



# A Road Less Taken

*After enduring years of macho scorn in racing, Lyn St. James has her own Indy Car team*

IN HER 15 YEARS OF BATTLING TO CARVE out a career as a professional auto racer, Lyn St. James has repeatedly been told what she can't do, what she shouldn't attempt and what she won't ever accomplish. At times her own crew members have made it clear that she would be more welcome in the garage if she fetched coffee rather than asked questions about chassis setup. At Watkins Glen in 1985, where she became the first woman to win a professional road race driving solo, nobody on her team celebrated with her in the victory circle.

"My entire career, it has always been, Who's going to work with the girl driver? Who's going to work with the bitch?" says St. James. "Many male drivers have told me, 'I couldn't do what you do.'"

Even St. James's mother—73-year-old Maxine Cornwall, a strong woman who drove a cab in Painesville, Ohio, during World War II—has fought her every step of the way. "My plan for Lyn was for her to get a good education and to be a nice lady," Cornwall says. "I didn't want her to be hard and fierce. She has wrinkles

around her eyes. She has let herself go. Racing is her life. I say prayers for her, sometimes twice a day."

The turning point in St. James's journey came in 1991 when Ford, her sponsor for 10 years, drastically reduced its involvement in road racing and dropped her as a driver. St. James was forced to shop around for rides. She got only three races, so at the urging of friends, she enrolled in a self-awareness seminar to help her come to grips with her sudden inactivity. After spending two days listening to 200 strangers make declarations about how they were going to change their lives, St. James announced, "I'm going to drive in the Indianapolis 500."

"Whenever I get to a low point," says St. James, "I go back to the basics. I ask myself, Why am I doing this? It comes down to passion. I love racing. I truly know that the gratification I get from driving is absolutely necessary in my life."

St. James's perseverance has finally paid off. After making pitches to more than 150 corporations to raise the \$3 million to \$5 million needed to finance a Indy

Car program, St. James, 46, this year became the first woman to attain a full-time ride in the major leagues of American auto racing. She plans to enter all but one of the 16 races in the '93 PPG Indy Car World Series. Last year St. James became the first woman Rookie of the Year at the Indy 500, where she finished 11th.

"Modern racing should be called the motor-sports business," says Leo Mehl, director of worldwide racing for Goodyear. "Speed costs money. To get to this level, Lyn had to improve not only her driving skills but also her business skills. I've watched her yelling and pounding to get what she wants. Some of the men supplying the equipment didn't take her seriously. She could have easily given up."

St. James's persistence has earned her some of the sport's best equipment, including 1992 and '93 Lola chassis and the Ford-Cosworth XB engine package. Why, after years of resistance, is St. James being welcomed into the macho world of Indy Car racing? Because in today's economy, with corporations slashing advertising and promotion budgets, even estab-





Lyn St. James



by JILL LIEBER

lished male drivers have had to go dialing for dollars. For corporations targeting female consumers—there are estimates that more than a third of auto racing fans are women—St. James has opened a new world of sponsorship possibilities.

And she is a unique spokesperson. Until recently the president of the Women's Sports Foundation, St. James has been a guest at the White House five times. She is an accomplished pianist and a published author—she wrote *Lyn St. James's Car Owner's Manual for Women* in 1984. She is a part of the management group at Human Performance International, a testing and training center based in Daytona Beach. She owned an auto-parts company for 10 years, and she worked with engineers to develop the 1993 Ford Probe and Lincoln Mark VIII.

Despite these credentials, St. James's 1993 Indy Car program never would have left the garage had it not been for JCPenney, 80% of whose customers are women. Four months before last year's Indy 500, Carrie Rozelle (the wife of former NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle) heard

GEORGE TIEDERMANN (TOP); TIM REMPEL/JCPENNEY



through a mutual acquaintance that St. James was having trouble raising money to make the switch from Trans Am to Indy Cars. Rozelle wrote to W.R. Howell, the chairman and CEO of JCPenney, who had been on the board of the United Way, the NFL's main charity, with her. Howell invited St. James to make a marketing presentation at the company's headquarters in Dallas. Upon arriving, St. James was introduced to three executives who happened to be women.

"I realized there was something there,"

Jantzen and Revlon, all three of which agreed to sign on as sponsors.

St. James knows that the bottom line for her 1993 Indy Car program is not measured by how many races she wins but by how often she makes the cash register ring for her sponsors. She has hired two women to oversee every off-the-track aspect of her motor-sports business, from corporate sponsorship and marketing strategy to press relations. "I don't want to wait three years for this to work," says St. James. "These companies are major

shell. At the Andrews School for Girls she played basketball, volleyball, tennis and field hockey. On weekends she hung out with boys from the local high school who drag-raced at legal strips and on the streets. In 1966, when Lyn was 19, she and her drag-racing pals went to the Indy 500, where she obtained A.J. Foyt's autograph. That's all it took. "I was mesmerized," she says. "Being at Indy was the most incredible experience of my life."

This was not the sort of weekend drive Maxine had in mind, though, and she insisted that her daughter pursue a more ladylike set of interests. After high school Lyn attended the St. Louis Institute of Music. She then took a job as a secretary at U.S. Steel in Cleveland, giving piano lessons on the side. The only thing that wasn't conventional about her was her car—a 1967 purple Pontiac Catalina 2 + 2, a muscle car with a 428 engine.

"I told the Pontiac dealer I wanted a heavy-duty radiator and heavy-duty suspension," recalls St. James. "And he's thinking, What is it with this girl? He wanted to sell me a Grand Prix."

In 1970 Lyn married John Carusso, the owner of a consumer-electronics firm and later of an auto-parts business, and they moved to Hallandale, Fla. Sharing a love of cars, the couple bought a Ford Pinto in 1973 to compete in regional amateur Sports Car Club of America races. John soon moved up to a Corvette, and the Pinto became Lyn's. In her first race she lost control of the car and spun it into a pond at the Palm Beach International Raceway. Embarrassed but undaunted, she raced the Pinto again and eventually bought a faster Chevrolet Cosworth-Vega. In 1976 and '77 she was the SCCA's Florida Regional Champion.

On one Saturday evening in 1976, St. James was romping with her beloved Irish setter, Max, at a West Palm Beach racetrack when a carload of rowdy youngsters bore down on them. Lyn frantically waved her arms, but the driver ignored her signal and struck and killed Max. "I cried all night and the next morning," she says. "I wanted to go home. I kept asking John, 'How can you pull yourself together to race?' He said, 'Crying won't bring Max back. If you can't race, pull into the pits, but I'm not going home until the end of the day.'

"Well, I drove the pace lap past the spot where Max was killed, took the green flag and ran the entire race. I was operat-



MICHAEL SCULLY

**St. James hit the road for JCPenney and Ford, conducting a car clinic at a shopping mall.**

says Gale Duff-Bloom, an executive vice-president at JCPenney and one of the women St. James met that day. "The men understand the benefit of sponsoring golf tournaments, because they do business on the golf course. But they can't understand things they aren't personally involved in."

JCPenney agreed to invest \$250,000 in the team St. James hoped to assemble for the 1992 Indy 500. In return JCPenney figures that the company received promotional benefits valued at \$2 million. For 1993 JCPenney more than doubled its investment in St. James, helping her to afford a full season on the Indy Car circuit. Then Duff-Bloom invited companies that sell their merchandise in JCPenney stores to join up. Duff-Bloom hosted meetings for executives of such companies as Nike,

hitters. This can't just be a racing thing: "O.K., you put your name on my car, would you like tickets to the race?" It must be, "How can we help improve your business?" I want to hit home runs for them."

That St. James can radiate such confidence is remarkable, considering that she grew up shy and self-conscious. Lyn, an only child, was raised in Willoughby, Ohio, a working-class suburb of Cleveland. Her father, Alfred, was a sheet-metal worker, and Lyn hung out in his shop, where she demonstrated a curiosity for mechanical things. She and her mother often took long weekend drives. Crippled by disease as a child, Maxine has always felt a sense of freedom sitting behind the wheel, and she passed that feeling on to Lyn. "A car gave my mother power and mobility," says Lyn. "She would talk about the car as if it were human."

Sports helped draw Lyn out of her



ing in another mode. That's when I realized the power this endeavor had: If you put your mind to something, you can override whatever you might feel emotionally."

John raced his Corvette on the International Motor Sports Association circuit, and in 1977 he finished sixth overall in the 24 Hours of Daytona, the highest finish for an American car in that race. Lyn was part of his crew, and she should have been elated, but she had grown tired of living in John's shadow.

In an attempt to create her own identity, Lyn decided to change her last name after watching an episode of the TV show *McMillan and Wife*, which starred Susan Saint James. From that day on she would be known as Lyn St. James. To prove she could handle a fast race car, she raced John's Corvette, and she attracted the attention of an Oklahoma businessman who offered her a ride in his car. In 1979, St. James's first pro season, she finished eighth, with one second-place finish, in the Kellygirl Challenge series. Shortly thereafter she and Carusso divorced.

"Lyn was a race junkie," says Carusso. "She could block out her husband, her mother, money. If you're a racer, you itch 24 hours a day to get to the track. I was a junkie too, but I controlled it. I put my real job first and made racing my hobby."

Says St. James, "It was a scary time. I didn't have a husband. I didn't have my own race car. I had an auto-parts company [obtained in the divorce]. I had \$50,000 worth of shock absorbers in a warehouse, and I had to make the business work."

After reading an article about Ford's attempts to pitch its products to women, St. James began a two-year telephone and letter-writing crusade to persuade Ford to back her racing career. Ford finally signed her in 1981, and St. James promptly finished well back in the pack in her first two races. To keep Ford aboard as her sponsor, she traveled 250 days a year as a spokesperson and product consultant for the company. For a good while she was far more successful at that than she was at driving; five years passed before she won her first race, at Elkhart Lake, Wis.

Not that she didn't work hard at driving. She visited the Motor Sports Research Group (now Human Performance



International), where her skills and conditioning were assessed. She hired a personal trainer who put her on a weightlifting and exercise program and a low-fat diet. She even sought out Rolland Todd, a former coach of the NBA Portland Trail Blazers, who conducts leadership training. He helped her change the way she dealt with the emotions that surfaced in the course of her racing career.

Says St. James, "This became my motto: You have to live by the rules. You have to play by the rules. You have to win by the rules. Then, when you win enough, you can change the rules."

St. James had become a successful businesswoman and a pioneer in her sport. Only one thing was missing. "Whose fault was it that I had no personal life?" she says. "I was steering this ship, and I saw no other way. I can program myself on the racetrack not to feel emotions, but my inner voice told me I needed more."

While negotiating with JCPenney for her 1992 Indy 500 ride, St. James met Roger Lessman, a resort developer whose avocation is challenging land-speed records on the Bonneville Salt Flats. Lessman, who had set a record of 292.719 mph in the E-fuel streamliner class in 1989, approached St. James about driving a car he was developing for a record attempt. "I made it clear that I couldn't think about it until after Indy," says St. James.

Last August, St. James decided to consider Lessman's Bonneville offer. After many phone conversations and a few meet-

**In Idaho the high-speed family—Roger, Lyn and Lindsay—slows down.**

#### Neck exercises help St. James prepare for G-forces on the track.

ings, it was evident that she and Lessman, a widower with a 10-year-old daughter, Lindsay, had a lot in common. "One night I said to Roger, 'You know what I've always wanted? My own go-kart track!'" says St. James. "And he said, 'Let's do it!'"

On Feb. 27 of this year they were married in McCall, Idaho. For their first joint driving project, Roger and Lyn will try to break the world land-speed record for wheel-driven cars, either late this fall or in 1994. The car Lessman has developed will be fueled by compressed natural gas. The model has already been tested in a wind tunnel, and speeds of 450 mph are expected. "I can handle that," says St. James, who could become the first woman to set a wheel-driven land-speed record. "I'm empowered in a race car. You're strapped in so tightly that you end up wearing it. You become one with the car. It takes on a being. Yet, unlike people, a car doesn't set limitations.

"All the good things in my life have happened because of racing. It helped me develop an identity. I've learned a lot about myself, about how to stretch my limits. This is where I live, where I'm in my most powerful form." ■

