

“I’m sure I would have been offered more drives had I been a man, but I was also naïve at times”

Desiré Wilson reflects on a career fraught with problems to **Richard Heseltine**, who reckons she clearly had the talent to beat her male rivals in F1

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Wilson is the only female F1 winner – in the 1980 Brands Aurora race – in a three-year-old Wolf WR4 with no ground effects

She has the look of someone accustomed to the line of questioning. It's clearly nothing new. Our chat is interrupted by a phone call from a BBC researcher, the interviewee responding to each query as best she can – and sometimes without rolling her eyes. Somehow you imagine it isn't easy being Desiré Wilson, a racer to the core; someone who – for more than 20 years – proved herself time and time again, no matter how defiantly she scraped barrel bottoms with second-rate equipment. That Wilson often succeeded in an arena awash with alpha males was always going to get Y-chromosomes bristling and her sex remains the big story, hence the fluffy “So what's it like being a woman *and* a racing driver?” stuff from her inquisitor.

Today, women feature in most top-flight series, from Danica Patrick in NASCAR to Susie Wolff (née Stoddard) in DTM tin-tops via Simona de Silvestro in IndyCar. Backtrack three or four decades, however, and it was a different story as ladies tended to provide pitlane ‘glamour’. Or made the sandwiches. Heck, they weren't even allowed in Gasoline Alley at Indianapolis until the early 1970s. Wilson had a mountain to climb in order to be taken seriously.

“My father Charlie had been a successful motorcycle racer in South Africa and I used to watch him work on his ‘bike,” she explains, “soaking up what he was doing. It went on from there. I started racing when I was five-years old in Micro Midgets.” Often the smallest competitor in this dirt-track oval-racing category, at age 12 she tied for the national title, only to lose out in a match-race decider: “I loved the thrill of competition. It was my passion. I enjoyed sports and when I was 17 my headmaster said he would not be surprised if one day I received South African Colours for achievement in athletics. I replied that it would be for motor sport.”

Making her ‘long circuit’ debut in 1973 in Formula Vee, Desiré Randall finished second in the South African series a year later. Then came Formula Ford, the young charger partnering Alan Wilson in a pair of prehistoric Titans. In 1975, they were married, Alan stepping back

from driving to concentrate on his wife's burgeoning career: “I won the ‘76 title, which meant the next step – racing in Europe.”

And the need to prove it all again. Success in Formula Ford 2000 counted for little and it was back to South Africa before an unexpected offer from Kent: “I generally got drives via mentors such as [Brands Hatch supremo] John Webb. He offered me a run in a ladies' race in a Ford Escort.” She would lead from start to finish.

It would be the start of a fruitful relationship. Alan became Brands circuit manager while ‘Des’ took on admin roles: “I was racing in FF2000, Sports 2000 and occasionally Formula Atlantic. John then informed me that I was going to test an F1 March. He rarely discussed deals, even when they involved me. Jackie Epstein, who managed the racing school at Brands, looked after me and the test went well. John then announced that I was to drive in Aurora AFX F1.”

Within two years of arriving in Europe, Wilson had made the quantum leap from Formula Ford to the domestic Formula 1 series. Campaigning an Ensign N175, she raced five times in 1978, with third place at Thruxton a highlight: “It was a great series, with one- or two-year-old machinery and some good drivers. The step in horsepower wasn't really a problem either. In ‘79, I had the Melchester Racing Tyrrell 008 and qualified just behind John Watson's works McLaren for the Race of Champions at Brands. I knew then that I could do it.”

Wilson's star was in the ascendant in the 1980 season, but the year wouldn't be without its heartbreaks. Armed with a pre-ground effects Wolf WR4 fielded by Teddy Yip and Sid Taylor,

Des would make history at Brands after claiming victory in the Evening News Trophy race: “I was on the front row alongside Emilio de Villota's Williams, which was on pole. I knew that if I was first into Paddock I stood a good chance of winning. I did just that but then Geoff Lees tangled with someone so the race was stopped. I had to do it all over again, but I took the lead and held it to the end. I also got the fastest lap.

“John then arranged for me to do that year's British Grand Prix. I was thrilled. I was down to drive a Williams FW07 run by John Macdonald. During June's tyre test, I was faster than my teammate Rupert Keegan and was 10th quickest out of 21 runners. I was feeling pretty confident but four weeks later I got into the car to practice for the race and it felt different. It was unpredictable, but Macdonald insisted that it was exactly the same as when I had tested it. Later on I discovered that it was a different Williams entirely, one that Eliseo Salazar had crashed at Monza two weeks earlier. It had been thrown together and was horrible to drive. I missed the cut by 0.9 secs, which was devastating. Then, on



Clockwise, from left: Wilson with Tyrrell – “the best team manager for a new driver entering F1”; en route to ninth in ‘79 Race of Champions; at home on the farm; in determined mood in her first racer, aged just five

top of that, I lost my Aurora drive because there wasn't enough money to run two cars. I had none so I was laid off in favour of Kevin Cogan."

Her efforts hadn't gone unnoticed, however, because Bernie Ecclestone offered Wilson a drive in a third Brabham for the '81 South African GP. "There would be no testing, I was simply told to be ready," she smiles. "Then it all went quiet. A few weeks before the race, I received a call from Ken Tyrrell, telling me that the Brabham drive was no longer available; I would now be driving for him. I was delighted. Ken's team wasn't the force that it once was, but I greatly respected him as a talent spotter. I wasn't able to test the car before the race weekend – and had a few spins during practice – but this was the opportunity of a lifetime. Ken told me to relax, not to overdrive and I qualified 16th.

"Unfortunately, I made a terrible start and was last away from the grid. It began raining as the grid formed and in the wet I managed to pick off several cars including Eddie Cheever's sister Tyrrell and Nigel Mansell's Lotus. I had worked my way up the order but on lap 51 I got on the power a bit too early. The back came round and I spun, just as Nelson Piquet's second-placed Brabham arrived on the scene. I got out of his way but glanced the barriers with my rear wing. I drove back to the pits but my race was done."

Worse was to come, the race being retrospectively annulled as a World Championship round: "Afterwards, Ken told me to get ready for Long Beach, Brazil and Argentina. Then Kevin Cogan found some money so Long Beach was out. Then Ricardo Zunino got backing for the Brazilian GP and Michele Alboreto for the rest of the season. I was a South African woman racing at the height of the anti-apartheid movement and I couldn't find financial support for all the publicity I generated. Later that year Andrew Marriott thought he had found a sponsor for me to join Arrows for '82, but that also fell through."

It would mark the end of the Grand Prix dream but there was always sports car racing, an arena in which Wilson excelled.

In another Webb deal, she joined Alain de Cadenet for the 1980 World Sports Car Championship round at Brands, anchoring the



Clockwise, from above: a winning team with de Cad and his car (also top); ill-fated '81 South African GP; Wilson rates 956 as best sports car she raced; gunning 'Woolly Bully' – Des helped owner Balme shave 3 secs from his lap time



de Cadenet-Lola to third overall and first in the Group 6 category. "Alain and I just clicked," Wilson recalls, "and after Brands we did the Monza 1000km. I was leading with half an hour to go and then it bucketed it down. I managed to keep it on the island to finish ahead of Henri Pescarolo's Porsche 935. Alain and I won by a few seconds. Two weeks later, we also won the Silverstone 1000km." Then came Le Mans. A crash during qualifying meant that Wilson's quickest time would 'go missing' so she wasn't allowed to start: "The car was patched up and Alain and François Migault did the race. I felt

'IT BUCKETED DOWN AT BRANDS, BUT I KEPT IT ON THE ISLAND AND WE WON BY SECONDS'

terrible for making my mistake, and will never forget how gracious Alain was."


Wilson would return to Le Mans in 1983, finishing seventh aboard Hans Obermaier's Porsche 956, yet she still hadn't given up on single-seaters. IndyCar beckoned, if only briefly: "I was keen to do the '82 Indy 500 and Teddy Yip got me into Bob Fletcher's team, which was also running Gordon Smiley, a friend from the Aurora AFX series. Gordon had a March – then the car to have – but I ended up with an '81 Eagle, which was just evil."

Left reeling after Smiley's fatal accident

during The Month of May build-up, Wilson also struggled to get to grips with her ill-handling car: "On the first weekend of practice the team waved off my qualifying run. It later transpired that my time would have put me in the race. Then the engine burnt a piston. We got a replacement motor and had the same problem so I didn't make the cut."

Wilson walked away a year later, following another attempt in an obsolete car: "I decided that I wasn't going to kill myself trying to find a few more miles per hour in a car that was clearly way off the pace. In those days you would have more than 60 drivers trying to qualify, so making the 33-car field was really tough. I returned in '84 with an old March but that was hopeless, too. Johnny Parsons Jr also drove the car, and he was slower still – and he did Indy a dozen times. I never had any desire to go back after that."

She never did, instead racing just about anything anywhere in sports car and saloon events the world over. Since the establishment of Wilson Motorsport in '94, she and the likable Alan have been involved in 30-plus track design projects, from street circuits to brand-new facilities. In recent years, Desire's race outings have been limited to the Goodwood Revival.

Which leads us back to the elephant in the room. "I'm sure I would have been offered more drives had I been a man," she considers, "but I was also naïve at times. Yes, I was a woman who raced but I never pushed that side of things; that was left to other people. I had ability and I wanted to be taken seriously as a racing driver." For all the prejudices and predispositions, few would argue to the contrary. 



Wilson and Jonathan Palmer gave Ford C100 its best result in GpC, fourth at Brands in '82 1000km