

Lyn loved her Mustangs,
here in 1980. Credit Ford



CLASSIC AMERICAN PEOPLE

Lyn St. James

Fast Lady

Steve Havelock interviews and profiles Lyn St. James,
probably the fastest lady in American motorsport...

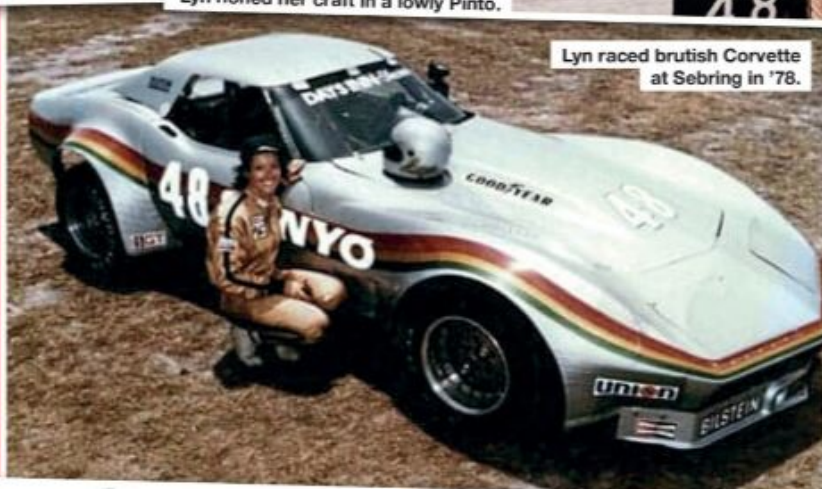
Words: Steve Havelock Photography courtesy of: Lyn St. James, Fred Lewis, Ford and IMS Photo



In Lyn's first race, she and her Pinto went swimming.



Lyn honed her craft in a lowly Pinto.



Lyn raced british Corvette at Sebring in '78.

I first met Lyn at the 2001 Goodwood Revival where she was racing a mighty Ford Galaxie and a potent Shelby Cobra. This happened to be her first foray into historic racing and the first of many visits to Goodwood, following her decision to retire from top-level professional racing at the age of 53, her last outing being the 2000 Indianapolis 500. Yes, you read that right. The Indy 500. Lyn raced in arguably the most famous race in the world seven times. Her debut was in 1992 and she was only the second woman to have ever qualified and made the start. She finished in 11th place and became the first woman to be awarded Rookie of the Year. Even today, there are only nine women who have actually made the grade and raced in the Indy 500.

Of course, Lyn earned her stripes and did a lot of racing before Indy, mainly in saloons, sportscars and GTs and her considerable achievements include two GTO class wins in the Daytona 24 Hours ('87 and '90), class wins in the Nurburgring 24 Hours (1979) and Sebring 12 Hours ('90), six wins in IMSA GT racing, seven top five finishes in Trans-Am and two Le Mans 24 Hour races. In 1985 she won the GTO class in the Serengeti 500km race at Watkins Glen driving her Mustang solo which was quite some feat. She also held 21 International and National closed course speed records including the first woman over 200mph and the closed course women's record of 212.577mph in a Ford Thunderbird at Talladega in 1988.

In the last 20 or so years Lyn has put a lot back into the sport that she loves and has done much to help women racers in what is still a male-dominated motorsports world. She has received many honours and several hall of fame inductions. She is a motivational speaker, author and TV motorsports pundit and is a motorsports and industry advisor.

I recently managed to find a gap in her hectic schedule and had the great pleasure of chatting with her. Now 75 she is still incredibly enthusiastic, bright and bubbly and can talk the hind leg off a donkey.



The successful AMX team at Nurburgring in '79.

Not coming from a racing background, she told me: "Racing was always on my radar but only as a fan. I never could comprehend the idea that I could actually be a race driver or actively involved in the sport. You have to see, not just another woman, but real people doing it instead of what we call our 'stars'. I'd go to the Indy 500 and they all seemed like superhumans to me, whether they were driving or working in the garage. Those people were extraordinary and I was just ordinary. So it doesn't connect.

"But before that, when I was younger, I went to the drag races and they were ordinary people. Drag racing back then was that you showed up in a street car and they put a number on your door or window in white shoe polish, and you get in line and go down the drag strip. I was racing my buddy's Pontiac GTO. It was fabulous and I loved it and I won my first race. It was eliminations all day and I kept getting through. I did it a couple of times more, but I didn't like all the waiting around and then in 10 or 11 seconds it's all over. >>

Lyn hustling her AMX at the 'Ring in '79.



Lyn's Motorcraft Mercury Capri at Atlanta in '81. Credit Ford.



Lyn posing with Mercury Capri at Lime Rock in '81. Credit Ford.



Driving solo, Lyn won '85 Watkins Glen 500Km.



Lyn raced this sleek Mustang throughout '85.

"I saw people working on their cars and I don't know how to work on cars. I'm not a mechanic. So, I couldn't see a clear pathway to going racing. From the time I was 16 for a whole decade until I was 26, I was trying to do what I thought society expected, which was to get an education, get a job, get married and have a life. I was a race fan that entire time but never thinking it was something I could do. In 1972 I went to the Daytona 24 Hours and saw road racing for the first time and saw real people with their cars. There were some Corvettes and Porsches and Camaros at the back of the field aside from the likes of Mario Andretti and Pedro Rodriguez and their very exotic cars at the front. I could walk around in the garages which I couldn't do at Indy and see people who could be my neighbours almost, working on their cars. So, it became real. And I was older. Then in '73 I became inspired by Billie Jean King beating Bobby Riggs on TV in a tennis match that set the world upside down. So, I saw a woman beating a man in front of

millions on TV. I was married at the time to a husband who wanted to pursue motor racing, so we jumped in with both feet. I became a participant rather than a spectator. It just happened late for me. Once I did, I found my home. I found the place I want to be to this day. When I am at a race track I am the happiest person in the world. Every race track in the world is my home. My first race car was a Ford Pinto which was a street car, but it was the only way I was able to afford to do it."

Lyn's first race was at Palm Beach International Raceway in '73 and it wasn't one she'll likely forget as she ended up submerged in a lake. However, lesson learned, she took to racing like a duck to water and started winning races – lots of them. Spurred on, she was then keen to progress. She recalls: "My husband had a Corvette. I kept bugging him and said I want to drive your car. The opportunity came up at an SCCA race at Daytona (in '77.) He wanted to see if I could handle it and I did. Next year I drove it at the Sebring 12 Hours (finishing

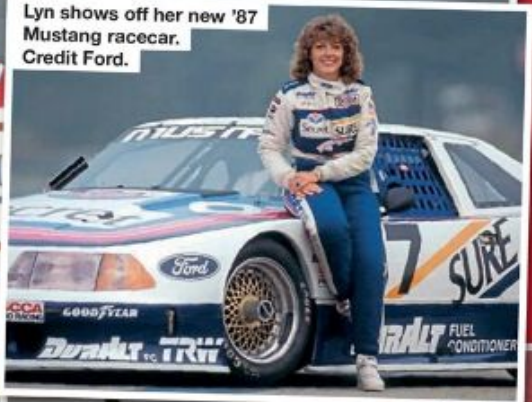
17th). I lived in South Florida near the two biggest endurance races in the United States – Sebring and Daytona. And IMSA sportscar racing was held at Atlanta which wasn't too far away. Anyway, I proved that I was capable. Then if you have aspirations you have to work awfully hard to make things happen. It's not like you can sit on your butt and opportunities are just going to show up."

Lyn knocked on many doors pursuing drives. In '79 she was invited to join a top American team who were racing a pair of AMC Spirit AMXs at the Nurburgring 24 Hours and she grabbed the opportunity with both hands. She says: "BF Goodrich put together a two-car programme with Team Highball. I'd never been out of the United States. Wow, talk about a leap of education of just being culturally in another part of the world, and then being part of a big corporate programme with a fabulous race team and then to be at the amazing historic, incredible Nurburgring – 14 miles long with 176 corners. We flew to Belgium and then took a train. BF

Lyn's Mustang won GTO class at '87 Daytona 24 Hours. Credit Fred Lewis.



Lyn shows off her new '87 Mustang racecar. Credit Ford.



GTO victory for Lyn at '87 Daytona 24 Hours.



Lyn in her Mercury Capri at Daytona in 1988. Image credit Fred Lewis.

Goodrich arranged rental cars and we took them around the circuit, because it was open to the public. So we did that for a couple of days and that's how we learned the circuit. I was in the No. 2 car (sharing with two other drivers) and we ended up winning our class." The sister No.1 car came second so it was quite some result.

In 1981 Lyn landed a contract to race for Ford. She says: "I'd been bugging them since 1978. You don't realise it at the time but I was building a body of work. A series of building blocks of your experience and ability that you could then sell yourself to somebody. They eventually said yes."

However, Ford had her racing all over the place in all manner of cars. Even some off-road racing. They never really had a structured plan for her that would allow her to specialise and concentrate on one particular championship. She recalls: "I would have loved to have had a structured path. This is not a complaint, but it is reality. I only ever had one-year contracts. By August or September I was wondering what

next year would be. I always believed even from when I was following the sport as a fan, that race wins are quickly forgotten. You are only as good as your last race, and then it's forgotten. So race wins are not as lasting as winning a championship which shows the whole season.

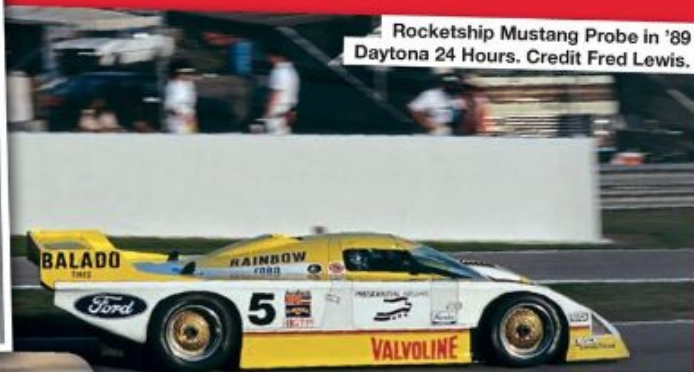
"I have always felt that winning a championship is the most accomplished thing a driver can have. I had that embedded in my brain. At Ford, I was not their priority. I was filling a slot. They wanted to win championships, but to be very candid they never saw me as the driver that would win them one. Instead it was Scott Pruett or Tom Gloy or the other drivers that did win championships for them. So, I was relegated to a supporting role in their overall campaign. That's just the way it was."

Lyn dedicated herself completely to racing. She says: "I got divorced before I got Ford as a sponsor. I was single for 14 years and those 14 years were the most prolific years of my professional racing until I got to Indy. With all the travel, fitness training, racing and other

demands (including the running of her own auto parts business) it would have been very difficult for me to have had a home life as well as a professional career as a race car driver." So how did she get on in a sport dominated by men? She recalls: "It was about 98% guys. There were times I hung out with them, but when I knew they were going out to play I opted out. I never felt uncomfortable. To be honest I was old enough to be their bigger sister and in some cases, their mother. They were in their teens and twenties and I was in my thirties. All I can say is that it worked. Some of them liked me and some didn't. Some I liked, some I didn't. We managed okay. In 1981 I was racing an Aston Martin Nimrod at Daytona and AJ Foyt was in the sister team car. Everybody was 'Oh my God, wait till AJ shows up and finds he's got a woman on his team.' But he was absolutely delightful. He taught me more about tyres in the course of that weekend than I'd learned forever. We ended up going out to dinner." She also later raced wheel to wheel with him at Indy. >>



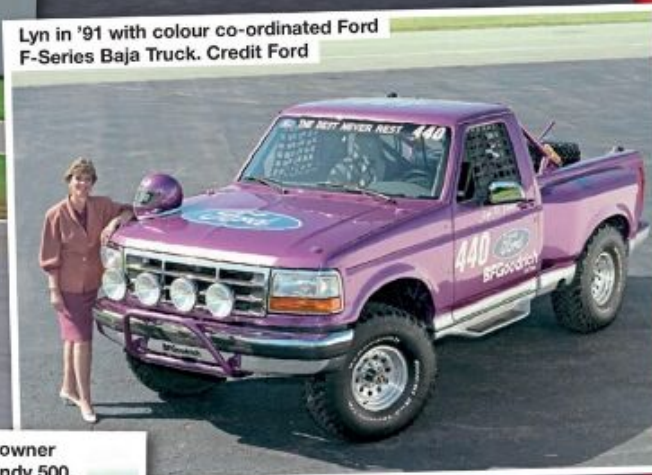
Lyn's Mercury Capri on Daytona banking in '88 24 Hours. Credit Ford.



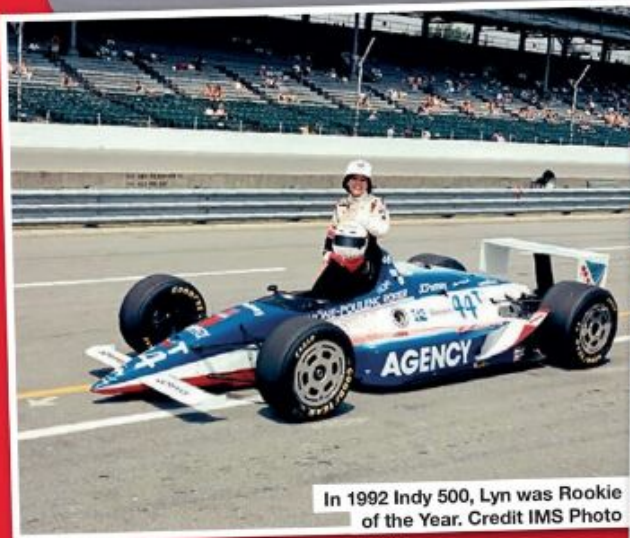
Rocketship Mustang Probe in '89 Daytona 24 Hours. Credit Fred Lewis.



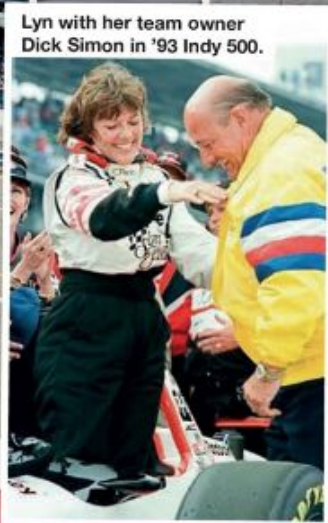
Lyn's Mercury Cougar was 5th in '90 Daytona 24 Hours. Credit Fred Lewis.



Lyn in '91 with colour co-ordinated Ford F-Series Baja Truck. Credit Ford



In 1992 Indy 500, Lyn was Rookie of the Year. Credit IMS Photo



Lyn with her team owner Dick Simon in '93 Indy 500.



Lyn finished 32nd in 1995 Indy 500. Credit IMS Photo

In 1986 Lyn had a massive shunt in a Ford Mustang Probe during the IMSA LA Times/Ford Grand Prix of Endurance at Riverside. Three cars tangled at 160mph and she was punted into the barriers, her car overturned and burst into flames. She recalls: "I'd had some other incidents but that was the biggest I'd ever had at that point. We destroyed three race cars. All three of us walked away unscathed, well I was injured a little bit. And no race fans were injured." Lyn also had some other big accidents including at Indy and reflects: "I was fortunate enough to reach the higher levels of the sport when the sport was safer, in both sportscars and Indy cars. If I had been racing Indy cars in the '80s, when I was racing sportscars, I may have had mangled feet if you look at some of the crashes I had or look at some of the crashes

that happened. I call it more destiny than luck. I feel very fortunate that in reality the things that happened to me happened when they did rather than at another time."

Lyn had long had her sights set on the Indy 500 but she had very little experience of racing in single-seaters. She says: "My goal was to drive an Indycar once in my life. I kept talking to team owner Dick Simon about that at the races over two or three years. He then gave me a chance to drive a car in 1988 and it went so well. I truly, absolutely went to heaven in that car. He saw how well I did and then he said 'we can do this'. But I had to go and find the money and that's why it took four years and me approaching 151 companies to find the sponsorship and to be able to put a deal together (with department store JC

Penney as her main sponsor). The Indy 500 was only my third open wheel race. I raced a Formula Ford once in 1982 and I raced a Formula Atlantic kind of car, it wasn't a pure Atlantic, in an open wheel exhibition race in Phoenix in 1990. Then Indy, which was my first oval track race. But I had driven at Talladega for the speed records I set in the '80s and I had endurance racing experience at Le Mans and Daytona where I was over 200mph on a number of occasions, and I had some turbo experience from when I raced the Mustang Probe, so I had all of this to draw on. The good news at Indy is that you have the whole month of May and so I was able to eat the elephant one bite at a time.

"Dick was a former driver and was a great teacher. He had that ability to tell me what I

Lyn racing Ford Galaxie at 2001 Goodwood Revival. Steve Havelock



Lyn's first historic race was at 2001 Goodwood Revival. Steve Havelock



Lyn and her record-breaking 212mph Thunderbird at '07 Goodwood FOS. Steve Havelock.



Receiving Spirit of Ford award from Ford CEO Jim Farley in 2021. Credit Ford.



Ronald Reagan was very presidential.



Lyn with a relaxed President George HW Bush.

needed to know when I needed to know it. He didn't try and download everything at once on me. He was the perfect person to take me through it step by step so by the time I got to qualifying and the race I was by no means a veteran but I was comfortable. I got to grips with the car very quickly. It was incredibly precise. You just think about what you want the car to do and it does it. You better make sure you are thinking right because it was so responsive."

I asked Lyn to describe racing around Indy at more than 200mph: "It's like threading a needle and it takes intense concentration. After the race, when you stand up it feels like you're drunk. Your body is still going in that circle. But when I was in the car it didn't bother me at all." Lyn raced in the Indy 500 six other times but her

first time was also her best result, although she did qualify 6th in 1994. She also raced in CART and IRL. She says: "I had some amazing positive experiences from 1974 to 2000 and I've had a great life. There's no reason why the other gals out there shouldn't have the same, if not better. In fact it should be better. I'm not wearing my helmet these days so if I can help give them an opportunity to have a positive career, why wouldn't I? Women have to believe that they can get to the top levels."

Largely through her work helping women Lyn has met three presidents at the White House. She recalls: "Well, they were all very different but they all left a huge impression. Reagan was a race fan but he was also older and very presidential. George HW Bush was so down to earth and so

laid back. And with Clinton, you can see how he mesmerises people. He was very charismatic." In 2019 Lyn had a really bad accident racing a Corvette in a historic event at Indianapolis. She says: "The tyre blew and I was out of control, and that's the first time I can say I was actually scared in a race car. I didn't want to die. I hit the wall pretty hard and it was the first time I felt a moment of fear." Lyn spent the night in hospital and after that decided to call it a day. Looking back on her career she concludes: "I am proud of what I've done on the track and what I have been able to do off track. I love the sport and the sport has given me so many great things. And I hope that I can also make a difference to others to have a great experience in the sport. I only wish I could have won a championship." ★