XO and say that they went out and bought a bottle to celebrate with while watching the ESPN coverage of the races. These are all new consumers and fans of the XO Cafe line, and I'm proud to be able to showcase it to our audience."

Patrón has been in the racing world for years. Currently, they sponsor the IMSA Tudor United SportsCar Championship series in addition to backing two prototype cars. With the exception of a few one-off races over the years where a special livery was used, Patrón has always represented themselves in the racing industry with the Silver brand. DeJoria said, "We were incredibly honored when they approached us with the opportunity to do something completely different and slightly out of character for them."

"Patrón XO Cafe is a perfect fit for our sport. Nitromethane has long been considered the 'dark side' of racing. It's volatile and exciting. Just like nitro, XO Cafe is considered by some to be the 'darker side' of tequila; it defies convention, marrying tequila with coffee, so the two together—nitro and XO—is a great fit. We work very hard to portray the brand in the best way possible," she said.

Proving the worth of sponsorship in the NHRA series, Greg Cohen, Director of Communications of The Patrón Spirits Company, said, "Patrón XO Cafe has steadily grown in awareness and popularity, and we thought that the association with Alexis and NHRA was a perfect fit. People who enjoy Patrón XO Cafe are adventurous and thrill seekers. Just like watching Alexis race, it's a terrific jolt of excitement when you try it"

Patrón patriarch John Paul DeJoria, Alexis' father and cofounder of both The Patrón Spirits Company and John Paul Mitchell Systems, said that the decision was a no-brainer. Maybe better charged as being the team's head cheerleader, John Paul attends several races every year.

But more than being just a father, he said "Alexis is the ideal spokesperson for the brand. She really represents what we're all about, which is having fun, being a winner, doing things first class all the way, and being humble all at the same time. It's really the perfect match and so far this year has been really exciting on all fronts."

That declaration of "...really exciting on all fronts" just might be the understatement of the year. A year that will no doubt see more great things to come. **DRA**



Possibly the two things John Paul DeJoria is most proud of, his daughter and Patrón XO Cafe.