

LADIES FIRST

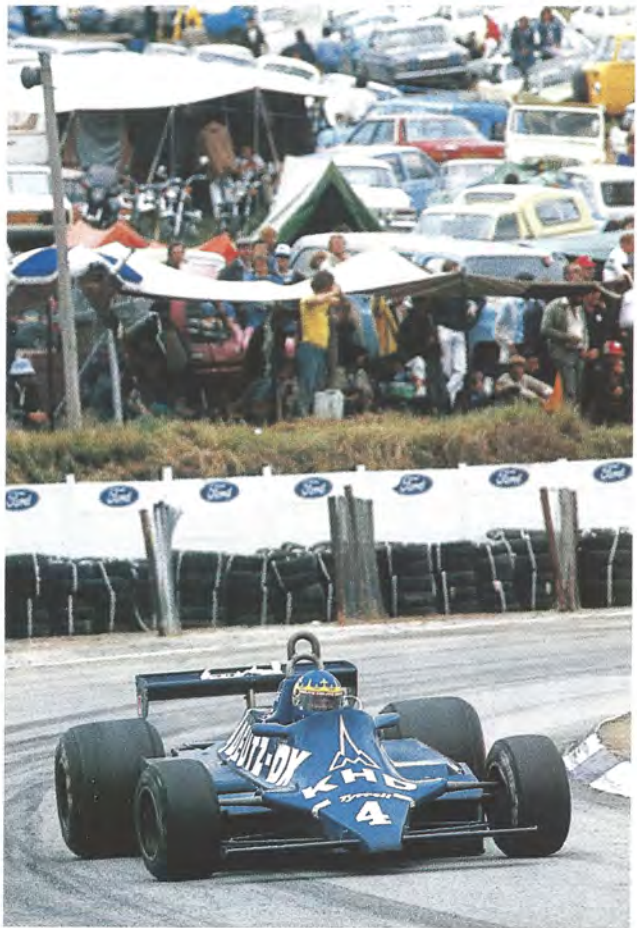


TWENTY YEARS AGO, THE DRIVER OF THIS WILLIAMS FW07 BECAME THE FIRST AND, TO DATE, ONLY WOMAN TO WIN A FORMULA ONE RACE. WHAT'S MORE, SHE DID IT ON MERIT. MARK HUGHES TALKS TO DESIRE WILSON AND REMEMBERS THOSE WOMEN WHO REFUSED TO LET PREJUDICE KEEP THEM FROM TRYING FOR THE TOP

Kyalami, February 1981. As the first race of the season, four drivers are making their Grand Prix debuts, including the one in the second Tyrrell who qualifies 16th, just 0.6sec adrift of experienced team-mate Eddie Cheever. This despite not having sat in the car before practice, not having sat in any race car for five months. In the race, our novice stalls at the start and has to be push-started into action, with the rest of the field long-gone. The number four Tyrrell sets off with a purpose and as rain begins to fall, the driver feels all is not lost. Not only does the car subsequently catch the end of train, it then begins to pick others off. Fellow debutantes Siegfried Stohr and Eliseo Salazar are the first to fall. Cheever is the next. Then the rain dies off and the novice, now on the wrong tyres, slides back down the order, briefly emerging on top in a tussle with a tyre-troubled Nigel Mansell before getting on the power a little too hard and early and smiting the wall into retirement after 51 laps.

That was the last time a woman drove in a Grand Prix. Desiré Wilson was her name and the year before she wrote a little bit of motor racing history when she became the first – and to date, the only – woman to win an F1 race. Sure, it was a British championship Aurora event, not a Grand Prix. But she led from start to finish in a '77 Wolf, beating a pair of ground effect '79 Williams FW07s piloted by drivers with Grand Prix experience. Later that year, she co-drove with Alain de Cadenet to two World Endurance Championship victories at Monza and Silverstone. She began her career by winning the South African Formula Ford championship outright. She was, and is, no mug.

But, if Bernie Ecclestone is to be believed, she was the last of the line. Asked a few weeks ago whether he foresaw a future for



women drivers in F1, he said: "In all likelihood they'd never get the opportunity because no-one will ever take them seriously. Who is going to take a chance? She would have to be a woman who is blowing away the boys."

Perhaps it'll take the racing equivalent of rallying's Pat Moss or Michele Mouton to make an impression on F1. Moss won the 1960 Liege rally in an Austin-Healey 3000 and Mouton was a close runner-up in the 1982 World Rally Championship, winning more events than Walter Rohrl, who took the title. But there seems little prospect of such a thing being repeated in F1.

Desiré agrees. "I wish there would come along an extremely well-funded 16 year old world karting champion girl," she says, "who then goes into F3 and starts winning, then into F3000 and wins there too. It would take something of that order to overcome the obstacles, and I don't see anyone like that around."

What are the obstacles? "Not ability," argues Wilson. "There's no reason at all why a woman couldn't win if it's the right woman in the right equipment. But when there's been women talent in the past they haven't been able to quite follow it through in the following year or two. If they've got into F3, they've then disappeared or if they've gone well in karting they've never quite made the next step. The reasons for that are quite complex.

"Firstly, it's an obvious truism that in modern racing it requires an enormous financial investment to climb up the ladder. Without that, it ain't going to happen for a driver, no matter how good, and finding that backing is doubly hard for a woman. It's such a male-dominated macho sport – one of the last bastions for the macho man. When I first moved to ➔

Left: Desiré Wilson was – and remains – the only woman to win an F1 race. Main pic: Wilson earned a drive in a Williams in '80. Above: Kyalami 1981, Wilson in a Tyrrell out-drives Nigel Mansell



America to race I would go into boardrooms explaining that I was trying to do Indycars and the reaction was: 'You mean you're going to be racing against Mario Andretti? Excuse me?'

"That's one part of it. Another is that almost all of the successful driver/sponsor relationships below F1 are really patronage dressed up as sponsorship. So a driver will go off for a weekend of fishing or golf with his mentor. But the president of a corporation couldn't turn round to me and say 'let's go spend the weekend together,' because it has all sorts of other connotations! We're just that seemingly little step away from proving things but we cannot quite make that step because of the little social things that prevent financial muscle being put behind a woman driver."

It hasn't always been so. Back when motor racing didn't have so many layers, when a driver with ability could display it at a fairly high level without first having to get through the jungle of junior formulae, there was a woman who had it all – Elizabeth Junek. Her form was sensational but frustratingly brief.

The Czech was married to a Prague banker, Cenek Junek, who funded their joint racing exploits in the 1920s. On the track, though, it was Elizabeth who wore the trousers. Her first international event was the 1927 Targa Florio where she ran an early fourth ahead of eventual winner Meo Costantini before her

Right: A brave lady, Kay Petre lapped Brooklands in a Delage at nearly 135mph in 1935. But like so many other women who chanced their hand, Petre never made the top level of motorsport

steering broke. Junek followed this up with a win in the 1.5-3-litre class of the German Grand Prix on her first visit to the Nürburgring!

The following year Elizabeth Junek launched another attack on the Targa and this time left the men open-mouthed. Her Bugatti lay fourth after the first 90 mile lap but on lap two she went into attack mode, and took the

lead from Campari's Alfa. Drivers of the calibre of Nuvolari, Divo and Materassi were eating her dust. The contest subsequently came down to a duel between her, Divo and Campari and the two men were only let off the hook when, on the final lap, her water pump failed, forcing her to back off in order to get the overheating car home.

Later that year she and her husband returned to the Nürburgring but Cenek Junek crashed fatally. Devastated, Elizabeth withdrew from racing and wasn't seen again until the '60s. Even as an elderly woman, her handling of Bugattis in historic demos suggested she still had a feel for those glorious days. Days when the lap timers would look in turn at their watches and then each other as the blue Bugatti sped past.

In the 1930s, Kay Petre added glamour and also a steely determination to the British racing scene. She lapped a 10.5-litre Delage at almost 135mph around Brooklands, but unlike Junek, she never got to race at the top level of international competition.

In 1958, Maria Teresa de Filippis campaigned a Maserati 250F in the world championship and whilst no threat to a Moss or Brooks, she was certainly worthy of her place on the grid.

It would, however, be another two decades before the next woman arrived in F1. Lella Lombardi recorded her place in the history books when she took sixth place in the foreshortened 1975 Spanish Grand Prix to score half a point. She wasn't the most gifted of the various works March drivers that year, but she was better than was realised at the time, as Robin Herd recalls: "She always complained that her car had vicious oversteer and we just said 'yes, well that's how they are, you just have to get used to it.' The following year we put Ronnie Peterson in that =>

Right: a real talent, Mrs. Elizabeth Junek stunned the likes of Nuvolari and Campari by leading during the 1928 Targa Florio. Left: worthy M T de Filippis campaigned a Maserati 250F in 1958



Right: Davina Galica got a shot at Formula One with Hesketh in 1978. A contemporary of Desiré Wilson, the former downhill skier lacked real experience. Galica never qualified for a GP race

by John Macdonald's RAM team. In testing, with the full field present, she was an excellent 12th fastest. "It was a fabulous car," she recalls. "I was finding whole seconds of time as I got used to it – it was the first time I'd driven a sliding skirt ground effect car.

"Then it came to official qualifying a couple of weeks later. The first thing I noticed was that I didn't fit the car properly. I said, 'has someone else driven it since the test?' and they said 'no.' I said 'the pedals don't work properly anymore' and they said, 'oh, we changed the brake pedal a little bit.' I then looked down and noticed it was a different chassis number. I asked John Macdonald and he said, 'oh you don't know what you're talking about, it's the same car.' When I got out on the track, it was evil, just a million miles away from the car I'd driven before. I was two seconds slower than I'd been then and didn't qualify.

"Later I got a call from Emilio Villota. He told me that the car I'd driven in the test was his car, the one that he used for a few Grands Prix that year, and that the team had had no business putting me in it in the first place. For the Grand Prix I'd been given Eliseo Salazar's Aurora car which had been set up to run without the skirts which were banned in that series. They just fitted the skirts and delivered it to the track. No wonder it didn't work. But what could I say? – I was young and if I'd made a fuss

car and he came in saying 'this car has got vicious oversteer.' We checked and found out there was something dreadfully awry with the chassis."

Such stories don't surprise Desiré. She's been on the receiving end of rough treatment herself. On the back of winning that 1980 Aurora F1 race, she got an entry for that year's British Grand Prix, with a Williams FW07 run



I would probably have struggled to get another drive."

Even on-track, things weren't made easy for her. "I'd just got out there when Jacques Laffite came up behind me, going much faster. I moved over for him, let him pass on the inside, then kept my foot in it once he was through. But as we came to turn at the next bend, he just wouldn't give me room. I was partly alongside him and he just ran me to the edge of the track and kept me there until I went off. He then went on television and said women shouldn't be doing Grands Prix. I mean, we're good friends now – we go karting together and he's always behind me."

Davina Galica was a contemporary of Wilson's, similarly helped and promoted by Brands Hatch's John Webb. But she'd done little formative racing – she was a former downhill skier – and was nowhere near experienced enough when she got her Grand Prix chance with Hesketh early in 1978. She didn't get close to qualifying. It was a similar story with Giovanna Amati in 1992, dropped by Brabham after predictably proving whole seconds adrift of her more experienced team-mate and failing to qualify. This created a vacancy for hungry F1 aspirant Damon Hill.

Such episodes haven't helped the cause. But a racer of Wilson's more obvious pedigree and experience could feel justifiably short-changed. "I don't think, in all honesty, I was world championship material," she says, "but I think with the right circumstances and the right equipment I could probably have been good enough to win a Grand Prix. I'm pretty sure I would've been a regular points scoring type of driver. But I don't feel bitter. People did try to help me, but unfortunately, they just didn't have the real financial clout needed to break through the barriers." ■

Left: rallying is kinder to women. Pat Moss won the '60 Liege Rally in an Austin-Healey; Moss won her fourth Monte Carlo Ladies Cup in '64, and finished just two places behind husband Erik Carlsson