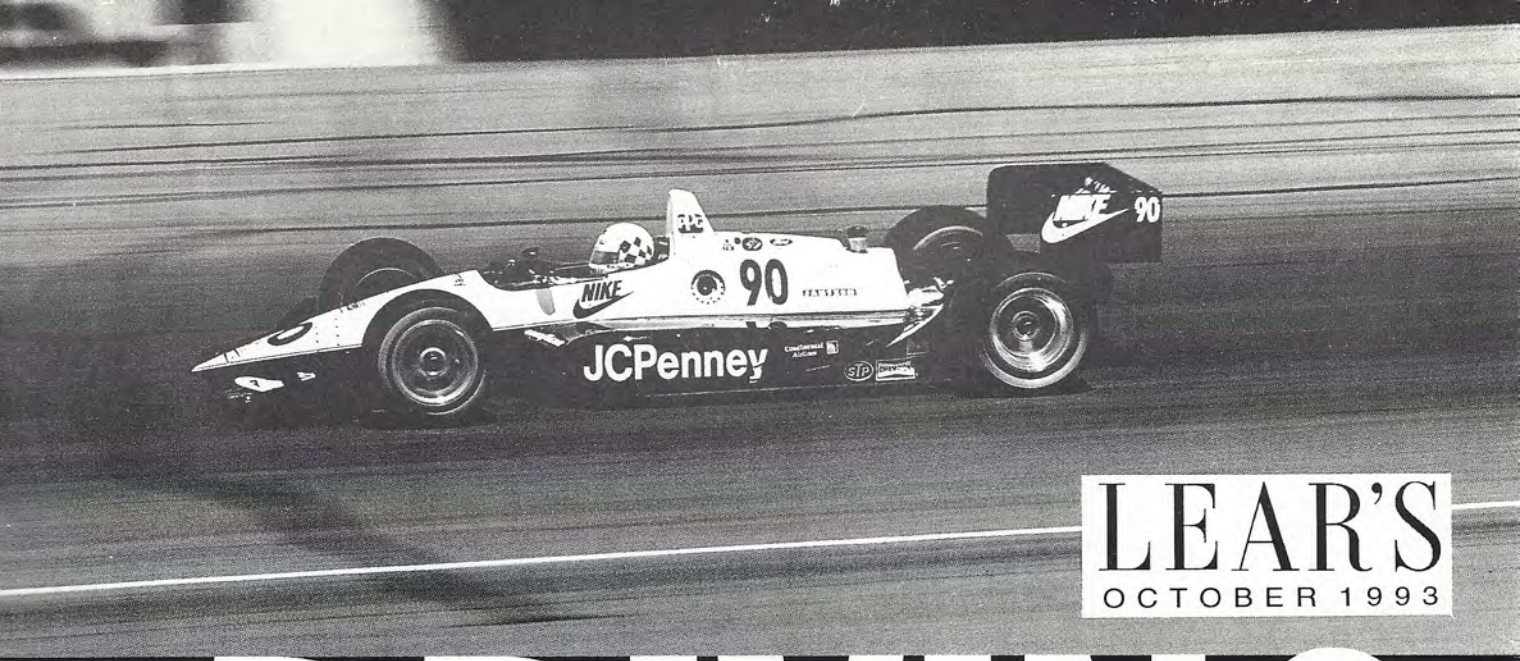

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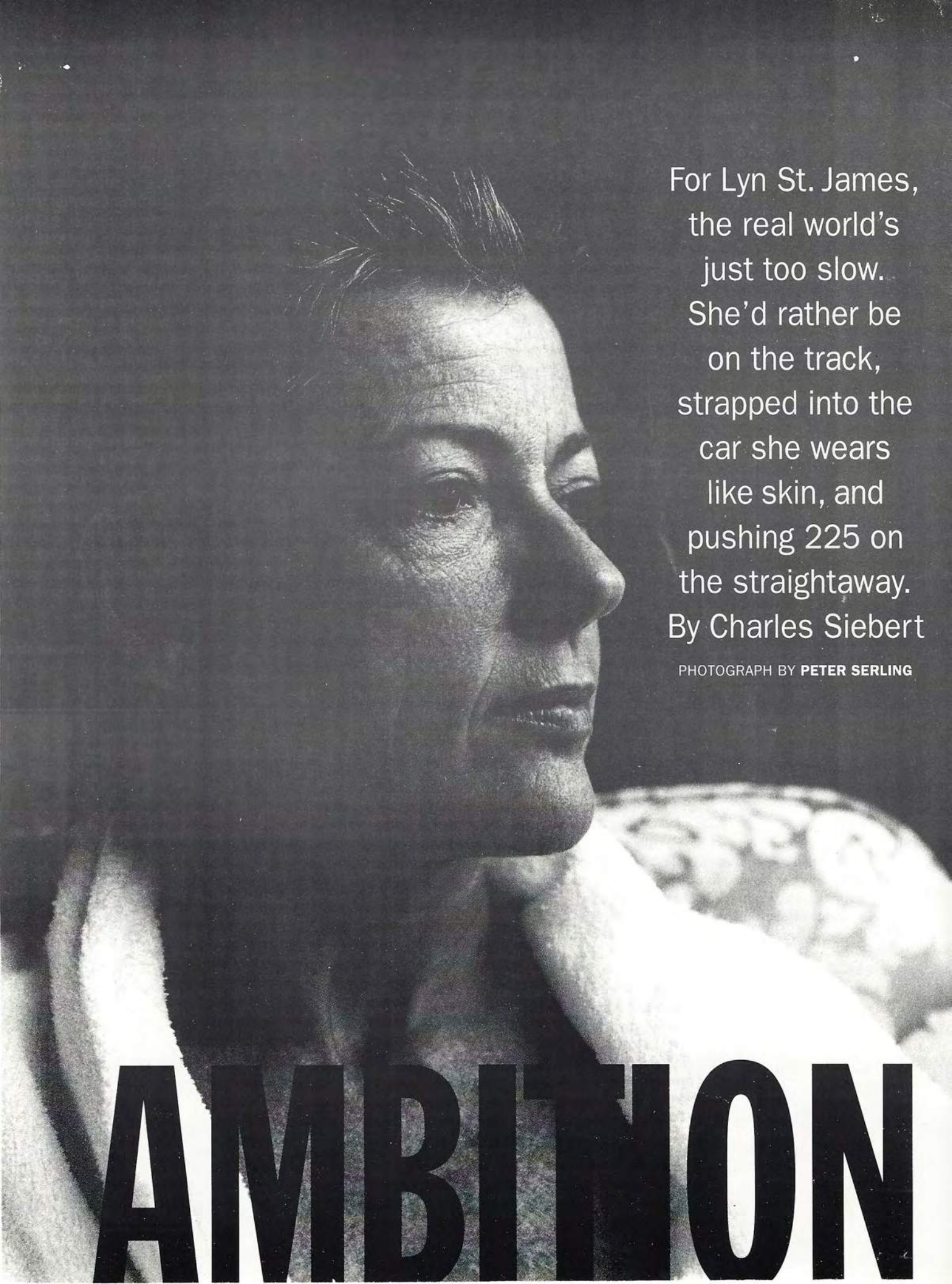

AMBITION

For Lyn St. James, the real world's just too slow. She'd rather be on the track, strapped into the car she wears like skin, and pushing 225 on the straightaway.

By Charles Siebert

PHOTOGRAPH BY **PETER SERLING**

When I couldn't sleep as a child, my mother would take me for a ride in the car," Lyn St. James recalls, sitting with her back against the pit wall at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. "I also used to rock my high chair across the kitchen. My mother would be doing the dishes and turn around to find me on the other side of the room."

Lyn St. James is a woman at odds with the world—and not just because she's the only woman in the history of auto racing to be competing full-time on the Indy professional circuit, the lone woman in a sport as unashamedly macho as a Marlboro ad. St. James's argument is a deep and long-standing one with the world itself—with its weight, its sluggishness, the way it tends to just lie there. Somehow, things never look quite right to her until they're going past her, or she past them. As far back as she can remember, St. James has been trying to speed the world along.

"It's timing, and the decisions you make," she says.

In Indianapolis, where I catch up with her, she's only one of some 40 drivers running two-day time trials for this year's Indy 500. Right in front of us, glistening in the afternoon sun, is the very pricey (close to $750,000) 1993 Lola-Ford Cosworth she's been driving this season for the Dick Simon racing team.

Imagine the speed in a car at which you begin to get that nervous swell in your stomach—90 or 100 mph. Then double it and take it into a turn. On an oval racetrack, or even on a straight and wide-open highway, 200 mph is a speed at which most of us would record only a long, airless scream—or an unbroken line on a heart monitor. But for Lyn St. James such rarefied registers are what she longs for, what she's been working for all her life—the defied limit, beyond the envelope, the strange sweet spot of ease on the other side of danger.

"You wear the car," she says. "Every fiber of your body is with that car. Everything gets transmitted up through the tires, through the suspension and the seat into your body. It's a very sensitive, precise experience.... It's driving by the seat of your pants."

At the age of 46, currently in her 19th year of auto racing, she's a decorated veteran in a sport in which the odds against getting onto the oval track at Indy are huge; for a woman, those odds become almost incalculable. In September 1985, for example, she became known as the first woman to win a professional road race driving solo. In November of that year she was touted as the first woman to drive faster than 200 mph on an oval track. And after an impressive 11th-place finish at her first Indianapolis 500 last year, she became the first woman to win Indy's Rookie of the Year award.

Attractive, soft-spoken, this "first woman" says she doesn't really feel like herself until she's out on the track, just another driver vying for the kind of speed at which all the world's superficial distinctions blur away. "It's timing, and it's the decisions you make," she says about racing. "It's not just guts, believe me, because that can get you killed. It's good sense. Good equipment and technical information, everything at an exceptional level, and better than anyone else's on a given day. It's hair-trigger—but you're in control of the trigger."

Behind us, the cars fly by in a deafening whine. "We speak of it in terms of tenths," she says. "When you're driving at nine tenths, you've left that little tenth—whether it's a foot or more from the wall on a turn or from the inside line—because you're still feeling out the car. At ten tenths you're just driving now, you're comfortable. But if you're comfortable, you're not going fast enough. You have to get to that point and start testing it. Sometimes you spin out. If you've never spun, you're not driving fast enough. Eleven tenths is where you go past what you thought was the fastest the car would go and you pull it off. You just squeeze the throttle and get a little closer to the wall, and it's all right." She gestures toward the straightaway. "That," she says, her brown eyes sparkling, "is my space. That's where I live."

Home wasn't always so noisy. Born Evelyn Cornwall, the only child of Maxine and Alfred Cornwall, owners of a sheet metal company in Willoughby, Ohio, St. James attended the all-girls Andrews School, majoring in business and continuing the piano lessons she'd begun at age six.

She went on to get her piano-teaching certificate from the St. Louis Institute of Music and is now an accomplished classical pianist. "My mom raised me to be well educated and refined. She felt the piano would help me learn to be a lady and give me something I could always fall back on. Race-car driving is not what she had in mind."

St. James hadn't given it much thought either, until the night in her junior year of high school when she went to watch some friends run their car in a drag race. They got eliminated. St. James mouthed off about it, and one of the guys said, "Okay then, why don't *you* drive?" She did, and won.

"I'll never forget it," she says. "Of course, when I got home my mom said, 'You did *what*?' I still don't think they get why I'm doing this. They're divorced now, and I'm not that close to my dad. He doesn't really understand me, but he'll come to a race from time to time and take pictures of the cars. My mom just keeps waiting for me to get it out of my system—but she's good enough to say, 'If you're gonna do it, do it well.' She's come to a few races, but it's not a good environment for us to be together in. Once she came up to me when I got out on the grid like this and said, 'Now you be careful. I heard those guys talking, and they're out to get you.' I said, 'Hey, guess what, I'm out to get them!' "

In no other sport is an athlete's performance so completely wrapped up with and dependent upon the equipment as it is in Indy racing. On the second day of the time trials, St. James took her car for a practice run at 222 mph, recording the fastest lap time of the day. But as the veterans will tell you, one day's record is the next day's Did-Not-Finish: In another two weeks, after untold hours of practice and fine-tuning, St. James's transmission gave out just 21 laps shy of the Indy 500 finish line, the car rolling to a stop along the edge of the infield, the rest of the pack bunching up behind the obligatory yellow caution flag. Which, according to some partisan spectators, cost Nigel Mansell, last year's Formula One champion, his lead and quite possibly the race. "This sport," she reflects, "really beats you up and breaks your heart. You can work all year at getting everything right.... Then something like a twenty-five-cent O-ring blows on the last lap, and you're done."

The outcome of a given race, so often determined by factors beyond the control of a driver, is a small and very fleeting aspect of the drama, revealing little about the challenges and inner workings of race-car driving; about what it's like to go more than 200 mph on a curve in an Indy car, and to focus every day of your life on doing that very thing. Race-car driving is one of the most widely viewed and, perhaps, least understood of all professional sports. On TV, in particular, it's about as entertaining as a cloud of gnats buzzing around your head. Speed, the very factor that draws us to a race, is what ultimately distances us from it; keeps us from truly grasping the skills involved; renders us, in the end, head-swiveling gawkers on the periphery of accidents always about to happen.

PREVIOUS PAGES: LEFT, FROM TOP, FOCUS ON SPORTS; GEORGE TIEDMANN/*SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* © TIME INC; RIGHT, HAIR AND MAKEUP, MARY ELKING, CHICAGO; PHOTO OPPOSITE, PETER SERLING

This is why races are often presented as weekend-long or, in the case of the Indy 500, three-week-long events. Many fans buy package tickets not just for the race but also for the practice and qualifying rounds leading up to it; and not just for a seat in the grandstands but also for access to the racetrack's infield area. Here, they can walk through the elaborate trailer camps of racing-team owners and their drivers, legends like Al Unser and A. J. Foyt, and see Mario Andretti and Nigel Mansell sitting with their team owner, actor (and occasional Trans Am Series competitor) Paul Newman.

People approach the drivers as they might astronauts: awed by the physical presence of beings somehow defined more by their otherworldly mode of travel than by the here and now. They get the drivers' autographs or take photographs of them, as though trying to pinpoint and document their actual existence. And they sidle up to and stare at the cars on the blocks in the garage ports—if only to see in stop-time what will soon be snapping invisibly past them.

"It's not just guts—because that can get you killed."

"Most people think racing is just like driving along a freeway," says St. James on the first day of the trials. She's hiding against the pit wall because she needs to get in the right mind-set for her upcoming qualifying laps and has a tough time saying no to the seemingly endless stream of fans who seek her out at a race.

The process of "setting up" an Indy car—getting it to the point where it's performing at optimum speeds without giving a driver the unsettling feeling that it's about to break the earth's gravitational pull and leave the track—is the major struggle of auto racing. You'll never witness more serious or involved discussions about inanimate objects than you will among drivers and their crews trying to find the right setup. Aside from the obvious challenges of maintaining proper engine function, there are the constant minute adjustments being made both before and during a race—to the pressure of tires, to the angle of the wings on the front and back of the car—adjustments based on the information the driver relates to the crew about how the car feels out on the track, which varies constantly depending on the road surface, the weather, and the amount of driving that's been done on the track on a given day.

A driver's crew will often "stagger" an Indy car's tires on an oval track, using a right rear tire that is slightly taller in order to predispose the car to the lay of the track's curves, in the same way that the wider end of a paper coffee cup will, when the cup is set on its side and pushed, cause it to roll in a circle. This creates a certain amount of drag on straightaways, so some happy medium must be found between the time gained on turns and the time lost in between them. Similarly, the wings that direct the airflow upward and help the car bite down on the road surface must be set to find just the right balance between too much updraft and a sudden, disastrous takeoff into oblivion. Pit crews work long days arriving at decisions about tire stagger and wing adjustment and are quite protective of the formulas they finally arrive at. St. James's car, for instance, like many of the others sitting out along the pit row now, has canvas covers over the front and back wings to conceal the settings from the other driving crews.

Today's Indy car is wired with a small "black box" computer that relays digital data about every mechanical function of the moving car back to the pit crew. St. James, in turn, has a small, rectangular screen for a dash displaying such things as speed, lap time, and engine rpms. Her helmet is also wired with a mike that allows her to talk with her crew throughout the course of a race about everything from engine functions to bodily ones.

"Last year here," she says, smiling sheepishly, "I was in that perfect flow mode where I was hardly conscious of anything, just the car and the race. Of course, the only thing that interrupted that was I had to pee so bad. It was terrible. I had hydrated as I usually do before a race, because your body is really working hard and loses a lot of water, but it was a very cold day and the race had a lot of interruptions because of accidents, so I wasn't sweating as much as usual. Obviously, you can't take a bathroom break in the middle of a race, and I couldn't let it break my cocoon of concentration, my focus, so finally I just peed. Luckily, nothing short-circuited."

Ironically, it was St. James's mom, who was a taxicab driver in Ohio during World War II, who first gave her a feel for cars. Polio in her childhood left her with limited mobility in her feet, completely reliant upon the automobile to get around. "The car was her independence," says St. James, "so you better believe she kept it running. She had a good ear and feel for its inner workings."

There being little incentive for a woman to pursue race-car driving, St. James spent her early 20s "bumbling along," as she puts it, "without any direction." For a time she found herself working as a secretary in Cleveland and teaching piano on the side, racing one of the guys in her office to work every day in her Pontiac along crowded freeways.

In 1970, when she was 23, St. James married John Caruso, a man who shared her passion for racing. They moved to Florida together, lived in a trailer, ran a small business representing electronics ▶ 104

Driving Ambition

From 77

manufacturers and then an auto-parts wholesale business, and spent all their spare time and money on Caruso's dream of transforming an old Chevy Corvette into a race car. While watching her husband attend driver's school to get his competition license in 1974, St. James decided she couldn't go along for the ride any longer. She got herself a Ford Pinto and enrolled in the driver's course as well. "The first instructor I had wouldn't even look at me," she recalls. "It was 'the woman thing.' It was like I was invisible. So I got myself another instructor, who was just marvelous. He was an Italian, so descriptive. He rode with me, and I learned so much. To this day I hear his voice whenever I get in a race car. I realized that had I kept my mouth shut about the first instructor, I would've gone nowhere."

Instead, she started going places fast. By 1976, competing in amateur races, she was the Sports Car Club of America's Florida Regional Champion. By 1978 she was competing in the national championships of amateur racing. By 1980 she had turned pro, undergone a painful divorce from Caruso, and changed her identity, borrowing the last name of actress Susan St. James after watching an episode of the TV show *McMillan and Wife.* At the age of 32, she was alone—and streamlined to pursue a long-pent-up desire.

"Preracing, I would describe myself as a nice, hardworking person who was a little shy, and lost," she says. "Not long after I turned pro, I was asked to do a TV commercial, which never aired, it turned out, but they were trying to decide whether to film me in my racing outfit or in a dress. We ended up doing it both ways. Afterwards, one of the women on the set came up to me and said she was amazed by the transformation that took place when I had my racing helmet in my hands. She said that I talked differently, I seemed to have much more confidence. That really stuck with me. Upon reflection, I realized that what really attracted me to racing, aside from my fascination with cars, is the fact that you wear a helmet and now you're invisible. Because I was always very self-conscious. I never thought I was pretty. Never felt my appearance was a statement. I had to find someplace else for that part of me, and it was when I put that helmet on. Then, I'm not judged by how I look or how nicely I smile. It's just me and the race car. As I developed over the years and won races and drove faster cars, I started developing more confidence as a person, more clarity and definition in my life."

St. James's gender has, in the end, proven to be a mixed blessing. While it's undoubtedly kept her from getting the necessary sponsorship over the years to race in the big-time competitions, it's also what's kept her, quite literally, on the track. In the late '70s, she helped launch her pro-racing career with a personal two-year letter-writing-and-telephoning PR campaign that finally won her the backing of the Ford Motor Company, for which she still does extensive traveling as a spokesperson and product consultant. In 1984 she authored *The Lyn St. James Car Owner's Manual,* and she recently worked with Ford engineers to develop the 1993 Ford Probe and Lincoln Mark VIII. She has conducted car clinics at car dealerships around the country, and made many in-store appearances for—and attended women's conferences on behalf of—JC Penney, Nike, Jantzen swimwear, and New Essential cosmetics. As with each car being driven on the Indy circuit—an endeavor that costs somewhere between 3 million and 5 million dollars a year to support—there's a product label on practically every inch of St. James's car.

Standing now, cries of "Lyn!" coming from the crowd on the other side of the pit wall, St. James goes over to her car and takes her helmet from her new husband, Roger Lessman, a soft-spoken Oklahoma native whose hobby happens to be chasing the world land-speed record on the Bonneville Salt Flats. He first approached St. James last year about driving the new car he's designing for the next record attempt sometime this fall. They were married last February and now are the fastest couple on the planet.

"I thought I'd get a woman to kick some of those good ol' boys' butts," says Lessman, a widower with an 11-year-old daughter. "A woman gettin' the land-speed record ought to really mess with those rednecks' minds."

Lessman's new car will run on compressed natural gas and is expected to achieve speeds of around 450 mph. "That's cool," St. James says. "Once you're up over two hundred, it all looks the same anyway."

Indy cars, the so-called thoroughbreds of racing, are fast, tightly wound machines in which one touch of the steering wheel is the equivalent of three turns in a normal car. Essentially powerful engines set on open wheels with narrow cockpits and lightweight, missile-shaped cones of fiberglass around them, Indy cars are capable of speeds of well over 200 miles an hour.

But all the advanced technology and high-tech tinkering notwithstanding, cars are still operated by drivers, all of them out there on that same extreme edge of imminent disaster, trying to run their own perfect race. And while the prevailing wisdom is that the sophistication of today's cars has leveled the degree and the significance of individual driving styles and strategies—that it has, in effect, rendered racing a matter of drivers living up to the genius of their machines—the fact is that each driver, depending on experience and personality, approaches and maintains that extreme edge differently. And such differences are ultimately what inform and drive a race.

Readying for her second round of time trials, St. James snaps up the collar of her race suit and puts her helmet on, leaving her just the occluded head-on view out her front visor. St. James says her focus grows considerably narrower anyway the closer she gets to driving, so that by the time she actually slips the helmet over her head, it matches her perspective perfectly and locks it into place. And, more than any other driver on the circuit, she has a world of distractions to shut out.

"The woman thing," for example. For years, while refusing to let being the lone woman in her field define her, she didn't realize how solitary she actually was. And then, about ten years ago, she attended a dinner for the Women's Sports Foundation. "I met Peggy Fleming and Cathy Rigby and athletes I never heard of—my whole family of peers. It was great being around them, talking about things I wouldn't talk to male race-car drivers about. It was a void I didn't even know existed."

When she accepted the Rookie of the Year award at 1992's Indianapolis 500 Victory Dinner, St. James received a standing ovation from her fellow drivers, including the great A. J. Foyt himself. It was Foyt's autograph that an awestruck, teenage Evelyn Cornwall had gotten through the fence here at Indy 20-some years earlier. And this year, when Foyt shocked the Indy crowd the morning of the first day's time trials by announcing his retirement minutes after recording his fastest practice lap that week, St. James was leaning out over the wall of the home straightaway with a big thumbs-up sign as Foyt rolled slowly past her in a farewell lap. It was, she thought, as if her career had come full circle.

I completely forget she's a woman," says owner Dick Simon of his precedent-bending team member. "She's just a driver to me. We're too engrossed in what we're doing to think otherwise."

At the first day's time trials, St. James found herself struggling through a major crisis of confidence, unable to get her lap times up beyond 213 mph. She would run some laps and then bring the car in, saying it still didn't feel right on the curves, that it felt like the nose wanted to trade places with the tail. As the day wore on there seemed to be a growing, though unspoken, suspicion in the crew that maybe the problem wasn't with the car but with the driver—and, the driver being St. James, that this was, once again, "the woman thing." Finally, Raul Boesel of Brazil, one of the other drivers in Dick Simon's stable, was asked to take St. James's car out for a lap. He pushed it to the limit,

came back, and told her the car was fine.

"Yeah, I was aware of what was going on," St. James tells me after her triumphant practice run the next day. "It would have been so easy for those guys to say, 'Hey, she can't do it. She's a broad. We knew it. Last year was a fluke!' But they continued working with me. It felt to me like my back tires were going to slide out, but Raul told me to just keep turning through the curve."

After she'd recorded her 222 mph lap, Boesel told St. James that one of the other drivers asked if it wasn't really him in the car wearing St. James's helmet. "He told Raul," says St. James, smiling mischievously, "that he'd cut his own balls off if that was me driving. I think I'll have a knife wrapped in a red ribbon delivered to his garage."

St. James's crew chief straps and wires her into the shoulder-width cockpit of her Lola-Ford Cosworth. She sits perfectly still but for her wide eyes, which dart madly between sideview mirrors, watching every adjustment being made to the car.

"When I'm in the pits," she tells me, "I'm checking all the movements around my car and everything that's being done to me because it tells me where I'm at."

While the crew makes all its last-minute adjustments and preparations, Lessman stands over his wife with an umbrella to shade her from the afternoon sun. Then the crew gives St. James a little push forward, toward the starting area. It is one of the anomalies of Indy racing that a machine that goes well over 200 mph gets manually pushed to its start. It's as if the cars understand only one speed.

St. James's engine is started now from the rear with a hand-held electric starter motor. There are fierce, piercing roars with each squeeze of the throttle. She engages the clutch; then the tires, trying vainly at first to catch up with the thrust, do, and St. James's gone.

Lessman and I run back to the pit area where we can watch her progress, a little blinking dot around a shimmering oval on a computer screen. In a moment we hear the deafening buzz that is St. James down the straightaway alongside us and then she's gone again. For the first lap, the screen flashes a slow (if one can imagine such a thing) 215.182 mph. In Indy racing, the average of four official laps constitutes a final qualifying speed. St. James is looking for something around 220 mph in order to position herself firmly in the starting pack of competitors on race day.

There is an ideal line that a driver hopes to pursue around an oval track, a line described by precise points at which to bow out from the straightaway, dip down into the turn, and hug the inside white line for as long as possible before near-slingshotting back out of the turn into the straightaway, carrying through as much speed as is humanly and mechanically possible. St. James does a lot of visualization training off the track to help promote her muscle memory, closing her eyes and picturing the way an ideal lap looks to her as she's going along that perfect line at her top speed. She times herself with a stopwatch to make sure she's dreaming it right. "You get into a rhythm out there," she says.

"Actually, the discipline I've learned sitting at the piano all these years, repeating the same piece over and over until it's perfect, has helped me with driving—along with having the attributes of a crazy person who likes to go fast in cars. I think of the metronome. Once you're out on the track and you've achieved your speed and established your reference points, you just get into the rhythm and go. You can't get hypnotized by your own rhythm, though, in case something happens ahead of you. Like you get caught in a driver's dirty air, which can really make your car jump around, or someone crashes and dumps oil all over the track. You have to be ready and willing and resilient." St. James has come through a number of scrapes in her career, including one particularly bad crash seven years ago at Riverside in which her car got clipped by the one ahead of it, sending her into a high-speed tumble. Her car was reduced to a smoldering hull. She walked away, dazed but fine.

When it's going right—the world at more than 200 mph—St. James can't really describe what it looks like. "If I can create the words, I'm dealing with emotions—and then I'm not driving the car. You have to be logically driven, not emotionally driven. If you know what you're experiencing, that means you're outside of yourself, and you have to be totally into the flow, become one with the car. Last year at Indy was perfection. I was so relaxed and focused. I know what it looks like to the normal person's eye, but to me it was like slow motion. Once, when I was in the pits waiting out a delay, I was so relaxed I fell asleep. The guys in the pit were shouting, 'Lyn! Wake up!'"

Beside me now, Lessman's eyes light up as Lap Two culminates behind us in another blistering buzz, 219-plus flashing on the screen, and then another lap, St. James in that groove, that sweet spot of ease on the other side of her hesitation, on the way to proving herself again. "There is a moment," she tells me afterward, gritty but smiling in the afterglow of the 222 mph record, "a moment when you make the turn, and you know the car is going to hold and that you'll see the next turn—as opposed to what drivers call the 'Oh shit!' syndrome, where you know you're gone. And when you find that place, that moment, it's not a rush so much as an affirmation. What I'd been doing the previous days was modifying my line to what the car was telling me. It's a bad habit. It's like saying, 'I've gained ten pounds and now I'm going to find the large clothes in my closet,' as opposed to saying, 'I'm going to find a way to wear the stuff that's too tight.' Probably the whole point of this thing for me is getting past or breaking through the limits we set for ourselves. Yeah, you're gonna spin, crash, and embarrass yourself, and even when you lay it out there and get away with it, you just start the dialogue all over again. It never ends. I mean, I went two hundred and twenty-two mph, and then I qualified at two hundred and nineteen—and I was disappointed and asking, 'Why didn't I go two hundred and twenty-two? What didn't I do?' Quite frankly, it's addictive, this racing thing." ●

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