

Los Angeles Times

SUNDAY, MAY 24, 1992, SPORTS

Copyright 1992/THE TIMES MIRROR COMPANY

JIM MURRAY

She Is Driven to Be the Best

INDIANAPOLIS — If Hollywood were scripting the Lyn St. James story, there would be a few small but significant changes.

First of all, no one would know she was a woman. You remember all those old Irene Dunne or Doris Day films where the leading lady would upsweep her long hair under a cloth cap, remove her earrings, hide her curves under a baggy suit and, for nine reels, no one would be supposed to know this person was a woman.

The charade would go on until one day her cap would fall off or her coat would come unbuttoned and it would become apparent even to the dimwitted leading man that what we were dealing with here was a masquerade. Or, maybe, she would simply show up in an evening gown and corsage and the sidekick would blurt, "My God, Butch is a girl!"

It would have been a natural for the Indianapolis 500 this year. But, even in a flameproof suit, goggles and helmet with a glass visor, there's very little doubt what gender St. James is. Julia Roberts would get this part.

The Indianapolis 500 is about as all male a sport as you can get this side of an all-night poker game or a shootout at the O.K. Corral. Women have swum channels, flown the Pacific, struck out Babe Ruth, beaten men at tennis,

wrestled in mud, but only one has ever teed it up at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Janet Guthrie competed in 1978, driving a smooth, trouble-free race to ninth place. A year later, she made only three laps and finished next-to-last. The only car behind her was Jim McElreath's, which never did fire up and died at the start line.

The public perception was, Guthrie drove the race to survive it, not win it. Lyn St. James demonstrated early that she is not out there merely to log laps. She's not about to get out of the way of anybody. When she took her rookie test, she was black-flagged (ordered off the track) twice for going too fast. She was turning laps five to seven m.p.h. over the rookie speed limit of 212.

Race drivers don't usually come from secretarial schools in Ohio. They usually come from grease pits in Amarillo. Very few of them had dance lessons or piano lessons as youngsters. St. James might be the only one whoever started at Indy who can tap dance, take shorthand or do a few bars of Beethoven in the key of C.

But she never hankered to be a chorus girl, beauty queen, first lady or concert pianist. She wanted to be A.J. Foyt. She wasn't brought up with a wrench in her hand, but she did get a job in a gas station. The gleam in her eye was put there by a racecar. "The first time I tore an engine down, took it apart and put it back together again, I had a whole box of parts left over," she says. "I was discouraged until a mechanic told me, 'Aw, it happens all the time!' I felt better."

Still, she was not completely liberated. "I went from a spectator

to driver (in the Sports Car Club of America). I thought I was overmatched, but then I found out 'Hey, these are real people. They're not superhuman.' "

She went racing with a vengeance. Even though she didn't start to win SCCA events until she was 30, it was clear this was no weekend thrill seeker. She was tough competition. She put many a male driver in her rear view mirror in IMSA and Trans-Am races. She became the first woman to top 200 m.p.h., going 204.2 in a Ford at Talladega in 1985 when she was 38. She broke her own record in 1988 with a loop of 212.5.

She dreamed of being an Indy driver, and in 1989, as she was establishing 16 international speed records, she approached the veteran car owner, Dick Simon.

Simon was a Speedway legend. A monumental over-achiever, he had walked out on a job as chairman of the board of an insurance company in 1970 to go racing. He was to drive 1979 laps in 17 years at Indy, in (usually) underpowered, outmatched machines, but he finished sixth one year and ninth another.

St. James approached Simon to make her dream come true. She had been a spectator at Indy since 1966, when she went to the race with her mother, and ever since yearned to be in the field there.

Simon invited her to Memphis for an all-day test of her driving skills. She passed like an Andretti.

Getting a car sponsored for Indy is not like the old days when a phone call or a postcard could elicit funding, you could slap a decal on the car and get in line.

She was asking for a multimillion-dollar commitment.

It took three years for Simon and St. James to line up the J.C. Penney and Agency Rent a Car. Penney's was celebrating its 90th anniversary, and the notion of a female driver was found to be intriguing. St. James got into the act, chose the number 90 for her car and set out for Indy.

Her ability was immediately evident when she quickly went wheel-to-wheel in a practice with Foyt in a wall-scraping duel around the oval. She qualified on the ninth row when her Chevy engine found her 220.5 m.p.h.

The outside of the ninth row is not exactly the catbird seat--27th--but the race has been won from 25th (Johnny Rutherford in 1976), and it was won from 28th twice (Louie Meyer 1936, and the original winner, Ray Harroun).

For St. James to win Indy would be enough to drive the Presidential election not only off Page 1, but the 11 o'clock news and every tabloid in the supermarkets. Simply making the race has put her on "Good Morning America," Peter Jennings' "World News Tonight," Dick Schaap's show and every local telecast for a week.

No one believes that she can do it. Mario Andretti, who should know, has warned that no rookie from the sporty car fields has ever seen anything such as the turbulence, buffeting and sheer aerodynamics of a 33-car Indy dash for the rail positions. "I believe it. I believe it!" St. James said. "They've got us thinking we rookies (she is one of seven) should just park our cars for the first 10 laps until the danger is over and then join the chase."

She doesn't propose to do that. "I never enter a race without intending to win it," she explains.

St. James' name might look strange next to Ray Harroun,

Emerson Fittipaldi, Parnelli Jones or even Dario Resta or any Unser.

But Hollywood would love it. Especially the fadeout, where she takes off her helmet, shakes out her hair and they find out she isn't Arie Luyendyk, she is a woman.

Reprinted with permission from the
Los Angeles Times.

Courtesy of:
Jim Murray Memorial Foundation
P.O. Box 995
La Quinta, CA 92247-0995
Ph/Fx: 760-771-8972
www.iimmurrayfoundation.org