

SPEED QUEEN

PEOPLE

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Lyn St. James, nobody's token, will be one of her kind at the Indy 500

It's a rainy day in Daytona Beach, and Lyn St. James, race-car driver, is feeling impatient. Hemmed in by other drivers, she makes a desperate bid to break free of the pack. She maneuvers to the far right, shoots past a line of cars and—oops!—spots a police car up ahead. "I would have done something else if that policeman hadn't been there," she says with a chuckle, easing her Mercury Sable onto a side street to avoid being ticketed.

No matter. Lyn St. James doesn't need to steal furtive thrills on city streets. She can get hers before 400,000 fans at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. On May 29, St. James, 46, will climb into her Lola-Ford and take her place in the 33-car starting field with the likes of Mario Andretti and Al Unser Jr. Only the second woman to qualify for the Indianapolis 500, St. James is the first to be fully accepted by the men. (Of Janet Guthrie, who competed in 1977-79, St. James says, "She was the first; that's gotta be the roughest job.") Last year, at the Victory Banquet, where she was named Rookie of the Year, Lyn was given a standing ovation—led by the sport's storied A.J. Foyt.

"She's a very smooth, natural driver," says former race-car driver Dick Simon, who owns the \$1 million car that Lyn will drive in this year's race. "Do you see a woman competing with men in any other sport? No. And here she is competing against the best drivers in the world."

Lyn St. James has been a race-car driver for 19 years. Long before that she was Evelyn Cornwall, the only child of Alfred Cornwall, a Willoughby, Ohio, sheet metal company owner, and his homemaker wife, Maxine. "All my friends were girls," says Lyn. "But when I was home, I hung out with the boys." The reason? She was crazy about drag racing.

One night 17-year-old Lyn was at the drags in Louisville, Ky. Her friends entered their GTO but got smoked. When Lyn made a smart remark, one of the guys said, "If you're so great, why don't you race it?" She did—and won in her class. "But I never saw myself as a race-car driver," says Lyn. "Frankly, my mom was not too thrilled about it."

Instead, Lyn became a secretary, and she might have given up on driving had it not been for racing enthusiast John Carusso. They met at the Euclid, Ohio, electronics company where they both worked, and they married in 1970. Outfitted with a Ford Pinto—Carusso took a Corvette for himself—Lyn won the Sports Club of America Florida Regional Championship in 1975 and '76. In 1978 she made it to the SCCA Runoffs in Atlanta—the national championships of amateur racing. "I went there and blew my engine right away," says Lyn. "I thought my life was over."

Actually it was just beginning. She noticed that other competitors—Paul Newman, for one—had spare cars and realized she was woefully underequipped. "That's when I said to myself, 'I'm going to prepare to win,'" she says. "I'm going to get sponsors, and I'm going to be a professional race-car driver."

She rechristened herself Lyn St. James—borrowing a media-ready surname from actress Susan St. James. Two years later, even as her marriage was failing, she won the backing of Ford Motor Company.

By 1988, with numerous victories and women's speed records under her belt, Lyn decided she was ready for Indy cars, the Thoroughbreds of racing machines, which are capable of twice the speed of road racers. And they burn money: A day's worth of test laps at Indy costs \$25,000; the Indy 500 itself, \$1 million. It wasn't until March 1992 that she successfully tapped into the deep pockets of J.C. Penney, which agreed to lend its Spirit of the American Woman slogan to her racing campaign. She finished a very respectable 11th in her first Indy.

These days Lyn has a couple of new fans: second husband Roger Lessman, an Idaho real estate developer, and his daughter, Lindsay, 10. Lyn expects to split her time between the Daytona condo where she cares for her ailing mother and a home she and Roger will build in the West.

St. James admits to some apprehension about being a belated stepmom. "I have a panic attack every day," she says, laughing. Yet she claims to have no such worries about this year's Indy. "I'd like to say I'm ready to kick ass and show the guys how it's done," she says. "But I'm not here to prove anything about being a woman. I'm here to drive a race car and try to win a race."

- William Plummer
- Cindy Dampier in *Daytona* and Bill Shaw in *Indianapolis*

