



GAVIN STAPLETON

Time with... DESIRÉ WILSON

Formula 1, Le Mans, Enduro, the Indy 500...
Meet the lady who's been racing since she was five years old

Words: Steve Havelock Photography: Steve Havelock, Desiré Wilson

The British public sees Desiré Wilson racing once a year at the Goodwood Revival, muscling Cobras or Astons in the RAC TT and hurling barge-like Mercedes or little Ford Anglias in the St Mary's Trophy. On-track she is a formidable competitor. Off-track she is quiet and charming. 'I am almost a Jekyll and Hyde character,' she says. 'I can come across meek and mild in public but on the track I'm a terror.'

Her distinguished career is a rarity in a sport that certainly was (and still largely is) dominated by men. Desiré was the first woman to win a National Formula Ford Championship, first to win a Formula 1 race, first to race in the American CART series and, in 1978, she was voted South African Sportswoman of the Year. Some stats? She has won two World Championship Endurance races and finished seventh in the Le Mans 24 Hours; and raced more than 90 types of car on more than 60 different tracks in 13 different countries, notching up 23 wins, 16 second places, 42 thirds, 17 track records, 12 pole positions and 28 fastest laps in the process.

Born in South Africa in 1953, Desiré manifested a competitive streak when she was just five years old – in micro-midget racing. 'The cars were made for children but they still did 60mph on dirt ovals and small asphalt tracks. My dad was a 250cc motorcycle champion in South Africa and had no boys, so I was destined to be his driver,' she says.

After high school, there wasn't enough money for college so Desiré went to night school and became a bookkeeper. 'I worked for a Toyota dealer and started racing properly when I was 17 or 18. I moved up through the ranks in Formula Vee and I met my husband, Alan Wilson, who was racing Formula Ford 1600s. We got married when I was 21, we both raced FF1600 for a year and, the following year, he said that one of us should go for the Championship. Because I was the faster driver, he gave up his racing to support me, which was

quite something for a guy to do. I won the 1976 South African Formula Ford 1600 Championship.'

On the strength of this Desiré secured the prestigious 'Driver to Europe Award' and finished third in the 1977 Formula Ford 2000 European Championship, with victories in Zandvoort and Luxembourg. 'I realised that England was the centre of motor racing in those days so Alan and I moved, even though we didn't have any sponsorship. I took part in a celebrity race for women and that race changed my life. It was in Ford Escorts. I won and got fastest lap.'

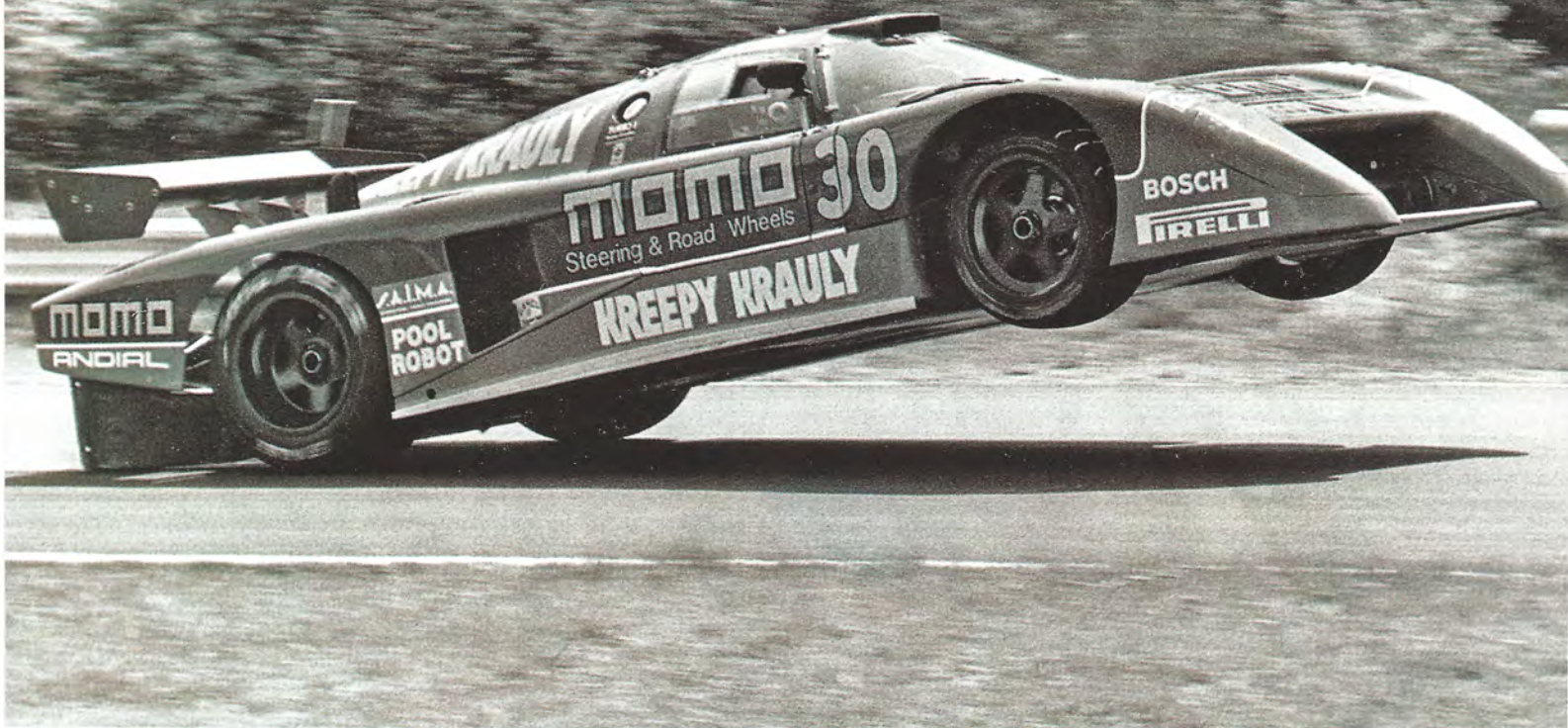
The victory was pivotal, as Desiré's talent was spotted by John Webb, then-owner of Brands Hatch, Snetterton, Mallory Park and Oulton Park circuits. 'He basically created a whole lot of formulae in this country that were the grass roots racing of British motor sport. He saw my potential and said "What do you want to do and what can I do to help you?" Nobody had ever really said that, because being a woman in a man's sport was always very, very difficult.'

With Webb's help, things happened very quickly. 'I was offered a Formula Ford 2000 drive and, although I started halfway through the year, I won a couple of races and finished fifth in the Championship. I then got into the British Aurora Formula 1 Championship, which was a series for one-year-old grand prix cars which replaced F5000, which John had also created. I won my first race in the series in 1980 at Brands Hatch driving an ex-Jodie Scheckter Wolf. I had several seconds and thirds and I think I had 12 top-three finishes in the two-and-a-half years I did it. Because I did really well, I was offered other drives.'

In 1980 Alain de Cadenet asked Desiré to partner him in his World Championship sports car. They finished third at Brands Hatch in their first race together before winning the Silverstone Six Hours and the Monza 1000km. 'We beat a lot

Right and above
Desiré Wilson:
captured on camera
at Goodwood; and
winning the 1976
South African FF1600
Championship.





'You never know what might have happened if I had been

Above
Momo sponsored it but there's not much steering in this shot: Desiré Wilson gets some air in the March Cosworth CART car.

of good grand prix drivers who were racing factory Porsches: Patrese, Alboreto and Cheever. Because we were successful, I built up a good reputation.'

And Formula 1 beckoned, yet success was frustratingly out of reach. 'I attempted to race in the British Grand Prix but we had a lot of trouble with our Williams. Before the Grand Prix the tyre tests had gone well, so I was devastated that I didn't qualify for that race because I believe that I should have. But they had switched chassis. Unfortunately things don't always work out.'

Five agonising months stretched out before Desiré was invited to drive in the 1981 South African Grand Prix by Ken Tyrrell. 'In that era, being a South African was fairly difficult, with apartheid and political instability, and it was difficult to find sponsorship. I was a little rusty and qualified 16th, but just four places behind team leader Eddie Cheever. But I made some mistakes in the race and eventually crashed out.'

Without sponsorship, she didn't have the funds to continue in F1. 'Even Ken needed sponsorship in those days. Michele Alboreto

took over the car and drove the rest of the season. You never know what might have happened if I had been given 15 races to show my potential rather than just one! But I did drive for Ken Tyrrell and he was just the most incredible person to drive for.'

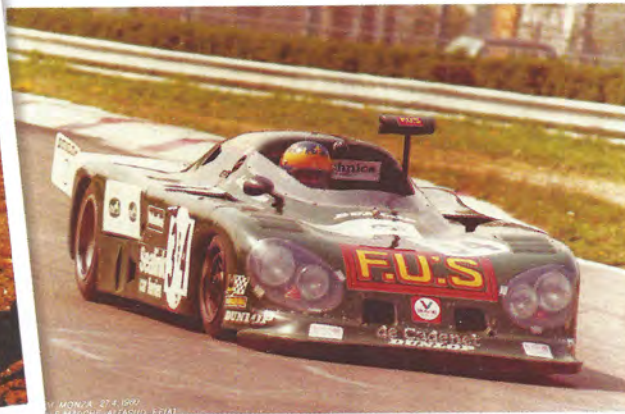
Although her F1 career was shortlived, there was no shortage of offers to drive sports cars in America, so Desiré packed her bags and moved Stateside for 1982, racing a Porsche 935 and Ferrari 512B in the IMSA GTP series. She also competed in the World Endurance Championship in the Ford C100, giving the car its best ever result: fourth place in the Brands Hatch 1000km.

The Indianapolis 500 also beckoned in '82. 'I had probably the worst Indy anyone could want. My team mate, Gordon Smiley, whom I had raced with in England in the Aurora series, was killed on the first day of qualifying, so we withdrew for the weekend. When we came back, I had five engine failures. The team never got it all back together. It bothered me, there is no doubt; most of the time [you as] a driver can shut off when you need to shut off, but I always said

that Indianapolis was not important to me after that. Gordon died because he was one mile an hour off the pace trying to qualify and it was sad.'

In 1983, Desiré drove CART Indy cars for Team Wysard/Kreepy Krauly in the March Cosworth 82C and 83C. 'Derek Daly didn't want to drive for them any more, so they offered me the car and at the time I was still hungry, so I agreed. The mechanical failures were awful and I think we finished two of eight races. My first race at Cleveland was actually one of my better races. It was crazy. It was 100°C and 100% humidity and it was a 3½-hour race with eight pit stops for fuel. It was gruelling but I finished tenth, so I was terribly happy because half the field fell out through exhaustion and dehydration but I just kept pushing myself. They don't have races that long any more. They are now two hours, basically.'

That same year, Desiré also drove in the Le Mans 24 Hours. 'It was with a German team, Obermaier, which was arranged by Porsche of Germany and I finished seventh in a Porsche 956. I was happy with that.'



Left and below Partnered with Alain de Cadenet, Desiré won the Silverstone Six Hours and Monza 1000km; racing in F1 for Ken Tyrrell.



Top and above Early days in micro-midget racing on South African dirt ovals; taking the Ford C100 to fourth at Brands, 1982.



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
However, in spite of her successes, Desiré was again finding sponsorship hard to land. 'The mentors of the late '70s and early '80s all went away; commercial sponsorship consumed the whole motor racing industry, and a lot of successful male drivers had male supporters behind them. They can bond by fishing or playing golf. It's difficult for a man to bond with a woman in sponsorship because there are all kinds of connotations, and lines have to be drawn. And women don't support women.'

Very few women have reached the top in motor sport, so I ask Desiré if she would be in favour of women-only race series. Her reply is emphatic.

'Absolutely not. A racing car is a racing car and it shouldn't matter if you are a man or a woman. But men still have a problem with women. Many of them were patronising. I was always racing against men, so it didn't matter to me who I raced against. What I found was that, while you were the underdog and while they were beating you, you were best friends. But the minute you started getting on their level or going faster than

them, nobody would talk to you. Most of my team mates were so busy trying to beat me, they forgot there were other people out there.'

In the late '80s Desiré drove for the Saleen team but her career had begun to quieten down by the early '90s. 'I didn't officially retire from racing but I was getting maybe one drive a year. You can't be competitive and show what you can do with just that. I always said that the day I'm no longer competitive would be the day I give up. Now I race at Goodwood once a year. That's the only motor sport I do but I really enjoy it.'

Any regrets, Desiré? 'I didn't make much money out of motor racing because a lot of my drives were unpaid. I am disappointed because I would have liked some more opportunities just to prove that I could be good in grand prix racing. Never World Champion, no. But could I have run in the top five in the right circumstances with the right car? Yes. Would I have liked the opportunity? Yes. Am I angry that I didn't get the opportunity? Not at all. It's just the way the cookie crumbles.' 

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