

# GIRL



# Power

Will women ever make it to the top in racing? **BY PRESTON LERNER**

**D**anica Patrick, racing's latest It Girl, prowls around the pits of a scruffy club track near Chicago, searching unsuccessfully for some Windex to clean the visor of her helmet. Looking on indulgently is car owner Bobby Rahal, who's attending this private test session to see how his latest hire is faring in an obsolete Toyota Atlantic car he bought to get her up to speed. "That's why you use tear-offs," he tells her.

"I don't know how to use them," she says.

"I'll teach you."

"Really?" Patrick nails him with a wicked smile. "Can you carry my helmet, too? I'm looking for a young hottie."

Rahal and the rest of the crew crack up. After only two months with Team Rahal, Patrick is already one of the guys. At the same time, of course, she's very much a young woman in a sport that remains a bastion of male chauvinism.

In fact, Patrick is herself a serious hottie—an asset brazenly hyped in a press kit that's as heavy on come-hither photography as it is on race results. That's not to say that Patrick is just a pretty face, as her super-firm handshake demonstrates. But she's probably the only professional driver whose race gear includes a pair of earrings, a necklace, a bracelet, a watch, three rings, and a tattoo of the American flag a few inches north of her butt.

At twenty-one, Patrick has been racing for half her life, starting in karts and moving by herself to England at sixteen to run Formula Vauxhall. Now she's under contract to both Ford and BMW. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" she says, flashing another killer smile as she contemplates this unlikely coup. Last year, Rahal signed her to a three-year deal.

"It was a no-brainer," he says. "Clearly, she's the most marketable driver in the United States today. She's the whole package—good-looking, personable, *and* talented. She's still very, very inexperienced. But I wouldn't have brought her in if I hadn't believed that she could win races. I think Danica is the first woman with a chance to become a star in this sport. I truly believe she has the opportunity to write history."

*First woman to become a star in racing.* Haven't we heard that before? Since 1977, when Janet Guthrie became the first woman to race in the Indianapolis 500 (and the Daytona 500), there's been no shortage of women groomed for the role. But one by one, they've flamed out, flaked out, opted out, been frozen out, or plateaued. After a quarter-century of unfulfilled promise, the real question isn't whether Danica Patrick—or Sarah Fisher or Shawna Robinson or any of the women ascending the ranks—will make it to the top of the mountain. The question is why all of the women up to now have come up short.

First, let's get the bogeyman out of the way: The notion that women can't cut it in racing is pure bull. The women competing in professional track and field, tennis, basketball, and so on, are world-class athletes with all the competitive



zeal and emotional resiliency of their male counterparts. Women are as smart as men, with the same ability to discern racing lines and provide engineering feedback, and there's nothing in their physiology to suggest that they suffer any deficiency in car control or other requisite skills.

The one legitimate knock on them is strength, or the lack thereof. Strictly from a physical standpoint, driving is hard work, and hustling a Formula 1 car around, say, Spa requires some formidable muscle. Still, racing cars are no longer the monsters once manhandled by Fangio and Vukovich. Even Winston Cup cars are now equipped with power steering, and formula car cockpits are designed with Mini Me types such as Formula 1 waif Cristiano da Matta in mind. On average, women are smaller than men, but they're big enough to do the job.

In any event, the car doesn't know—or care—whether it's being driven by a man or a woman. Would that people were equally gender-blind. In this age of political correctness, it's difficult to get anybody to talk smack on the record. But when tempers flare, the honesty quotient skyrockets.

Two years ago, in an IRL race at Miami, after Eliseo Salazar lost a position to Sarah Fisher, car owner A. J. Foyt shouted into his microphone: "You just got passed by a girl!" Salazar had spoken for the Joe Six-

mind you, because they haven't been good—some of them have been very good indeed—but because none of them has been truly great. (Except, of course, for drag-racing icon Shirley Muldowney, with her three NHRA world championships.)

The major reason there's never been a female Senna is that the talent pool of female drivers is so shallow. Think of racing as a pyramid. Everybody starts at the bottom in karts, club racing, or short tracks. As competition intensifies, drivers run out of talent, money, drive, and luck. The pyramid narrows, and at the top of the pyramid, you find the freaks of nature—the Michael Schumachers and the Jeff Gordons.

The wider the base of the pyramid, obviously, the higher it's likely to go. And as Americans grow more comfortable with women in gender-bending roles, the talent pool deepens. "A third of the soapbox derby racers are girls," says the recently retired Lyn St. James, who tirelessly promotes women through her Driver Development Program. "One-third of the quarter-midget drivers, 25 percent of the go-karters, 50 percent of the junior dragsters. More and more parents are saying, 'My little girl can do whatever my little boy is doing.'"

But let's not go overboard here. A random survey of entry-level kart,



**IT GIRL** Rahal calls Danica Patrick "the most marketable driver in the U.S."

pack brigade the previous year after Fisher, then a nineteen-year-old rookie, crashed him out of a race at Las Vegas. "This is not powder-puff racing," he fumed. "She should go back to racing against little girls."

To his credit, Salazar later repudiated these comments, and Fisher has been accepted on the IRL circuit. But an even uglier scene unfolded last year at Nashville's Fairgrounds Speedway, where several male drivers pooled \$3600 to enter a car in a Late Model race with the sole intention of protesting the car driven by Deborah Renshaw, whose major offense was the possession of two X chromosomes. "I never felt that I was treated any differently [by the other drivers] because I was a woman until I got competitive and started racing with the big dogs," Renshaw says.

Publicity from the brouhaha propelled the twenty-six-year-old short-track specialist into a ride in ARCA, the stock car division just below NASCAR's Craftsman Truck series. But after several promising performances, she had a horrific wreck in practice at Lowe's Motor Speedway that killed Eric Martin and left her with a broken ankle and foot. After much soul-searching, Renshaw decided to continue racing; she's scheduled to run selected races in the ARCA and Busch series this year.

Women always have been part of the track scene but usually in subordinate roles: timer, PR functionary, trophy queen. In a perverse way, the examples of the few women who have managed to make a living from driving have reinforced their position as second-class citizens. Not,



**TIRELESS PROMOTER** Lyn St. James advocates a form of affirmative action.

midget, late-model, and sports car races shows women still being outnumbered by men by a ratio of twenty, thirty, forty, even fifty to one. Very few women have a hands-on passion for cars. (When, after all, was the last time you saw one down at AutoZone buying a carburetor for her '69 Nova?) Fewer still, it seems, are afflicted with the all-consuming motorsports monomania that's required to succeed in racing.

Then again, scarcity carries some collateral benefits, the biggest being instant recognition. Fan favorite Sarah Fisher ended the 2001 IRL season tied in driver points with Didier Andre. Didier who? Exactly. All things being equal, female drivers generate exponentially more publicity than men. That's why small-fry team owner Dale Pelfrey plucked Fisher from relative obscurity to drive an IRL car. The next year, bigger hitter Derrick Walker leveraged Fisher's marketability to raise \$2 million in sponsorship and put together an IRL program.

Amazingly, though, Walker couldn't find enough sponsorship to run Fisher last year. Granted, she was coming off a rocky season, but, considering her immense popularity and her undeniable talent, it's hard to believe that she started the year on the sidelines while Tyce Carlson, John de Vries, Jon Herb, and Billy Roe—hardly household names—were on the track. When funding materialized in mid-season, she qualified on the pole at Kentucky and was named Most Popular Driver for the second consecutive year. Yet she still didn't have a solid ride when 2003 began.

The inability to secure sponsorship has hamstrung every female driver from Patty Moise and Tammy Jo Kirk in NASCAR, to Ellen Lohr and Deborah Gregg in road racing, to Desire Wilson and Davina Galica in Formula 1. "What most people don't understand," St. James says, "is that publicity and name recognition are only a small part of the return on investment that sponsors are looking for."

Nobody ever worked harder at providing added value than St. James. In many respects, she was the prototype of the modern driver: articulate, presentable, available, as good in the corporate hospitality tent as she was in the cockpit. St. James parlayed her considerable self-promotional skills into a career capped by seven Indy 500s. But even for her, a marketing marvel, finding sponsorship was a never-ending struggle.

Janet Guthrie explains: "All the reasons that corporations give to justify the money they spend on racing are just a bunch of BS. The real reason is that executives want to feel macho by rubbing elbows with racing drivers, and they don't get that experience with women drivers." Given a choice between a man and a woman, sponsors will go with the guy, she says, because "he's got those little things between his legs."

Bitter? Well, yeah. Although it was fashionable at the time to dismiss

if I was promoting her that much, maybe I ought to sponsor her myself."

Unlike Fisher, who never aspired to a career as a driver, Patrick has wanted nothing else since she was twelve. Also unlike Fisher, who was rushed from midgets into IRL cars, Patrick was able to get her feet wet in a few Barber Dodge races last year before embarking on a full season in Toyota Atlantic in 2003. "I'm banking on being in Champ cars in 2005," says the brash Patrick, who's yet to win a major professional race.

Back on the track, on used-up tires and an increasingly greasy surface, Patrick trims lap times from the sixes to the fives and finally to a 1:04.6. Even Rahal is impressed. "You go, girl," he says as she wails past the pits. "Let's see how she backs it up," engineer Walt Preston murmurs. Suddenly, there's the distant sound of squealing tires, and the engine goes silent. Preston sighs. "Looks like she backed it up by falling off the track."

Two steps forward, one step back—a metaphor for the tortured progress women have made in racing. But getting to the next level—where there's no distinction between male and female drivers—will take something more dramatic. It will take a woman who can kick ass.

Will Danica Patrick be that woman? She sure thinks so. Watch this space. **A**



JOE VAUGHN

**FAN FAVORITE** Despite Joe Six-pack, Sarah Fisher has won acceptance in IRL.

her as a women's lib publicity stunt, Guthrie did an admirable job in Indy cars despite mediocre equipment and notched a sixth-place finish at Bristol in Winston Cup competition before the money ran dry. "I had professional money finders coming to me, saying that finding sponsors was going to be as easy as picking up money off the sidewalk. Hah!" Guthrie says. "I pitched everybody in the United States except the cigarette companies before I finally gave up in 1983."

The situation has improved in the past two decades. But not enough. And there's no consensus on how to make it better. One attempt was the short-lived Women's Global GT Series, which raised the profile of female drivers but at the cost of ghettoizing them in events that smacked of patronizing powder-puff races. St. James advocates a form of affirmative action. "I can't look girls in the eye and tell them, 'You just keep working hard and keep winning races, and you're going to succeed.' Because the way the system works today, it's not going to happen," she says. "I'm not saying the system's wrong. But if you want a different result, you have to do things differently."

Racing is a conservative sport—one reason the cars look alike and sponsors favor drivers who toe the corporate line. It's hard to imagine a trend toward anything as revolutionary as affirmative action. But individuals still can make a difference. Rahal, for example, had been trying to help get Patrick a ride since her spectacular second-place finish in the British Formula Ford Festival in 2000. "Finally," he says, "I decided that

## Ladies' Firsts, since 1899

**1899** In the Paris-Spa road race, a **Mme. Labrousse** is the world's first female racer.

**1975** **Lella Lombardi** scores half a World Championship point in the Spanish Grand Prix.

**1976** Olympic skier **Davina Galica** attempts but fails to qualify for the British Grand Prix.

**1976** At Phoenix, **Arlene Hiss** is the first woman to race in an Indy-car event.

**1977** **Janet Guthrie** qualifies for both the Indianapolis 500 and the Daytona 500.

**1980** In the Aurora AFX championship round at Brands Hatch, **Desire Wilson** is the first woman to win an F1 race.

**1981** At San Remo, **Michèle Mouton** is the first woman to win a World Rally Championship round.

**1985** At Watkins Glen, **Lyn St. James** is the first woman to win an IMSA GT race driving solo.

**1987** At Road Atlanta, **Patty Moise** is the first woman to lead a Busch Grand National event.

**1988** At New Asheville Speedway, **Shawna Robinson** is the first woman to win a NASCAR Touring Series event.

**1992** **Giovanna Amati** fails to qualify in three consecutive F1 races.

**1992** **Ellen Lohr** is the first woman to win a round in the German Touring Car championship.

**1996** **Tammy Jo Kirk** is the first woman to qualify on the pole in a Busch Grand National event.

**2000** **Danica Patrick** takes second in the British Formula Ford Festival.

**2002** At the IRL event at Kentucky, **Sarah Fisher** is the first woman to qualify on the pole for an Indy-car race. —PL



**1928** **Elizabeth Juneck** (above), perhaps the greatest female driver ever, leads the Targa Florio on merit.

**1947** **Louise Smith**, who would go on to win thirty-eight NASCAR events, has a wreck in Bill France's big race at Daytona Beach.

**1949** **Sara Christian** competes in the first NASCAR stock car race at Charlotte Speedway.

**1958** At Spa, **Maria Teresa de Filippis** is the first woman to compete in a World Championship Formula 1 race.

**1960** In the Liège-Rome-Liège event, **Pat Moss** is the first woman to win an international rally.

**1961** **Denise McCluggage** scores a GT class victory in the 12 Hours of Sebring.

**1971** Indianapolis Motor Speedway allows women into the pits and Gasoline Alley for the first time.