

The Washington Post

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 19, 1996

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Driven to Success On and Off the Racetrack

Want to know a sure-fire way to feel upstaged at The Palm restaurant? Walk in with Lyn St. James.

The waiter knows exactly why her arm is in a cast: She was involved in a crash May 24 at the Indianapolis 500 and ended up in the wall—"pretty hard," is the way she puts it—and broke her wrist. He wants to know how she's feeling, when her next race is. "August," she says. "The True Value 200," the start of the new season.

He tells her Joe Gibbs is coming to the restaurant that night. St. James thinks highly of Gibbs: He knows the business of sports. And so does she, thanks to her early career as a manufacturer's rep for electronics. "I learned the flow of business," she says. "That has given me an edge." She negotiates her own deals, which have ranged from being a consumer adviser to Ford Motor Co. since 1981 to being a spokeswoman for the National Car Care Council to being a racing analyst for ABC and ESPN.

In the world of auto racing, America's number one spectator sport, Lyn St. James, 49, is America's number one female race car driver. She's started 12 times in the Indy 500, finishing in the top 15 three times; she's the only woman to win "Rookie of the Year" (1992); and she set the national closed-course speed record for women for the fifth time by reaching 225.722 mph at the 1995 Indy 500 qualification. For the 1994 Indy 500, she qualified sixth, the highest ever for a woman.

She loves cars and racing with a passion, and has ever since her first husband took her to the Indy 500 on their first date. They married and settled in Florida, started electronics businesses and spent seven of their nine years of married life racing together. "In racing," she says, "I found the thing I wanted to do."

St. James is probably better positioned than anyone to create connections between the macho dinosaurs of the auto industry and the growing car purchasing power of American women, and she knows it. From car manufacturers to the companies supplying parts and maintenance, the auto industry is like many old-line industries dominated by men who are suddenly understanding the fact that a tremendous number of American buying decisions have moved into the hands of working women. "They are at a loss as to what to do about it," she says. She is using her expertise as a race car driver and

an entrepreneur to bridge this gap and has, for example, assembled a team of 20 female drivers and auto experts to provide programs throughout the country to educate consumers on everything from vehicle maintenance to car racing.

Last week, four members of her team raced under her name in a 4,000-mile, seven-day race that began and ended at the Watkins Glen International course in Watkins Glen, N.Y. Her team, one of 100 in the race, drove the new Mercury Mountaineer in the Sport Utility Class and helped promote the Susan G. Komen Foundation's Race for the Cure, which benefits breast cancer research. Ford Motor Co. and its dealer organizations have donated more than \$700,000 in money and in-kind services in the last 18 months to Race for the Cure, which is the kind of connection between the industry and women that St. James wants to develop.

"Throughout my career, I've been able to find ways to touch people beyond or outside the racing community," she says. And she intends to continue.

Competition is still a big focus of her life, and she maintains an aggressive conditioning program. What's key, she says, is physical fitness, not muscle mass. "The muscles I have are good for endurance." She uses a lot of visualization techniques to maintain her reaction time, but she knows it is bound to slow down at some point.

"I have a relatively short window," St. James says. "I'm now looking beyond. I've always driven for another owner. I'm going to launch my own team. I'll drive at first, but it will benefit other women drivers in the long run." Lifetime Television is her major sponsor.

Today, St. James is remarried, raising a 13-year-old daughter and running a foundation to help aspiring female race car drivers. "One of the things I want to fix," she says, is the fact that she's currently the only woman driving in the Indy 500. "It doesn't reflect the participation and interest of women in racing." Forty percent of the racing spectators are women, she says.

For all of her success, for all of her firsts and all of her records, she's feeling that she's just about to come into her own. "I feel I've got the allies and resources to make things happen," she says. "I'm on a roll."

And not just for herself, but for other women, as well.