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Women Racers: Business not gimmickry

By Bill Moore

There's nothing new about women in racing cars. Heck, *AutoWeek's* very own Denise McCluggage was racing AC Bristols in the '50s. But now, instead of being merely novelty items following in the wake of Janet Guthrie's trials and tribulations at the Indianapolis 500, they're beginning to earn both the cash and the respect which go with being true professionals.

There has always been a double standard, and that difference for men and women in racing still exists. The gap, however, is narrowing thanks to women like Lyn St. James, Cat Kizer, Vicki Smith and Kathy Rude who compete in the Kelly American Challenge Series.

At 34, St. James, a 5-foot-6, 125-pounder, is probably the most prominent of the women competing in the International Motor Sports Association series for intermediate size American sedans. In 1979 she made history at Road Atlanta when she drove a Plymouth Volare to a second-place finish behind Gene Felton, the four-time series champion. That second was the best a woman has ever done in a pro race.

Both Lyn St. James and Cat Kizer followed their husbands into racing. Lyn's former husband, John Caruso, asked her in 1973, "How would you like to go to driver's school?"

"That was all it took," laughed Lyn, who has competed in everything from Sebring, Daytona and the 24-hour race at Nurburgring in Germany.

Usually women racers are hindered by second-rate racing equipment, but last year Lyn took a huge step up when she signed a personal services contract with Ford. "It was a big gamble at the time," she said. "Ford hadn't built anything at that point."

While waiting for a spanking new Capri sponsored by Motorcraft, she raced a Mazda at the 24-Hours of Daytona last year and shared a ride with Charles Mendez and Ralph Kent Cook in a Porsche 935 that DNFed at Sebring.

Becoming a professional driver, however, was not Lyn's first goal. "For the first four years all I was was a club racer. That's all I wanted to be, all I thought I would be. My dream was to be a national champion in the Sports Car Club of America," she said.

While a dream for Lyn, it was reality for Cat Kizer who won an H-Production national championship at Road Atlanta in 1979 by beating the omnipotent Randy Canfield by .164 seconds.

"That's close, real close," said the 33-year-old Kizer who stands 5-foot-4 and weighs 117 pounds.

"It was that way all race long. It was real tense, but it was the best race I've ever had."

It marked the first time in the history of the Champion Spark Plug Road Race of Champions that a woman had won. In recognition of that fact, she was awarded the prestigious President's Cup.

Trying to repeat as champion in 1980, she was bumped hard from behind while leading and was sent spinning down the track. Regaining

the race in sixth, she finished a creditable third, but was unhappy with herself.

"I just wasn't racing well. I was just off that day. I don't have any excuses."

Kizer drives an AMC Spirit in the Kelly Series while her husband, Dave, does the maintenance. And while that may cause problems for some couples, it doesn't seem to bother the Kizers.

"I think it's more awkward for other people than us," said Cat. "He doesn't have an ego problem with it. He's not in my shadow. I know I wouldn't be doing anything without him. Besides, a good mechanic is 80 percent of the effort."

Explaining her entry into racing, Cat Kizer said, "I was always bitching about how much it cost us for him to go racing. Then he got me involved. Now, I'd sell the house just to get some more power out of my engine."

The 24-year-old Vicki Smith, at 5-foot-3 and 98 pounds, is the most petite of the lot. She makes up in zeal, however, what she lacks in physical size.

Vicki, who races a Ford Maverick that car owner Bob Lee bought for \$200, said, "I've been doing racing of one kind or another since I was very young. I'd race whatever people would let me get my hands on."

Last year's race at Lime Rock

Park in Connecticut was her first race in the Kelly Series, but it wasn't much to write home about. The six-cylinder engine in her car had a blown head gasket and was running on only four cylinders, yet Lee sent her out to earn the much needed starters money with it—and she finished 11th with just two gears, no brakes and only three cylinders.

Kathy Rude, a 23-year-old former instructor at the Bob Bondurant School of Performance Driving who in four years of racing has gone from go-karts to Formula Fords and into both Kelly American Challenge and IMSA GTU cars, is perhaps the woman with the most promise.

Dave Kent is having a third

Mazda RX-7 built for her to race with team members Walt Bohren and Lee Mueller. And no, she won't be racing in the Kelly Series. Instead, she'll be going head-to-head with the best in Camel GTU racing.

Kent is a hard man to please, but he is thoroughly impressed by Kathy Rude.

"She called me just before the 24 Hours of Daytona and asked me if I had made arrangements for a co-driver. I told her I would be interested in talking with her—but first I wanted to see what Lee Mueller thought."

Well, to make a short story even shorter, Lee met Kathy Rude at Willow Springs and was impressed himself. He called Dave Kent and said, "Sign her up."

"I trust his judgement as far as drivers are concerned," said the owner of Kent Racing.

Rude's performance at Daytona delighted Kent, and that prompted him to start work on a third team car for her while she and Englishwoman Divina Galica were paired in the IMSA endurance races.

Kent's use of Kathy Rude was a business venture, not merely a gimmick.

"It wouldn't be just a facade. It wouldn't be just a sham. It would be a real woman who could run with the men. If she could compete with Walt Bohren and Lee Mueller in the same car it would be great for everyone—the press, the team, everyone," said Kent.

There certainly is some publicity value in having a woman on the team, but Dave Kent is not a frivolous man.

"I build cars to win," he said. "If I didn't think she could win, I wouldn't have done it. I don't work that hard to lose."

And Kent has bigger plans for his racing team. He's interested in Camel GT racing, NASCAR, Formula One and the Indianapolis 500. He can foresee Kathy Rude racing at Indy.

Any mention of the Indy 500 and women brings to mind Janet Guthrie and her pioneering effort to become the first woman to race at the brickyard.

Mention Janet Guthrie to the women and each has a different response to her—and especially that last scene, sitting cold as ice in her broken car with Chris Economaki standing over her, microphone thrust into her face.

"I was real sorry for her," said Cat Kizer. "I guess she was the benchmark and that must have been a heavy cross to bear."

Kizer admits to having a temper, but points out, "I guess women can't be so intense or people will think of us as bitches."

And many people got that impression from Janet Guthrie, sulking in a broken car on that Indy day.

"I was disappointed in the way she responded," said Vicki Smith. "I think she bit off her nose to spite her face. You have to sit down and think before you talk. I think that's part of being a professional."

And Lyn St. James agrees. "I think she made a drastic mistake. If you accept the responsibility of driving for a team you have to live



Lyn St. James, Vicki Smith and Cat Kizer have garnered the respect that goes along with being true professionals. Bill Moore photos



Kathy Rude: The most promising.



Lyn St. James in her Kelly American Challenge Capri.

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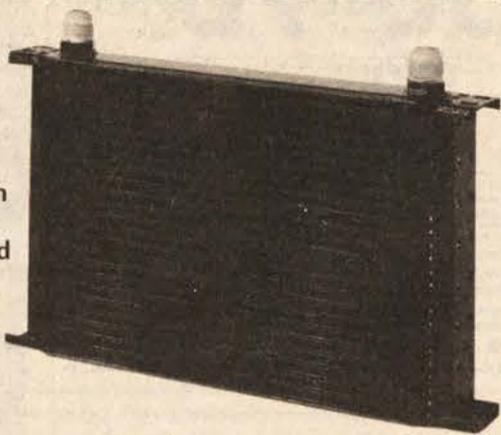
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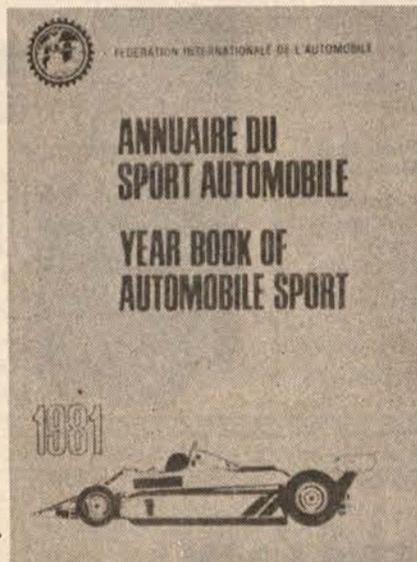
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AUGUST 10th
IN **AutoWeek**

Women racers

Continued from Page 33

up to it—and she didn't. She made a mistake."

If an A.J. Foyt had been in a similar situation, suffering the same heartache as Janet Guthrie, things would have been different. He would have bitten off the microphone—and been excused. The old double standard prevented Janet Guthrie from doing that, but Lyn St. James can think of no excuses.

"When you strike out to be a pioneer, the rules are different. She had to know that when she started out."

Lyn learned a lesson from Guthrie, though. "When something goes wrong now," she said, "I don't let the bitterness come across."

Ironically, the Kelly Series almost seems to be perpetuating the double standard. It pays a bonus of \$1,000 to the first woman driver in each race if she places in the top half of the field, and each is vying for part of a woman's \$10,000 season point fund.

And the women feel awkward about it themselves.

"I personally never liked doing anything that gives a woman preference," said Cat Kizer. "I'd rather compete on the same level as everyone else. We got into the series because we thought it would give us an opportunity to compete and be a stepping stone."

"It is a case of the double standard," said Lyn St. James, "but it offers the challenge to compete and it did open the doors for me. Ford called me. It would never have happened except for the Kelly American Challenge."

Vicki Smith said, "The way the series is now, you have to race the women first as far as the press, the sponsors and the promoters are concerned. But if it weren't for Kelly, I wouldn't be racing race cars. They're 100 percent responsible for me doing what I'm doing now." Each woman sees the Kelly Series as an opportunity to race now, advance later. Vicki Smith would like to go to Indy, as would Kathy Rude who seems to have the best shot because of Dave Kent's interest there.

But she also had the best chance because of her own meticulous preparation. For the past two years she has gone to Indy to spend time talking with drivers, car owners, press people and track officials.

"I'm trying to find out a little about it," said Kathy. "I think if you're there and people know you, they kind of know what to expect from you. It's easier than just arriving at the doorstep with a car one day."

"I've tried to learn their procedures," continued Kathy. "They do things very much differently than in road racing, so it's easier to know the procedures beforehand, then you can just concentrate on your driving."

Not only has she gone to Indy to learn the ropes, but she's also driven Formula Atlantic and Super Vees to stay in tune with open wheeled cars. And the hard work seems to be paying off.

Two years ago she tested a Rolla Volstedt Indy car at the Brickyard, but couldn't find any sponsorship despite the fact that the testing went very well. Besides that,

others have approached her about possible Indy rides.

When does she figure the Indy 500 into her plans? "I'd like to go next year," she said. "And if not next year, then the year after that."

"I've got a fantasy for NASCAR," said Cat Kizer. "Before the IROC (International Race of Champions) series I had a fairly low opinion of those guys, but then I started watching them in IROC. Those guys are really good drivers. They really gave the Formula One guys what for."

"My goal," said St. James, "is to drive the ultimate GT car, whatever that might be at the time. That would give me an opportunity to shine. Let's face it, the Kelly cars are big, heavy cars. They're not a pure race car. We're just doing the best we can within the rules."

Today, driving under those rules, how do the men and women relate to each other? Lyn St. James is leery about all the drivers. "I expect any thing from anyone at any time," she said.



Thom Cannell

Motorcycle racer Carter Alsop has been running Mazdas in IMSA.

Vern Smith, who won at Lime Rock this year, joked about his treatment of the women: "I wave at them." In the same vein, Vicki Smith said, "He blows kisses, but other than that . . ."

"When I look across the track at them it doesn't come to mind that they're women," continued Smith.

Still, he isn't sure women can be winning racers. "I have some basic doubts about the whole female personality and an ability to come up with enough aggressiveness. Maybe what we need is a Chrissie Evert and then train her to be a race car driver."

A suggestion of that nature goes over like the proverbial lead balloon with the present women racers of IMSA.

Bob Overby, who won the first race of the series this year at Road Atlanta, said, "I'm in a little different position. I don't mind a woman on the race track, but I don't like anyone being discourteous out there. Vicki and I had a little problem at Road Atlanta and she came over afterwards and apologized. If I'd been discourteous to her I'd expect to be knocked off the track. If she's discourteous to me I'd knock her off the track (and he did too, along with four other cars, some driven by men)."

Summing up the new approach to women drivers, Overby said, "There are good drivers and bad drivers, and it doesn't seem to make any difference if they're men or women."

