

Racing Pioneer Lyn St. James is the Wheel Deal



BY MILES Z. EPSTEIN
EDITOR, COMMERCE

LYN ST. JAMES USED TO RACE AGAINST PAUL Newman in the Trans-Am Series, and while the award-winning Hollywood actor had the famous name, the woman behind the wheel was a rising star in her own right. Fast-forward 30 years, and St. James has compiled and held 31 international and national closed-circuit speed records, has a record of accomplishment in the sport, and has placed as high as 11th in the prestigious, world-famous Indianapolis 500.

Lyn St. James's racetrack accomplishments at the Indianapolis 500 include: seven Indianapolis 500 starts in nine years, including six consecutive starts from 1992-1997; she was the first woman to win "Rookie of the Year" at the Indianapolis 500 in 1992, and finished 11th in the race; and she set a world record on a closed-course (for women) reaching 225.722 mph during the

1995 Indy 500 qualification weekend.

St. James also has two wins in the 24 Hours of Daytona (and was the winning GTO Team Driver in 1987 and 1990), raced nine times in the famous 12 Hours of Sebring Endurance race (winning GTO Team driver in 1990), raced in 53 SCCA Trans-Am races with seven Top-5 finishes, raced in 62 IMSA GT races with six wins and 17 Top-5 and 37 Top-10 finishes, is the only woman to win an IMSA GT race driving solo (1985 Watkins Glen), and raced in the legendary Goodwood Motor Circuit Revival & Festival Meetings in England in 2001, 2005, 2006, and 2007.

"I am most proud of the fact that I have had a long career," says St. James. "To have this kind of longevity in racing, you have to deliver on the racetrack and for sponsors—you can't just talk your way through three decades."



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In an industry that only understands one imperative—winning—Lyn St. James has blazed a trail for women race car drivers: *Sports Illustrated for Women* named her to its “Top-100 Women Athletes of the Century” list, *Working Woman* magazine named her one of “The 350 Women who changed the world between 1976-1996,” she received the 2001 “Guiding Woman in Sports Award” from the National Association for Girls & Women in Sports, was named 2006 Northwood University Distinguished Woman of the Year, and received the 2002 Office Depot Visionary Sportswoman of the Year award.

St. James was also president of the Women's Sports Foundation from 1990-1993.

In *Ride of Your Life-A Race Car Driver's Journey* (Hyperion, 2005), she talks about her incredible transi-

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tion from racing fan to race car driver, and how she has helped to inspire generations of women to pursue careers in the racing business.

In this interview with *COMMERCE*, Lyn St. James looks back on her 30-year career and discusses the future of racing along with the growing success of female drivers. She is without question a "Woman of Influence."

COMMERCE: *What attracted you to racing, and when did you know it was something you were good at?*

LYN ST. JAMES: I was, at first, a fan and a spectator. I went to the races with my friends and I just liked cars that could drive fast. I had no idea that I would be any good at racing. I liked it as a hobby, and once I started doing it, I wanted to be a race car driver more than anything else in the world. Once I started to race, it became my passion and I focused on becoming good at it. Eventually, I started winning championships and realized car racing was definitely for me.

Q: *When you first started, you were often the only woman driver in the male-dominated sport of racing. What was that like? How were you treated?*

A: I started racing back in the 1970s. When you are racing, as an amateur or a professional, everyone is focused on doing what they love. The focus is almost always on our common interest—fast cars. We're all

working on our cars trying to win a trophy. I never thought about how I was being treated. It was always about the cars.

Q: *How has racing changed since you started driving as a professional in 1981?*

A: Back in the 1970s, racing was not as popular as it is today. The Indy 500 was big, but the sport overall was nowhere near as big as it is today. NASCAR has grown so rapidly over the last 15 years—it has helped put racing on the map as a major league sport. Once you become a professional, which I did back in 1981 when I got Ford Motor Company as a sponsor, the sport becomes a business. Drivers have to get sponsors to compete and every driver has to make the transition from amateur to professional with this in mind. I have watched racing grow as a sport and a business—and the sponsors have really taken the sport to a new level.

Q: *What advice do you have for women who want to pursue a career in auto racing?*

A: Not everyone who wants to race has an understanding of business. I started running my own company from an early age and became an entrepreneur, so the move from driver to racing business executive was a smooth transition for me. Both women and men have to realize that racing is a business. Every driver has to know that they *are* the brand, and that they have to



Lyn St. James, one of motorsports' pioneering women, joined an illustrious group of automotive innovators and leaders when she was recently honored as one of seven recipients of the Automotive Hall of Fame's Distinguished Service Citation. This honor annually recognizes individuals (currently active or recently retired) who have provided distinguished service to the motor vehicle industry or their respective organizations.

know how to connect their personality and interests with potential sponsors. This advice is the same for men and women.

Q. *How is the racing business different for women drivers?*

A. What is different for women is that sponsors tend to be curious about the oddity of women race car drivers in such a male-dominated sport. You attract more attention as a woman race car driver—but it's still harder to get taken seriously as a female and it's still more difficult to get sponsors as a woman. Once you accept a check from a sponsor, you become a business. You have an obligation to make sure you do what the sponsor needs. That has nothing to do with being a man or a woman. That means you need to be successful on the track. That means winning races.

Q. *What are you most proud of in your racing career?*

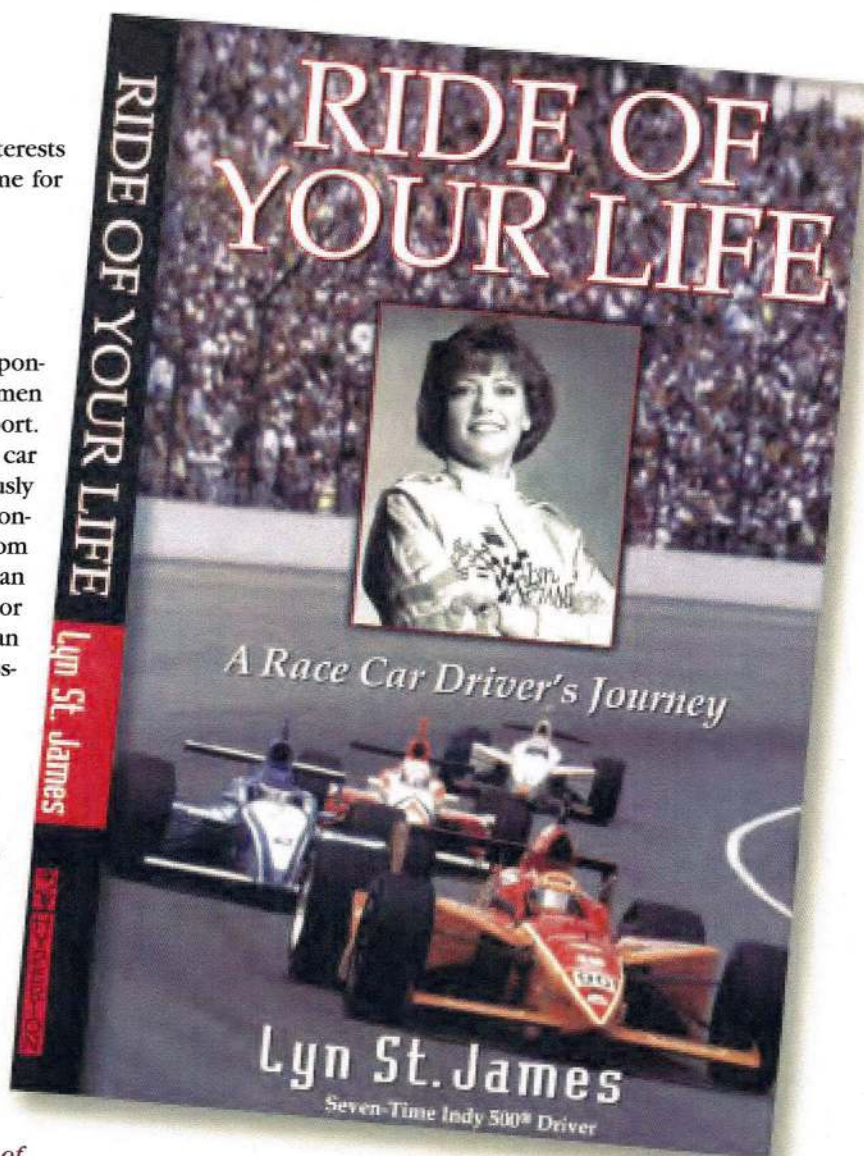
A. I am most proud of the fact that I have had a long career. I have been in the racing business for 30 years. To have a career that long, you have to deliver on the racetrack and for sponsors—you can't talk your way through three decades. JC Penney was the 150th sponsor that I partnered with in my racing career, and that really says something about my success.

Q. *You were a racing pioneer, being one of the first women to succeed in the sport. Why are you still involved in helping future generations of women to follow in your tire tracks?*

A. I was overwhelmed by all the fan mail that I received after I raced in the Indianapolis 500 in 1992. People were not only asking for autographs, they were asking for advice. That's what inspired me to start The Winner's Circle Foundation, a 501c (3) not-for-profit educational program to help women succeed in the sport of racing—a sport which is dominated by men.

Q. *Has the Winner's Circle Foundation been a success?*

A. With scholarships and training at the Winner's Circle Academy, we have helped women drivers such as Danica Patrick, Sarah Fisher, Erin Crocker and Melanie Troxel. The female drivers that I worked with in their younger years are the ones who are successful on the racetrack today. Danica was 14 when she came through our program, and came back again when she was 15.



In *Ride of Your Life-A Race Car Driver's Journey* (Hyperion, 2005), Lyn St. James talks about her incredible transition from racing fan to race car driver, and how she has helped to inspire generations of women to pursue careers in the racing business.

Now, women are coming to our program between the ages of 8 and 9. There are a lot of young, very talented female drivers who want to have successful careers in racing, and I'm doing everything I can to help them.

Q. *There's also an initiative called Project Podium. What is that about?*

A. The overarching goal of Project Podium is to provide financial assistance in the form of matching grants to women drivers to help further their professional careers. Secondly, the Project Podium process introduces or further provides experience for drivers related to the very important business aspect of the racing industry by the matching fund requirement. Each year, up to \$50,000 in funds are available to young women drivers who compete in all forms of motorsports, includ-

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ing, but not limited to, karting, quarter midgets, drag racing, sports car and oval track racing.

Q. *Paul Newman, who you used to race against, is helping with Project Podium, correct?*

A. Since 1994, with the help of Paul Newman and The Newman's Own Foundation, we have a grant program so that female drivers can apply for financial support to help them succeed on the racetrack. The Newman's Own Foundation was my first sponsor for Project Podium.

Q. *Most athletes can practice their sport every day. How do race car drivers stay sharp? They can't really use our highways or side streets for the speed they need without getting into a police chase.*

A. It's true, as athletes, race car drivers can't practice as easily and as often as in some other sports. One mental training tool is the MindShaper software, which helps drivers to improve their short- and long-term memory, concentration, focus and reaction times using computer simulations. Drivers can compete against themselves or against other users of the software all over the world. MindShaper is one way to keep sharp.

Q. *Has racing made you a better driver on the streets and highways, when you are not competing?*

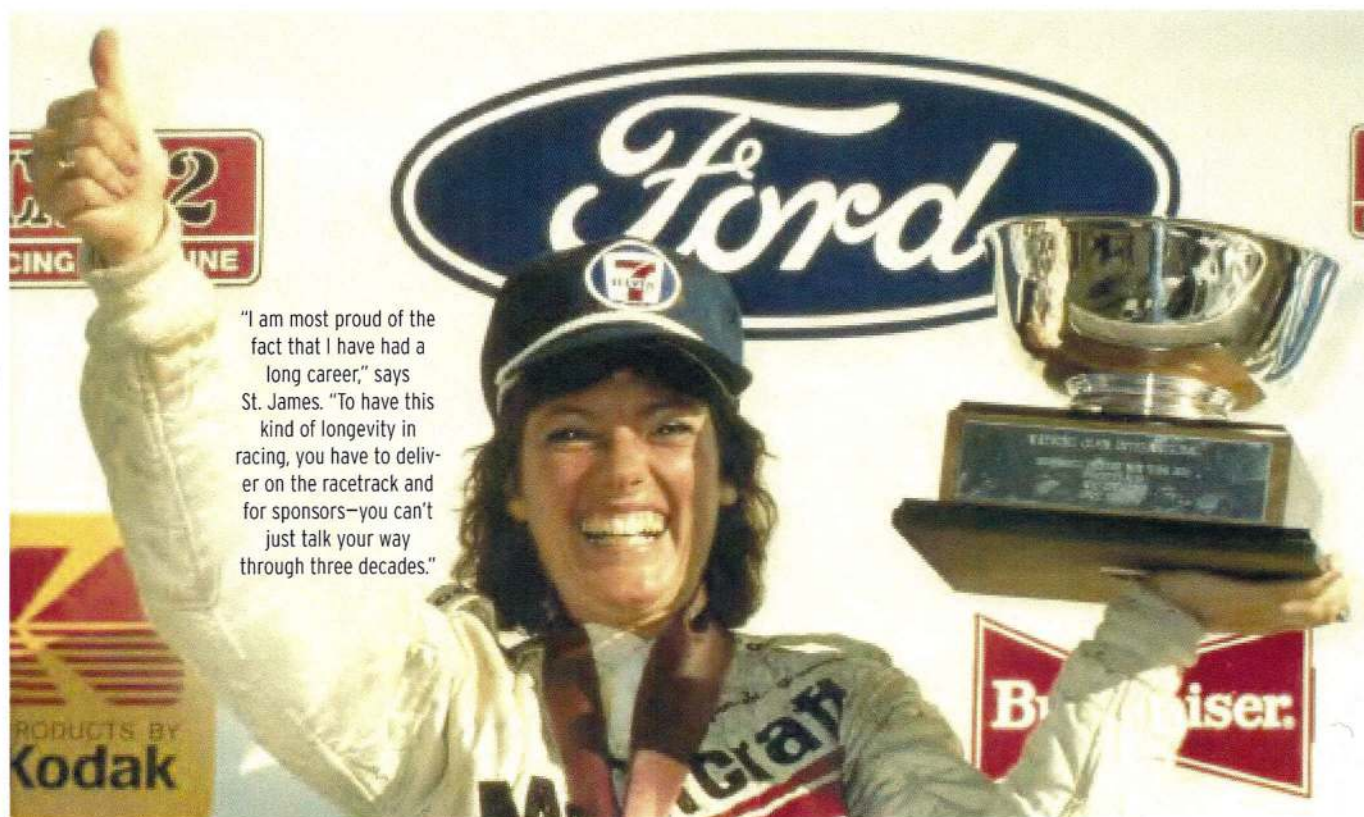
A. My visual skills and reaction times from racing have made me a better driver in my highway and off-the-race-track driving. But I do have to follow the same speed limit signs as everyone else—unfortunately.

Q. *You are trained as a piano teacher; which could have been your career if auto racing didn't work out.*

A. I took piano for 13 years, starting when I was six years old. I went on to get a piano-teaching certificate. Since racing worked out for me, my piano career was a short one. When I won the 24 Hours of Daytona race for the first time, the team owner kept the trophy but I went out and bought a baby grand piano with my winnings, which is still in my living room.

Q. *What advice would you have for a parent whose daughter wants to be a race car driver like Lyn St. James?*

A. I would encourage parents to support their daughters in whatever they want to do. If that's to become a race car driver, let them try. This sport is still emerging as a place for women to succeed. It's only male-dominated now because more men have chosen to race. There's no reason a woman can't win the Indianapolis 500. Wouldn't that be a great moment in sports? ■



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