



Wilson finished a fine 5th in a star-studded, champion-packed field at the 2009 Goodwood Revival.

GROUND EFFECTS AND HIGH HOPES

From kiddie midgets to formula 1 to GT3 Cup, Desiré Wilson has stood on the loud pedal for decades

BY STEVE HAVELOCK | PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE HAVELOCK AND COURTESY OF FORD AND WILSON COLLECTION

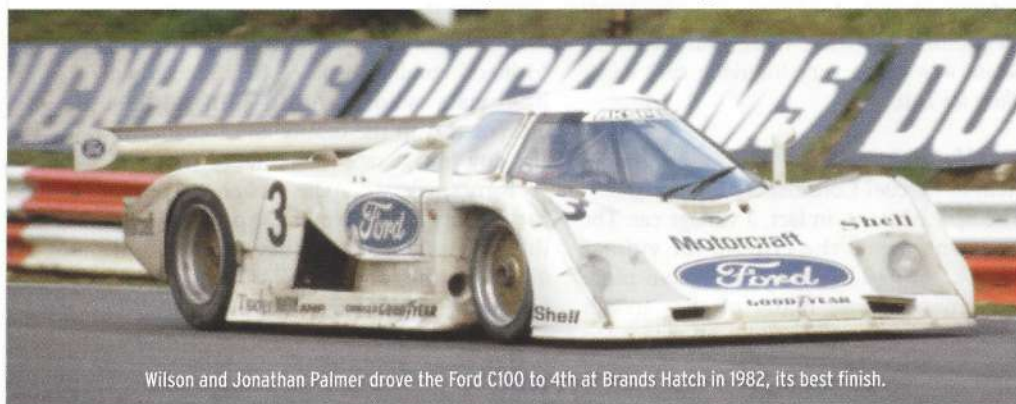
Anyone who has watched Desiré Wilson race or has raced against her will know that she was a forceful, formidable competitor but off track she is a quiet, charming lady. She says, "I am almost a Jekyll and Hyde character. I can come across very sweet, meek and mild in public but on the race track I am a terror."

She succeeded and rose to the top of a

sport that most certainly was and still is largely dominated by men. Wilson was the first woman to win a national Formula Ford championship, the first woman to win a Formula 1 race, the first woman to race in the American CART series and in 1978 she was voted South African Sportswoman of the Year. She won two World Championship Endurance sports car races and finished 7th

in the Le Mans 24 Hours. She has raced more than 90 types of cars on about 60 different tracks in 13 different countries, notching up 23 wins, 16 2nds, 42 3rds, 17 track records, 12 pole positions and 28 fastest laps in the process.

Born in South Africa in 1953, she started racing when she was just five years old in micro midget racing. She says, "The cars were made for children but they still did 60 on dirt track 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. After I left high school, there wasn't enough money to go to college so I 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-to-be Alan Wilson, who was racing Formula Ford 1600s. We got married when I was twenty-one. We both raced FF1600 for a year and



Wilson and Jonathan Palmer drove the Ford C100 to 4th at Brands Hatch in 1982, its best finish.

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 and I won the 1976 South African Formula Ford 1600 Championship, which was a big series in those days."

A Woman in a Man's Sport

On the strength of this she secured the prestigious "Driver to Europe Award" and finished 3rd in the 1977 Formula Ford 2000 European Championship with victories in Zandvoort and Luxembourg. Wilson says, "I realized that England was more the center of motor racing in those days if you wanted to go places, so Alan and I moved to England, even though we didn't have any sponsorship. I took part in a celebrity race for women and that race changed my life quite a lot. It was in Ford Escorts. I won and got fastest lap. The promoter and owner of Brands Hatch, Snetterton, Mallory Park and Oulton Park was at that time John Webb, and he was one of the all-time greatest promoters as far as I'm concerned, not only in British motorsport but in the world. He basically created a whole lot of formulas in this country that were the ground-roots racing of British motorsport. 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 John'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 '78 Championship. I then got into the British Aurora Formula 1 Championship, a series for one-year-old Grand Prix cars that replaced F5000, which John had also created. It was a good championship and it did produce Rupert Keegan, who was a good Formula 1 driver (1976 British F3 Champion and 1979 Aurora F1 Champion) and Tiff Needell. There were some very good drivers, like David Kennedy, Geoff Lees, Tony Trimmer and some very good foreign drivers.

"I won my first race in the series in 1980 at Brands Hatch driving an ex-Jody 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. I actually enjoy cars with a lot of horsepower. High-powered cars are more my forte than less powerful cars. I do better because it requires that much more car control and I truly believe that I have very good car control. Or I did in those days."



Wilson tries to qualify the ground-effects Williams FW07 at the 1980 British Grand Prix.



Wilson's dominant win in celebrity all-women's race at Brands Hatch in 1978 was a career springboard.



Wilson and Alain de Cadenet won the 1980 Monza 1000km World Championship Endurance round.

Something Completely Different

In 1980 Alain de Cadenet asked her to partner him in his World Championship De Cadenet sports car. Wilson says, "He sat me down and said this is how we race sports cars. You move the stick-shift gently, you don't brake as hard, you don't use maximum revs on the engine, that type of thing. There were constraints and it is absolutely a team effort." Desiré clearly listened as they finished 3rd in the Brands

Hatch 1000km in their first race together before winning the Monza 1000km and the Silverstone Six Hours.

However, not all went to plan during nighttime qualifying at the Le Mans 24 Hours. She recalls, "I crashed and the car went upside down. I had fuel tanks either side of my feet and I remember fuel running all over me. It was the scariest thing in the world, to be upside down, at night, disorientated and covered in fuel. I thought

'this is it.' Then, all of a sudden a marshal sticks a fire extinguisher underneath and blows the whole car down and I thought, thank heavens. I got away with that one. They [the organizers] wouldn't let me drive in the race but the car finished [7th].

Unfortunately we only had funding for four races that year and couldn't afford to carry on. I think we could have won the World Championship. We beat a lot of good grand prix drivers who were racing factory Porsches, like Riccardo Patrese, Michele Alboreto and Eddie Cheever. Because we were successful, I built up a good reputation."

Wilson was then given an opportunity to race in July's British Grand Prix at Brands Hatch in a ground-effects Williams FW07 Formula 1, run by a private team. In the preceding tire tests she did rather well and had high hopes. However, when she arrived at Brands Hatch for the GP, the car she was presented with was not the same car she had tested, although the team manager insisted it was. Desiré had all sorts of problems and issues and failed to qualify. It later transpired that the car she had tested had been used without the owner's authorization. The team therefore gave her an older car for the GP, which had been hurriedly and badly rebuilt after a serious crash at Monza the previous week. The chassis was flexing, making the ground effects unpredictable and the car unstable and off the pace.

The Lows and Highs

Wilson was bitterly disappointed and recalls, "Before the Grand Prix the tire tests went really well. But when I attempted to race in the Grand Prix, I realized they had switched the chassis. I was devastated that I didn't qualify for that race because I truly believe that I should have, but I didn't have the same race car. Unfortunately things don't always work out. But looking back, 1980 was an amazing year for me. Getting to stand on the winner's podium in Aurora F1 at Brands Hatch, kind of my home track in front of those large crowds we had back then, gave me so much pleasure I can't explain. And then winning Monza a few weeks later in the De Cadenet, which was one of the hardest races I ever had to do, and then winning again at Silverstone was just phenomenal."

At the beginning of 1981 Ken Tyrrell invited Wilson to drive for him in the South African Grand Prix. She hadn't raced for five months and recalls, "I was a little rusty and qualified 16th but just four places behind team leader Eddie Cheever. I made some mistakes in the race and



Wilson started racing at five in micro-midgets in South Africa.



Wilson celebrates her Aurora F1 win at Brands Hatch in 1980—the first woman to win a championship F1 race.

eventually crashed out.

"That was the end of that. In those days, if you don't have sponsorship, you get your opportunity and then you are gone. I wasn't the only one who was 'one race and then you are done.' It happened to a lot of male drivers, too. So, in some respects I achieved probably more than ever I had dreamed of but at the same time there are an enormous amount of 'if onlys.' 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 fifteen races to show my potential rather than just one. But I did drive for Ken Tyrrell and he was the



Wilson relaxes in the Driver's Club at the 2003 Goodwood Revival.



Alain de Cadenet and Wilson relax with the '80 Le Mans de Cadenet sports racer.

most incredible person to drive for. Those ground-effect F1 cars were very physical to drive and it was very hard to find the limits. If the skirts are working fine, you went so fast through the corners that you really didn't know where the limit was. There was no feel. And when something happened to the skirts, you were in the wall. There was a sudden loss of suction and you were gone. Quite often you say, 'Oh man, I am going so fast through this corner.' The next lap you say, 'perhaps I should try and go quicker.' I put my foot down and I went through and came out the other end and I said, 'Okay, the car stuck and that was worth one second a lap.' All I did was not lift off and the car sucked its way through the corner. It wasn't

feel, it was more taking chances and hoping that you didn't crash. I remember Nelson Piquet stating that that was what he used to do. I think he wrote off six Brabham chassis one year. He said, 'I didn't know where the limit was so I kept going until I crashed, then I knew.'

"Nowadays the ground effects aren't as strong as they were in the '80s. We had 6000-pound springs and your eyeballs used to bounce because they were so violently vicious and hard. The cars don't look like they are doing that nowadays, they are softer. It was quite an experience.

"Derek Bell once said to me at the Daytona 24 Hours, 'What car are you driving?' and I said a Porsche 935 and he said, 'You won't be able to handle that. When you get onto the banking the steering will be so heavy, there is no way you will be able to turn that car.'

"So anyway, I went out and we were in one of the faster Porsches and I think we qualified 5th or something, and as you came onto the banking, you would look around and decide where you wanted to place the car and where the traffic was because once you were on the banking, you weren't able to turn the steering wheel. It was a case of choose your line and hang on, because you couldn't really adjust it and after the 24 hours he came to me and said, 'I can't believe that you got to drive that car.' That's the thing with lots of guys, but with Derek, he was able to say, 'my God, you were able to do it.' A lot of the men think, how can a woman compete with me, because I'm a big macho guy. I work out in the gym and I'm so strong. But it is amazing what a strong woman can do."

An Apartheid Problem

In spite of her successes, Wilson was constantly having difficulty in raising sponsorship. She explains: "At that time my nationality was a major problem. I was racing in the anti-apartheid era and trying to find funding for a South African was very, very difficult. I won't tell you how many times I was turned down. To give you an idea, Geoff Lees and I were teammates for a short while in the British Aurora F1 Series. We were both offered drives in the Japanese sports car championship, to drive together in Japan. But I couldn't get a visa. They wouldn't give me one to drive in Japan.

Geoff went on to race in Japan for 10 years. That was a good move in a person's career in those days. You got an introduction into one of those teams and they would keep you for a long, long time."

Although her F1 career was unfortunately too short-lived, she secured sports car drives in America where in '82 she raced a Porsche 935 and a Ferrari 512B in the IMSA series. She also competed in the World Endurance Championship in the Ford C100 Cosworth, giving the car its best-ever result, a 4th place in the Brands Hatch 1000km.

Indyggestion

The Indianapolis 500 also beckoned her in '82. She said, "I had probably the worst Indy anyone could want. My teammate, Gordon Smiley, who I had raced with in England in the Aurora series, was killed on the first day of qualifying, so we withdrew for the

They don't have races that long any more. They are now two hours, basically.

"The Indy cars of that era were awful to drive. They were just going from the American designs to the European designs and March and Lola were in the early stages, so there was a change of engineering and everyone was trying new things. Also the turbocharged engines had terrible lag, so effectively at 7000rpm there would be nothing and at 8000rpm the car would be sideways as you pulled out of the pit lane. So, every time you came out of a corner, if you just got off the turbo, if it just hiccupped that little bit, it wouldn't go, so you dropped a gear and then you had to hang on for dear life, like a wild horse almost. Whereas to me the Formula 1 cars are neat and require finesse and you had to be very neat and tidy and precise and I like that kind of driving."

That same year, Wilson also drove in the Le Mans 24 Hours. She said "It was with a German team, (Obermaier) which was arranged by Porsche of Germany and I finished 7th in a Porsche 956, so I was quite happy with that."

However, despite her successes, Wilson was finding sponsorship hard to land. She laments, "The mentors of the late '70s and early '80s all went away. Commercial sponsorship completely consumed the whole motor racing industry

and I was never really able to find big sponsorship. A lot of successful male drivers had male supporters behind them. They can bond together by going 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. I don't know why, but it's very difficult to get a woman to help another."

As so few women reach the top in motorsport we asked Wilson if she'd be in favor of a women-only race series to which she replied, "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 patronizing. 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



Gunning the Tyrrell F1 in 1981 South African GP at Kyalami, Wilson crashed out on lap 51.

weekend. When we came back, I had five engine failures. The team never got it all back together. It bothered me a certain amount, there is no doubt, but most of the time 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, Wilson drove CART Indy cars for Wysard Racing/Kreepy Krauly in a March Cosworth 82C and 83C. She recalls: "Derek Daly didn't want to drive for them anymore, 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 degrees and 100% humidity and it was a 3 1/2 hour race with eight pit stops for fuel. It was grueling but I finished 10th, so I was terribly happy because half the field fell out through exhaustion and dehydration but I just kept pushing myself.

to you. Most of my teammates were so busy trying to beat me, they forgot there were other people out there."

At the beginning of 1983, Wilson and husband Alan upped sticks, moved to New York and became involved in the design, planning, building and running of race circuits, motorsport parks and events. Desiré also began a 14-year relationship with PPG Industries helping with the promotion of the PPG CART World series.

In late '84 they moved to Columbus, Ohio. Desiré recalls, "We ran a downtown city street race at Columbus (IMSA Columbus 500). I did all the ticket operations and the accounting and Alan was executive director and ran the whole event. We did that for four years and then, (in '89) we moved to Denver, Colorado and did the same thing for the Denver Indy car race."

During the late '80s she made a brief return to CART, successfully drove for the Saleen team in the SCCA Endurance Series, raced a Corvette in the SCCA Corvette Challenge, a Lola in the British F3000 Championship and a Porsche 962 in the English and Japanese rounds of the World Sports Prototype Championship. In 1991 she raced a Spice-Cosworth in the Le Mans 24 Hours and a Mustang in the 1993 Daytona 24 Hours.

Wilson reflects, "By the early '90s my career really quieted down. I didn't officially retire from racing as such but I was getting maybe one drive a year. You can't be competitive and show what you can do with just that. And then I started getting into bad cars. I had an accident in one, and I got out and said I don't want to have to do this ever again. We were racing for 15th position in a small category and I said, 'this is ridiculous.' This is a waste of time. I always said that the day I'm no longer competitive would be the day I would give up."

In 1999 she received an invitation from Lord March to drive her old De Cadenet Le Mans racer at the Goodwood Festival of Speed. She enjoyed the experience so much that she became a regular at both the Festival and the Goodwood Revival race meetings for the next 14 years where she has raced many exotic and valuable cars that she had never driven before, including a Ferrari 250 GTO, a lightweight E-Type Jaguar, an Aston Martin DB4 GT Zagato, the Willment Cobra Coupe and Shelby Cobra Daytona Coupe, a Cooper Jaguar sports racer, Minis and a whole load more. "I've absolutely loved it," she says. "Incredible cars, seeing all my old friends. I just really enjoyed coming to Goodwood."

In 2005 Desiré and Alan moved to Salt Lake City, where they still live, to build and manage the Miller Motorsports Park. Their company, Wilson Motorsport, has subsequently designed and overseen the building of racetracks across America and in Canada and Korea. They are currently working extremely hard on three new circuits in China and are in the process of selling their company to their Chinese clients, although both will remain involved for another couple of years.

Wilson still found time for some racing though. She says, "Goodwood was

very pleased and it was a lot of fun but I realized I just wasn't fit enough anymore. So, I decided to retire and sold the car. I'm 63 now but not finished with the sport as we have been mentoring a brilliant young driver, Bruno Carneiro (17), who has just won the 2016 FIA Chinese F4 Championship. For 2017 we are taking him into Japanese F3, so I will be going with him to Japan for nine race and two test weekends. People helped me early in my career and helping him is my way of putting something back."

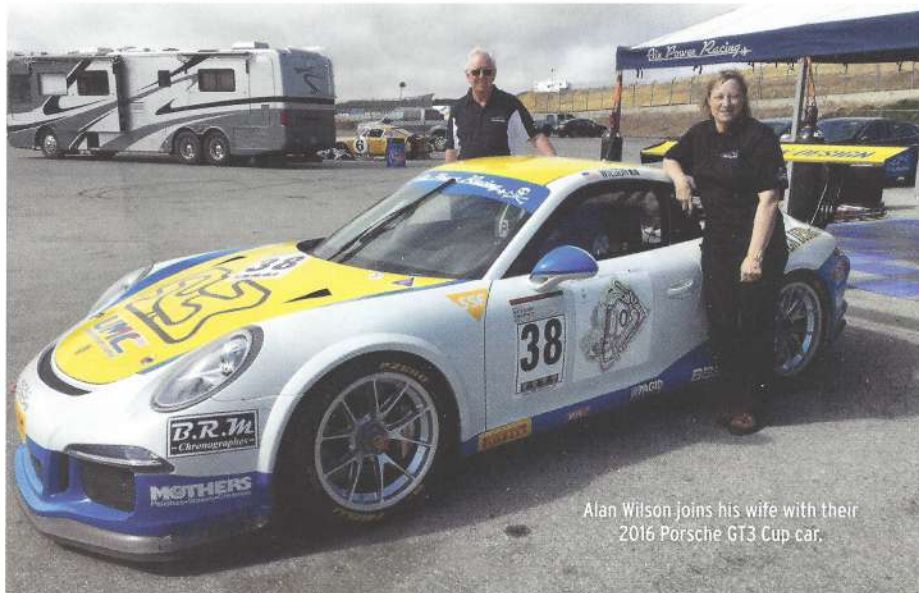
Summing up Wilson says, "I didn't make much money out of motor racing because a lot of my drives were unpaid. I would drive just about anything that was offered. Had I been smarter I would have got into tin tops, British Touring Cars type of racing. That would have been more of a career and a long-term career at that. I often think 'if

only' and what could have been. If I had had the funding to run in some of the top teams, how successful could I have been? 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.

"But looking back on my career I think the biggest thing for me is to have come from a low-income family in a tiny little town in the middle of nowhere in South Africa and to achieve what I did achieve in that era, to look where I went and where I am now."

MOST OF MY TEAMMATES WERE SO BUSY TRYING TO BEAT ME, THEY FORGOT THERE WERE OTHER PEOPLE OUT THERE

becoming very competitive with a lot of young British Touring Car drivers and stars racing. I was under pressure, from myself really, to go faster each time and I was really worrying about damaging other people's cars, so I stopped. Alan was racing Porsche GT3 cars and I practiced in them and thought it was so much fun, and safer than historics too. In 2015 I said 'I'd love to race at Laguna Seca.' I did and I won two races. A couple of months later I went to Miller Motorsports Park and won two more. I thought this is amazing. I wanted to have one more year in 2016 and so we bought a magnificent Porsche GT3 Cup car (for the Pirelli GT3 Cup Series). It's a really competitive and expensive series. I did three double-header weekends and I scored two seconds, two thirds and two fourths. I was



Alan Wilson joins his wife with their 2016 Porsche GT3 Cup car.