

**Yes She Can:** The 12 mph speed limit of the late 1800's soon gave way to auto race speeds that all but drove out women. In 1901 Camille du Gast entered her 20 hp Panhard in a 687-mile race from Paris to Berlin. Du Gast was driven to start last because her car was half the horsepower of the other 122 male drivers. Still, she finished 33rd.

For the 1903 Paris to Madrid race, discontent at not competing on equal terms with the men, she entered in a 80 mph De Dietrich. In a field of 207 racers, driving at speeds up to 80 mph, du Gast was in third place and showed women can compete when on equal terms with men. But the race, with rudimentary roads and cars, saw many tragic accidents. Du Gast stopped, aware of her decision's ramifications, to heroically attend to an injured diver, whose life, it is said, she saved. Beautiful with a vivacious personality, she had been very popular. After this race, she was a role model for women.

Mrs. Alice Huyler Ramsey, a Vassar College graduate, founded America's first "Women's Motoring Club" in 1909 to organize the first all-women auto race. Twelve women, two to a car, started in New York, drove to Pennsylvania then back, two days later. The first-, second-, and third-place winners drove a Maxwell Runabout, a Lancia Lampo, and a new, customized Cadillac.

Six months later, in a 30 hp automobile, Ramsey became the first woman in history to drive cross-country, solo. From New York to San Francisco, she made the 3,800-mile trip, but not easily. She was bogged down for twelve rainy days in Iowa; the front wheels of her Maxwell-Briscoe-sponsored open car collapsed when she hit a prairie dog hole in Utah; and eleven sets of fabric tires wore out; but she made it.

The first woman or man to win the National Hot Rod Association Top Fuel championship three times was a woman, Shirley Muldowney ('77/'80/'82). As the first woman drag racer to exceed 255 mph, Muldowney powered an exceptional racing career. It became a 1983 Hollywood movie, "Heart Like a Wheel," that was nominated for Academy and Golden Globe awards. In a drag racing men's world where managers aspired that no woman would, should, or (even) could, Muldowney did.

"Boys start racing young, driving go-karts and competing in soapbox derbies. I, on the other hand, went to an all-girl school, took piano lessons and worked in a steno pool," recalled Lyn St. James. She was fascinated with cars, but on her first visit to Indy as a fan, women weren't even allowed into Gasoline Alley. She started amateur racing in her twenties, but could not afford to race without turning professional. Sponsorship is vital to competing but sponsoring women was not yet vital to male sponsors.

St. James negotiated with a sponsor for three years before being signed. And in 1992 became the Indy 500 Rookie of the Year. "I got big ideas about Indy at an age most male drivers retire. I drove Indy as the oldest competitor in its history. Now I race vintage cars. My love of the sport - the car, the road and speed - has only increased with age."

Janet Guthrie, had a B.Sc. in physics, was a pilot, a flight instructor, an aerospace engineer, a technical editor, and had 13 years experience on sports car road-racing circuits, building and maintaining her own race cars. But it was the 70's, and sponsors thought a woman race car driver was too much of a risk. It was difficult to sell the idea of a female race car driver to the world and find a sponsor. Eventually, one took a chance on her and in 1976 Guthrie became the first woman to compete in a NASCAR super speedway stock car race.

Fellow acceptance was slow to come, Guthrie recalled. It took about a year before she could walk through the garage area without having to brace herself, before the attitudes of the crews and drivers started to change. Guthrie said, "That was a nice thing to have happen, very nice." In 1977 she became the first woman to qualify and race in the Indy 500. That same year,

she was the first woman and Top Rookie at the Daytona 500. In 1978, she finished ninth at Indy, the best finish ever by a woman, and held that record for twenty-seven years.

In 2005, Danica Patrick had a breakthrough fourth-place finish, was Rookie of the Year, and became the first woman to lead a lap at Indy. Only the need to make a pit stop, stopped her from a better-than-fourth finish, possibly even winning. She ran out of gas (fuel) but she didn't run out. The perennial question then became, "Can she win?" The short answer is: Yes she can. The long answer is: She did, April 20, 2008 in the Indy Japan 300.

Sources: My First Indy500, Marion Winik, MORE Dec2005/Jan2006;  
Pioneers in the Pit, Journey Gunderson, womenssportsfoundation, 5/05;  
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<http://www.muldowney.com/2006/bio06.htm>