“Voices Off Camera”: Women, Media, and the Performance of Legitimacy in Motorsports History

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Figure 1: Isabella Robusto Racing at the DuQuoin State Fairgrounds Racetrack. August 31st, 2025, taken by Liam Crider.

“It’s ground to a halt! And here comes the Porsche! Oh my goodness! Oh my goodness! It’s come to a halt, and Toyota have had the Le Mans 24 Hours snatched from them! Snatched from them! And Porsche are going to win Le Mans!”[1] The 24 Heures du Mans is the most prestigious endurance race in the world, having first been held in 1923.[2] In the 2016 edition, Toyota had the win snatched out from under them in the final three minutes of the race, and John Hindhaugh’s call perfectly encapsulated the emotions of the moment; agony for Toyota, elation for Porsche.[3] There have been other memorable moments, Ford beating Ferrari in 1966, the 1955 Le Mans Disaster, the Mazda 787B becoming the first rotary-powered car to win in 1991, and Peter Dumbreck’s flip in the Mercedes CLR in 1999.[4] Yet, amid all the iconic moments from the Circuit de la Sarthe, one historical result has faded from public recollection: Odette Siko's fourth-place finish at the 1932 24 Hours of Le Mans, which, to this day, remains the best finish for a woman in the race's history.[5] Her achievement received little attention beyond a routine post-race classification, where it was acknowledged in a single sentence.

While contemporary motorsport outlets such as Jalopnik have highlighted Siko’s fourth-place finish in retrospective articles, these pieces primarily frame her as a curiosity of

racing history rather than exploring her life, background, or broader career. As a result, little is known about her beyond her performance behind the wheel.[6] Still, her performance in the 1932 race offers a perspective from which to track the uneven trajectory of women's roles in motorsport, marked by progress, but also regression. While motorsport remains one of the few physical sports where men and women directly compete under identical rules, equipment, and scoring, a comparative historical analysis of four female pioneers, from Odette Siko's endurance racing at Le Mans to Janet Guthrie's Indianapolis 500 campaign, reveals that women's participation has been shaped less by merit than by institutional barriers and media framing. This pattern persists in the digital era, where the marketing-driven rise of drivers like Hailie Deegan and Toni Breidinger underscores the tension between athletic legitimacy and marketable identity.

The Process of Belief

In 2023, a nonprofit group called More Than Equal, founded by 13-time Formula One Grand Prix winner David Coulthard, conducted a survey of roughly 13,000 motorsports fans, including 3,200 women respondents, exploring fan attitudes towards women in racing.[7] 66% of women respondents said that they don't believe that women have aspirational role models in racing.[8] This, compared to just 11% of male respondents.[9] The gap suggests that male fans assume the mere presence of women in the sport suffices as representation, while female fans distinguish between visibility and true legitimacy. This was one of many findings from the study, which was "the largest ever conducted on female participation in elite motorsport."[10] This underscores how recent and fragile institutional efforts to meaningfully integrate women into motorsport, especially as drivers, are. All-female single-seater series such as the W Series (2019) and F1 Academy (2023) have only emerged within the past few years, while purpose-built, all-female race teams like the Iron Dames have been on the grid for only seven years, since 2018.[11]
This recent push is also reflected in the academic literature regarding women racing drivers. One of the earliest scholarly examinations of media portrayals of women racing drivers came from Cuneen et al., whose 2007 article "Advertising Portrayals of Indy's Female Drivers: A Perspective on the Succession from Guthrie to Patrick" analyzed how drivers such as Janet Guthrie, Lyn St. James, and Sarah Fisher "were most often [depicted as] strong and athletic or displaying athleticism" in Indy 500 Speedway Fan Programs, Danica Patrick's entry in 2005 "substantially changed all aspects, particularly portrayals, as she was often photographed in sexually suggestive manners."[12] The article was narrow in scope, only looking at advertisements in official Indianapolis 500 programs published between 1977 and 2006. In 2009, Cuneen, along with Sally R. Ross and Lynn L. Ridinger, would return to the topic in an article titled, "Drivers to divas: advertising images of women in motorsport". While the evidence they used was the same 21 advertisements analyzed in the 2007 article, the 2009 article used Roobina Ohanian's source credibility model to examined each advertisement's persuasiveness.[13] The 2009 article took an analytical angle towards women racing drivers, whereas the 2007 article took an empirical angle.

In 2016, Jordan Matthews and Elizabeth Pike undertook an endeavor to comb over a hundred years of media coverage of women racing drivers, all published in one newspaper, The Times. Their work explores "the participation and experiences of women, with particular attention to the role of the media in representing and encouraging female participation."[14] However, Matthews and Pike limit their scope to how The Times represented British women racing drivers. This narrow framing overlooks the fact that women from France, Poland, Germany, and the United States had been competing in organized forms of motorsport since the

1890s, well before the period their study examines. While they do cover how the end of the Second World War saw a renewed marginalization and trivialization of female participants within newspaper coverage, they focus on how population loss across the European continent resulted in increased fears of women racing drivers dying in racing accidents, whereas the present analysis examines the rise in appearance-based coverage after the Second World War.

Some of the most recent literature comes from Desiree Campbell, a PhD student at Northumbria University who wrote a dissertation titled, "Still Something of a Boys' Club? Representations of Women Motor Racing Drivers in British Newspapers Between 2010 and 2020". While Campbell expands on the work done by Pike and Matthews, examining "479 articles from six British national newspapers" instead of sourcing all of them from The Times, she confines herself to only a decade of coverage. This limited her ability to explore the evolution in media coverage of women racing drivers. Her findings showed that "despite an overall increase of 200% in the number of articles about them from 2010 to 2020, women racing drivers were barely visible in British newspapers' racing driver coverage".[15] However, the scholarship remains unclear on whether this coverage centered on British women specifically or women in global motorsport.

Historians of women's sport have long shown that legitimacy is never just about performance; it's about cultural gatekeeping. Susan Cahn's Coming on Strong and Allen Guttmann's Women's Sports: A History both argue that women athletes were framed as novelties, threats, or spectacles regardless of results.[16] From Babe Didrikson to Billie Jean King, anxieties about respectability and sexuality followed them into every arena. Motorsport scholarship rarely cites this work, but the parallels are unmistakable: when Sara Christian was described as having an "attractive complexion" on a NASCAR grid, she was running the same gauntlet that other women athletes had faced for decades. The surface, engines instead of tennis courts, changed, but the skeptical playbook did not.

On the technology side, scholars such as Ruth Schwartz Cowan, Ruth Oldenziel, and Jennifer Light have shown how women's technical competence has been hidden, minimized, or confined to domestic spaces. Oldenziel's work on the Fisher Body Guild illustrates how mechanical tinkering was gender-coded as male play, while Light's "When Computers Were Women" uncovered how wartime programming was erased from official narratives once the field professionalized. Put these findings alongside Odette Siko repairing gearboxes or Michèle Mouton mastering a Group B rally car, and the tension is obvious: women proved mastery over machines that symbolized danger and technical virtuosity, yet coverage framed them as novelties or, worse, as "attractive" accessories.[17]

Taken together, this broader historiography makes clear that women racing drivers were battling on two fronts: sport and machine. They were measured against athletic respectability while simultaneously denied technological credibility. The result was a double bind that the media eagerly exploited, packaging Guthrie, Deegan, and Breidinger as spectacles or brands rather than drivers. Cunneen, Pike, Matthews, and Campbell map the contours of that coverage, but placing their findings alongside Cahn, Guttmann, Cowan, Oldenziel, and Light clarifies the larger point: women racing drivers are not outliers, but participants in a century-long struggle over whether women can ever be recognized as legitimate athletes and legitimate technicians.

Forgotten

This study steps beyond these fragmented approaches by situating women's participation in motorsport within a broader historical trajectory of media representation. Whereas existing scholarship has largely confined itself to case studies of advertising, single outlets, or limited time frames, this study adopts a comparative, century-spanning perspective. By examining media coverage of figures ranging from Odette Siko at Le Mans in the 1930s to Hailie Deegan and Toni Breidinger in today's stock car racing, the comparative approach traces how legitimacy has been alternately granted, withheld, or commodified. In doing so, it argues that the evolution of media coverage is less a story of increasing visibility than of persistent tension between spectacle and credibility, tensions that continue to shape how women are positioned, remembered, and marketed in motorsports.

Odette Siko had already competed in the previous two Le Mans 24-Hour races before the 1932 showing, finishing seventh overall and first in the 1.5-litre class on debut in 1930 when she raced alongside fellow Frenchwoman Marguerite Mareuse, a wealthy heiress who fielded a privateer Bugatti Type 40 for herself and Siko. In L'Auto, a French newspaper that covered "automobilisme, cyclisme, athlétisme, yachting, aérostation, escrime", Mareuse and Siko's entry onto the 1930 grid was reported in April with a level of skepticism, viewing the pair as a novelty, but was treated with respect, focusing on the drivers' past accomplishments instead of their appearances. "A valuable driver, Mme Mareuse has already proven herself. Didn't she achieve an unusual performance for a woman by finishing second in the Rallye du Touquet 1929 after covering the 2,306.564km of the Cadiz-Amiens Le Touquet route at the wheel of a 5 CV Peugeot, with only one passenger on board?"[18] While the phrase "unusual performance for a woman" is condescending by modern standards, the whole quote serves to recognize Mareuse's achievements behind the wheel of a rally car as a reflection of skill and talent, treating her as a serious competitor. The newspaper said of Siko, "We do not know Mme Siko, but the fact that she was chosen as a teammate by Mme Mareuse gives us reason to believe that she too, is endowed with excellent qualities."[19] Instead of fretting over how she may perform due to her status as an unknown driver, the newspaper gives Siko credibility through her association with Mareuse based on merit instead of sponsorship or marketability. This contrasts with today, where sponsorship, marketability, and even appearance are prioritized more than demonstrated performance or racecraft.

In the June 23rd, 1930 edition of L'Auto, published on the day the 24 Hours of Le Mans finished, Mareuse and Siko's finish was reported in the same fashion as their male competitors. This included the finishing positions listed for the nine cars that finished reported in a standard fashion, providing the car manufacturer, the car number, the drivers, the distance covered, if the car was equipped with a turbo, what tires the car had on, and the distance covered, with Mareuse and Siko's seventh-place finish reported as "Bugatti number 25 (Mme Mareuse–Mme Siko), 1,497 cc, naturally aspirated, Dunlop tires, covering 2,164.701 km."[20] Further down the page, a series of five photographs occupies the center layout, positioning the race visually as a shared stage between male motorsport icons and the women's entry. Two images show the grid before the start and the winning Mercedes mid-race, and sandwiched between them is a picture of Mareuse in the number 25 with the caption, "The valiant women's team, composed of Mme Mareuse (at the wheel) and Mme Siko, finished in an excellent position, with a Bugatti."[21] This caption offers a respectful recognition of their on-track performance, affirming the legitimacy of their entry in the race as capable drivers, given their "valiant" effort on track. While the term

"valiant" carries a slightly romanticized tone, it does not ridicule their performance; rather, it conveys respect for the women's effort. The note that they finished in "excellent rank," though vague in isolation, becomes clearer when read alongside the finishing order at the top of the page, which confirms their seventh-place result. This framing allows the magazine to acknowledge their competitive legitimacy without resorting to comparison with male competitors, an approach that contrasts sharply with contemporary media coverage, which often emphasizes women racing drivers primarily as "firsts" or "onlys." The way the photo itself is positioned in the paper treats their appearance as one of the race's major storylines, not just a minor curiosity, or even worse, something to be sidelined entirely, a pattern that, in contemporary motorsport media, often manifests as placement in sidebars, diversity segments, or algorithm-driven novelty clips on social and broadcast platforms." In summation, the coverage of Siko and Mareuse in 1930 points to a unique paradox: women had fewer chances then, often needing large sums of money to afford entries as privateers in races like Le Mans, but those chances were taken more seriously by newspapers then than many women are by television and social media today.

But it was the 1932 running of the event for which Siko is remembered by die-hard endurance racing fans. That year, she fielded a privateer entry of her own, an Alfa Romeo 6C, which she co-drove with Frenchman Louis Charavel, who raced under the pseudonym Sabipa. The 6C's 1746cc S8 supercharged engine qualified the car for the 2.0-litre class, which made up a total of three entries in a field of 26 cars. The race was one of attrition; seventeen cars failed to finish, including the other two entrants in the 2.0-litre class. Siko and Sabipa brought their Alfa Romeo home in fourth overall and took the class victory. To this day, Siko's fourth-place remains the highest finish for a woman racing driver in the event's storied history, as even 93 years later, through decades of technological revolutions, driver academies, safety reforms, and professionalization, no woman has surpassed Siko's finish. At the time, Match l'Intra reported her finish as follows: "Mme Siko and her co-driver Sabipa covered 2,417.594 km. It is a very fine performance, all the more compelling given that Mme Siko drove for more than 12 hours and that, having shared the hardship, she can now rightly claim the honor."[22] This coverage is an evolution from the 1930 quotes from L'Auto, moving from polite recognition of her participation to a more explicit celebration of her endurance, effort, and driving stamina. Match l'Intra emphasized the stamina required to drive more than twelve hours in a 24-hour race. The publication made it clear that Siko earned recognition not because she was a woman, but because she completed the feat itself.[23] Contemporary motorsport media often praises women racing drivers as "trailblazing" or "inspiring," a framing that sets them apart from their male peers. Match l'Intra did not use that language. It praised Siko with the same respect typically given to male endurance racers. There's nothing that says her finish is exceptional because she was a woman; instead, her skill and effort spoke for themselves. She'd go on to compete at Le Mans once more in 1933, failing to finish after a crash on lap 120. After that, she switched her focus to rallying, competing up until 1939. Like many of her contemporaries, her career ended at the onset of the Second World War, and she passed in relative anonymity in 1984. But for those few years in the early 1930s, she garnered the respect of both the garage and the press, not because of her looks or marketability, but because of her on-track performances in one of the most grueling endurance races in the world.

Bat Country

The first season held under NASCAR sanctioning was the 1948 NASCAR Modified Division, which ran a total of 52 races.[24] It was 1949 when the first NASCAR Strictly Stock Series season was held, which featured a total of eight races, all on dirt.[25] The first of those eight races was held at Charlotte Speedway, a three-quarter-mile dirt track located in Charlotte, North Carolina.[26] Among the 33 cars on the entry list was Sara Christian, who became the first woman to compete in what is now NASCAR's premier division. That morning, The Charlotte Observer featured a report on Christian's entry into the race that captured the shift in how women racers were perceived in reports during the postwar years. Said the Observer's sports editor, "A feminine complexion was added for today's 150-mile strictly stock car classic at the New Charlotte Speedway when Sara Christian, attractive Atlanta woman driver, was granted permission to test her skill against the male speedsters and verified her qualifications by qualifying for 13th position in the starting field today."[27] From the outset, the language reveals how the paper framed. Instead of being regarded as another competitor, she's treated as a novelty, as a "female complexion" on a grid of 32 male drivers. Whereas L'Auto and Match l'Intra treated Mareuse and Siko's entry into the 1930 24 Hours of Le Mans with skepticism but acknowledged that they were in the race on merit, in contrast, The Charlotte Observer frames Christian not as a competitor but as a spectacle, describing her entry as a "promoter's option" meant to draw attention rather than as the result of merit.

That perception is reinforced later in the article, which states: "Race Director Bill France granted permission for her to try her skill in the long test."[28] The phrasing is telling. Christian wasn't simply a driver who entered and qualified; she was "granted permission," as if her presence required special allowance. Historian Daniel S. Pierce explains this dynamic directly in Real NASCAR: White Lightning, Red Clay, and Big Bill France, noting that it was "all too apparent that [Bill] France, as always, was most interested in selling tickets, and if using the gimmick of women drivers would help, so be it."[29] Pierce stresses that France was not to be confused with a budding feminist. At the time, Bruton Smith and the National Stock Car Racing Association were hosting their own Strictly Stock race at Lakewood Speedway in Atlanta. In response, France offered a record "purse of $5,000, with $2,000 to the winner, to draw drivers to Charlotte."[30] A woman on the grid offered an irresistible hook. From a promoter's standpoint, it was a win-win. Cynics might show up to see her fail. Others might be curious to see how she stacked up against the men. But either way, it sold tickets. The press, including The Charlotte Observer, played its part in this marketing effort, downplaying her credentials even though she had a background in motor racing. "Mrs. Christian is not a newcomer in stock car racing. In fact, the Atlanta woman has a modified stock car which she has used to complete [sic] with men in other races".[31] The article acknowledges that Christian had competed before, but it still puts more emphasis on her being "granted permission" and needing to "verify" her qualifications—language that subtly delegitimizes her prior experience. It's as if her prior races didn't count, either because they weren't sanctioned or because they weren't long enough.

The greatest indicator of the shifting attitude towards women racing drivers by the press comes from a single word: "attractive." For this descriptor to come before anything about her qualifications, either her previous experience behind the wheel or her lap time and grid position in qualifying, indicates that it was her looks, her appearance, that made her credible in the world of racing. This prioritization of physical attractiveness over racing credentials signals a subtle but powerful shift in how female racers were evaluated, not by their ability behind the wheel, but by

their marketability to the crowd. Christian entered NASCAR as a legitimate competitor. The press, however, portrayed her as a spectacle, presenting her as a promotional attraction rather than a professional driver. Yet, despite the press and Bill France's view of Christian as a marketing gimmick, she became arguably the best women racing driver in early NASCAR competition, scoring two top 10s, one top 5, and a 13th-place points finish in 1949.[32] Sadly, as Dr. Pierce details in Real NASCAR, she broke her back in a crash at Lakewood Speedway towards the end of the 1949 NSCRA season, in which her car rolled seven times. Her husband, mother, and two daughters, scared as much as she was by the wreck, encouraged her to quit.[33] She made one last start in 1950 at Hamburg Speedway, saying she "just wanted to be sure I could." She finished fourteenth, besting nineteen other drivers.

The Good Left Undone

"[B]y the mid-1950s signs went up in the pit areas of most [NASCAR] tracks reading 'No Women Allowed.' The only woman one was likely to see in the infield of a racetrack… was the beauty queen who presented the victor's trophy."[34] USAC, or the United States Auto Club, which sanctioned the Indianapolis 500 between 1956 and 1997, as well as the USAC Champ Car series between 1956 and 1978, had a similar policy in place; until 1971, women weren't allowed in the press box of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, much less the pits or garage area. Whether a car owner, photographer, or beat reporter, women were denied access to the most important parts of the speedway until a woman reporter filed suit and won on the heels of second-wave feminism and the women's rights movement.[35] It would take another five years after the suit that a woman would attempt to qualify for and compete in the Indianapolis 500 when Janet Guthrie and her team submitted the entry fee for the 1976 Indianapolis 500 in March of that same year. She'd be paired with car owner Rolla Vollstedt with sponsorship from Bryant Air Conditioning, while Dick Simon would be her teammate. The car Guthrie was given to attempt to qualify for the 1976 Indianapolis 500 was a four-year-old Vollstedt chassis that had already passed through multiple drivers and carried a record of mechanical inconsistency.[36] Small-team budget constraints meant the car had been repeatedly rebuilt rather than replaced, including makeshift modifications such as relocating the radiators to the nose; an unorthodox solution that underscored how far the machine was from competitive parity. In other words, Guthrie entered the Indianapolis 500 not with cutting-edge equipment, but with an aging car that had a history of middling finishes and reliability issues. Yet the media narrative in May 1976 focused not on these structural disadvantages, but on the symbolic novelty of a woman attempting to qualify, effectively separating Guthrie's performance from the material context that shaped it.

In footage of Guthrie's rookie test, the narrator, Marvin Miller, remarks that "[h]er debut, considerably reported in the press, was somewhat overshadowed by a host of mechanical problems, which would've dampened the spirits of anyone less determined. Every time she set out to run the two-phase driver's test, something broke. It was as though a power higher than her frustrated chief mechanic, Rolla Vollstedt, was taking a deterring hand."[37] This reporter did not present Guthrie as a novelty in the same way The Charlotte Observer had portrayed Christian. He acknowledges that the car was mechanically unreliable. However, he fails to situate that unreliability within the car's prior history; specifically, that the same chassis had repeatedly broken for experienced male drivers such as Tom Bigelow and Denny Zimmerman. By omitting that context, the article framed Guthrie's struggles as individual rather than structural. As a result, the material disadvantages she faced throughout the month of May were obscured. On

May 8th, 1976, the opening day of practice for the 60th Indianapolis 500, twelve cars took to the track. Guthrie's 72/75 Vollstedt was among them, but her teammate Dick Simon was the one behind the wheel for the shakedown run, during which the car "developed a serious oil-line leak" that wasn't repaired in time for the 6:00 PM deadline when the track closed for the day.[38] The next day, Simon was testing the car again just before noon, only for the car to burn a piston. 20 minutes before the 6:00 PM curfew, Simon took the car to the track once more, only for there to be "a flash turbocharger fire" that had to be put out, leaving only a couple of laps left for Simon to practice.[39] It wouldn't be until May 10th that Guthrie finally took to the speedway, and even then her run would last only seven laps before the #1 "piston failed on the main straight," thus putting an end to her day.[40] The problems would continue throughout the month, and by Bump Day, Sunday, May 23rd, Guthrie made the choice not to attempt to qualify.[41] But in the coverage of her rookie test, none of those specific failures are mentioned, the loss of two full days of testing isn't mentioned, and the fact that her teammate could only manage 173.210 miles per hour compared to her fastest speed of 173.611 miles per hour isn't mentioned. The consequences of mechanical mismanagement aren't just a relic of the 1970s. Even in the era of corporate-backed superteams, media coverage often overlooks structural failures in favor of personal narratives about success or failure. A striking modern comparison can be found in Fernando Alonso's failed 2019 Indy 500 bid.

That year, two-time Formula One World Champion Fernando Alonso suffered a similar fate in his Carlin-affiliated McLaren entry, which had backing from Mission Foods, Dell Technologies, and Citi Private Bank, amongst other sponsors. After electrical issues brought his opening day practice to an early end, a crash on the second day resulted in the need for a backup car, which wasn't ready until the final day of practice as it wasn't painted "the proper McLaren 'papaya orange.'"[42] Because of this and other failures, including an improper gear ratio on his final qualifying run, Alonso was bumped along with the two cars directly fielded by Carlin. If an effort fielded by McLaren, a manufacturer known for winning races and championships, with backing from major sponsors and a two-time Formula One World Champion behind the wheel can be bumped from the Indianapolis 500 after a "comedy of errors", how could Janet Guthrie, with a small, underfunded team in Rolla Vollstedt, with a car that was four years old and a driver in her second ever open-wheel race be expected to make the field amid even greater mechanical setbacks? And yet, contemporary reporting on Guthrie's 1976 attempt too often framed her as a symbolic figure of progress or failure, rather than a driver systematically let down by equipment, time, and team capacity, factors routinely overlooked in narratives about women racing drivers.

In 1978, Guthrie returned to the Indianapolis 500, this time fielding her own car, a 1977 Wildcat Mk 3 she'd purchased from George Bignotti of Patrick Racing. As detailed in her biography, "'George designed it for road-racing circuits. Wally Dallenbach tested it at the Speedway last year, but switched to the car he drove the year before. Wally qualified eighth at Mosport [a road-racing circuit in Canada] and finished sixteenth. Then he qualified eleventh at the last race at Phoenix, and finished sixth. Those were its only two races.'"[43] Instead of being hampered by outdated, woefully unreliable machinery, Guthrie was hampered by a car that wasn't even built for oval racing. But the Wildcat, with a DGS engine in the back, proved competitive, and a year after becoming the first woman to qualify for the Indianapolis 500, Guthrie qualified the Texaco Star fifteenth before securing "a ninth-place finish, a record for best finish by a female driver that she held until 2005."[44] Post-race, Guthrie was interviewed by Sam Posey, ABC Television's garage reporter. Posey himself had competed in the 1972 Indianapolis

500 and had competed in the 24 Hours of Le Mans nine times before interviewing Guthrie, contesting his tenth and final Le Mans race two weeks later. The first question he asked her was, “Janet, a lot of people said a woman could never drive 500 miles, and here you are. Tell us a little about the feeling of the race.”[45] Guthrie’s response to the question was to call the notion “nonsense,” explaining that she’d been “running these 500, 600-mile stock car races down south for two years now, and this is really easier”.[46] By 1978, Guthrie had already contested one 600-mile NASCAR race and ten 500-mile NASCAR races, and yet the fans at home and the news media broadcasting the race still struggled to accept that a woman could race 500 miles. This was not a case of false equivalency. Guthrie had already completed multiple 500-mile races in NASCAR. The broadcast framed the distance as a barrier she had only now proven she could endure, despite her established record. This selective amnesia is a media reflex: repackage the familiar as unprecedented to manufacture a fresh “barrier-breaking” moment. The same script played out decades later when Heinricher Racing, an all-female lineup competing in the IMSA sports car series, was informed by Caterpillar, the construction equipment manufacturer, that it would not continue sponsoring the team in 2020, as the ability to promote an all-female 24 Hours of Le Mans lineup had been lost after Kessel Racing got the nod in 2019, ignoring that an all-female lineup had been on the grid in only the eighth ever running of the famed endurance race.[47] The desire for Caterpillar to be the sponsor of the first all-female Le Mans lineup cost Heinricher their primary sponsor, even though that title had been claimed long before Kessel Racing took the grid slot in 2019. So while Sam Posey’s question wasn’t malicious, it reflected the persistent trap in motorsport media: if a woman isn’t the “first” to do something, she’s often not seen as a legitimate competitor at all.

The Dirt Whispered

Yet even breaking that barrier does not resolve the issue. When a woman is the “first,” her legitimacy is still contested; coverage shifts from outright skepticism to a more insidious emphasis on her body, image, or persona rather than her stage times and wins. Case in point: Michèle Mouton. Born in Grasse, France, she holds the distinction of being the first woman to win a World Rally Championship event, the first woman to win a major rally championship, and the first woman to win the Pikes Peak International Hill Climb.[48] In 1982, she’d claim three rally victories on her way to second in the World Rally Championship for Drivers, behind only Walter Röhrl in the Opel Ascona 400. That season, she and teammate Hannu Mikkola of Finland, driving a pair of Audi Quattros, delivered Audi the World Rally Championship for Manufacturers, edging Opel by eight points, with Mikkola scoring two wins and Mouton three. Highlights of the rallies were shown on ITV’s World of Sport in Britain, much like how NASCAR Winston Cup racing was aired on ABC’s Wide World of Sports during the 1970s. Lasting only ten minutes, the highlights were the only way for most Britons to watch rallying without traveling to see it in person. One of these rallies, the 1982 Rallye de Portugal, marked Mouton's second win of her career and her first of the season. Despite these achievements, the ITV highlights of the race introduced Mouton as “Mikkola’s attractive French teammate”.[49] Instead of introducing her as Audi’s number two driver or as the 1981 Rallye Sanremo winner, they instead introduce her with a descriptor of her appearance, despite her recent success as well as the fact that she won the rally. While male drivers like Röhrl, Mikkola, Jean-Luc Thérier, and Björn Waldegård were introduced as former world champions, experienced drivers, and rally winners, Mouton was relegated to the role of eye candy for the viewer at home. Davies's

commentary, when boiled down, reads as, “Hey, look at this woman racer. Doesn’t she look hot?” This sort of media coverage signified a worsening of the type of coverage women racing drivers received. Whereas Sara Christian came into New Charlotte Speedway with as little NASCAR-sanctioned experience as her male contemporaries, which some could say made it difficult to focus on on-track, performance-based merit, Mouton had twenty previous WRC starts, including her win in Sanremo in 1981. For Dick Davies and ITV to focus on her non-racing attributes serves to discredit those accomplishments and reduce her to the oddity on the grid, the outsider who isn’t meant to be playing with the big boys and their heavy toys.

When they do mention her recent success in the World Rally Championship, it’s still framed through a lens other than performance. After the highlights show footage of Mouton winning the rally, commentator Dickie Davies says, “For Michèle Mouton and her equally charming co-driver Fabrizia Pons, a second world championship triumph in only six months.”[50] While “charming” could mean nice, sweet, or kind, and isn’t necessarily appearance-based, it still isn’t focused on racing, even though she won the event. Although she had the firsts to back up her legitimacy as a competitor, ITV and Dick Davies made it their mission to discredit Mouton’s accomplishments by putting her physical appearance and personality before her ability to wrestle a 1.45 tonne rally car around the tight gravel bends of the Sintra countryside. This is especially evident in Davies's last line of commentary, where he says, “No wonder the whole world loves Michèle. All that brainpower and beauty, too.”[51] In a rally that she won by over thirteen minutes from Per Eklund in his Toyota Celica 2000GT, ITV ends the segment with another observation of her appearance. When drivers like Röhrl, Mikkola, Thérier, and Waldegård won, they weren’t described as handsome, striking, or hunky. Even in contemporary coverage, such as Jamie Little’s play-by-play on FOX for the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series, male winners are not described as ‘handsome’ or ‘striking.’ Aside from how male commentators regard male competitors, there’s a double standard in how male commentators report on women racing drivers compared to how female commentators report on male drivers. For ITV to repeatedly emphasize Mouton’s appearance and personality paints her as a spectacle, as someone who got on the WRC grid because of her looks, not because she worked her way up from co-driving for Jean Taibi in the 1973 Monte Carlo Rally to making her debut as a driver in 1974 before winning her class in the 1975 24 Hours of Le Mans. Her performance at Le Mans in 1975 was what attracted French oil company Elf to sponsor her. It wasn’t her features or her “charm” that got her the sponsorship; it was her on-track performances. These accomplishments are diminished by ITV’s coverage of Mouton and serve as a reminder of just how hard the media works to bring women racing drivers into disrepute.

This Ain’t a Scene, It’s an Arms Race

The four decades after Guthrie’s 1978 Indy 500 run would see the likes of Lyn St. James, Sarah Fisher, and Katherine Legge attempt the 500, as well as Patty Moise, Shawna Robinson, and Danica Patrick, who attempted to race at Daytona in NASCAR.[52] Now, a new crop of women racing drivers competes in the likes of Indy NXT and the ARCA Menards Series. In today's context, visibility is not achieved solely through competitive results. The rise of technology has transformed how drivers are perceived, branded, and assessed through social media platforms, algorithm-based websites, and features in lifestyle publications. In this altered media landscape, a new priority arises: "What can you add to my brand?" which takes precedence over the question, "What can you achieve on the track?" This branding-centric approach is particularly

pronounced in American stock car racing, especially within the top three NASCAR series and the ARCA Menards Series that it sanctions. In 2025, three women competed full-time in a major form of motorsport in the United States: Hailie Deegan, Toni Breidinger, and Isabella Robusto.[53] Deegan started in the NASCAR K&N West Series in 2018, moved to the ARCA Menards Series in 2020, spent three years in the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series, and in 2024 raced 17 races in the NASCAR Xfinity Series before she and her team parted ways.[54] This year, she raced in Indy NXT with HMD Motorsports, which had won both the Team's and Driver's Championship twice since they began competing in 2019.[55] Breidinger had a somewhat different trajectory, making three starts in the ARCA Menards Series in 2018 before returning in 2021, making nine more starts. She'd race three races in the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series in 2023, one in 2024, and competed full-time in the Craftsman Truck Series with Toyota and TRICON Garage in 2025.[56] Finally, there's Robusto, who made her first start in the ARCA Menards Series in 2024 and competed in the series full-time in 2025 for Venturini Motorsports and Toyota.[57] These three drivers have raced solely in the era where "content is king," where your results on track don't matter as much as they used to.[58] That's not to say that they don't matter at all, but unlike Sara Christian, Janet Guthrie, and Michèle Mouton, who were judged by their appearance and harshly scrutinized for on-track performance, drivers like Deegan and Breidinger have been promoted up the NASCAR ladder even when their on-track performance has been weaker than that of their peers.

Almost Easy

Deegan's NASCAR career started in 2018 when she began competing in the NASCAR K&N Pro Series West at the age of 16, driving for Bill McAnally Racing, a team that was just coming off three straight drivers' championships, one by Chris Eggleston in 2015 and two by Todd Gilliland the following two years. She'd compete for the team for two years, becoming the first woman to win in the Pro Series West, which had existed under a variety of names since 1954.[59] Halfway through her sophomore campaign in the series, in which she scored two wins and finished third in the standings, she'd sit down with Dale Earnhardt Jr. on his podcast, The Dale Jr. Download, and assert, "I'm a racer, I'm not a model."[60] Her claim is complicated by the fact that, months earlier, she had posed in two separate photo shoots when she was a seventeen-year-old minor, with HOLR Magazine and the athletic brand Under Armour, the latter of which featured her in a form-fitting sports bra and yoga pants, promoting the company's Rush athleticwear line.[61] Before she competed in the ARCA Menards Series, she was already being promoted as a brand ambassador. Her marketability was leveraged before her competitive résumé had developed. Under Armour posted its own video from the photoshoot three weeks after Deegan, when she was still a minor. Under Armour reported that the post, "attracted about 458,000 views" and that it was "'among some of the brand's highest engaged content recently.'"[62] This marked another institutional shift from drivers like Christian and Mouton, who were reported on from an appearance-based lens to a marketing-centered lens, as seen with Deegan. Even before she was eighteen, she was seen as a marketing tool for companies like Under Armour, and yet she tried to deny that label.

In an article from the Sports Business Journal, Jill Gregory, NASCAR's executive vice president and chief marketing officer, was quoted as saying, "'[Deegan's] social feeds are not lap times or how the car was running; she talks about her lifestyle, training regimen, what she's doing with her family — all the things fans want to know about their favorite drivers.'"[63] And

yet, for how she branded herself to her fans, as a lifestyle instead of a driver, she was still lauded as someone who could eventually make it to the NASCAR Cup Series by NASCAR executives. Instead, in the five years after the Sports Business Journal article was published, Deegan ran a full season in the ARCA Menards Series, where she scored 0 wins, 4 top fives, and 17 top tens in 20 races.[64] She then ran three full seasons in the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series, where she scored 0 wins, 0 top fives, and 5 top tens across 68 starts.[65] Finally, she ran a partial season in the NASCAR Xfinity Series before her and AM Racing, the team she was competing for, agreed to part ways 17 races into the 33-race season.[66] And yet, in 2025, HMD Motorsports gave her the keys to one of their Dallara IL-15s in Indy NXT, where she finished 14th in points, tied for last amongst all full-time drivers with Tommy Smith, both of them scoring 202 points.[67]

Don't You Know Who I Think I Am?

However, if Deegan is the genesis of the marketing-over-merit era, then Toni Breidinger represents its apotheosis: Toyota signed her through its marketing department, citing her 2.5 million Instagram followers as the reason, rather than her competitive record. Lauded by Glamour as "one of the most successful women in racing today," and by herself as "'very competitive and driven,'" her on-track performances tell a different story.[68] While it is true she was the winningest driver in United States Auto Club competition, an asterisk must be put next to that stat, as her 19 wins came in the regional Western Asphalt HPD Midget Championship.[69] This series competed at tracks solely on the West Coast, and, in 2016, when she won the series championship, only three tracks were on the schedule.[70] For comparison, there were nineteen tracks on the 2024 ARCA Menards Series schedule and twenty-three tracks on the 2025 NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series schedule, including superspeedways, dirt, road courses, and short tracks. That variety exposes a driver's range: their ability to adapt to different cars, surfaces, and race strategies. Breidinger's résumé, limited to a narrow, regional subset on paved short track less than half a mile in length, limited her ability to gain experience. In the nine starts she had in the USAC Silver Crown Series, a national series, she had one top 10, zero top 5s, and zero wins. In 2024, Kaylee Bryson would claim the honor of being the first woman to win a USAC National Series feature at the same time Breidinger was racing full-time in ARCA.

According to Sports Illustrated, though, "[t]he last couple of years have… seen her results improve on the racetrack," yet my own observations from when I attended the 2023 NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series race at World Wide Technology Raceway reveal her results have plateaued instead of getting better.[71] In the race, Breidinger qualified 18th and finished 24th, one lap down.[72] Her average running position in that race was 24th; she climbed no higher than 10th and fell no worse than 28th.[73] In her 27 starts in the Truck Series since, she's had an average finish of 25.1, an average start of 26.3, and four lead-lap finishes.[74] But the reason she has those competitive starts and is lauded by Glamour, People, and Sports Illustrated is that she's a marketing asset for Toyota. According to Paul Doleshal, group manager of motorsports for Toyota Motor North America, Breidinger is contracted through Toyota's marketing department rather than its driver development program.[75] Doleshal explained the reasoning directly: "Her large social media following was one thing that attracted Toyota to her."[76] So, according to Toyota itself, her 2.5 million followers on Instagram and 2.3 million on TikTok were the reason they signed her. Not her wins in USAC, not her Carolina Pro Late Model Series top 5s, but her social media visibility. Toyota's own marketing director noted that her large social following was central to her signing, suggesting that as long as she can sell Raising Cane's, 818 Tequila, and

Coach to the masses on social media, Toyota will keep her employed, regardless of how she finishes on track. Thus, the criteria used to frame Breidinger as 'successful' emphasize social media visibility and commercial marketability rather than competitive records such as lap speed, finishing position, or race wins.

Invisible

That's not to say all women racing drivers today have been confined to the box of marketing over merit. In 2025, Isabella Robusto, "the first female to win a Legend Car national qualifier," contested her rookie season in the ARCA Menards Series.[77] While writing this paper, I had the opportunity to watch her race in the Southern Illinois 100 at the DuQuoin State Fairgrounds Racetrack (figure 2 in the appendix), where she qualified 8th and finished 4th on the lead lap, having run as high as 3rd and never fallen outside the top 8.[78] Across her 23 other ARCA starts, she has averaged a 7.2 qualifying position, recorded an average finish of 11th, and completed 17 races on the lead lap.[79] In the 2025 season, she made history as the woman with the most top 5s in a single season, with 9.[80] Despite these historic achievements, though, she does not receive the same press that Deegan and Breidinger currently do from the likes of People, Forbes, SB Nation, and even Motorsport.com. For reference, Breidinger had 4 top 5s across 65 starts, and all 4 came in a part-time season in 2023. Although she's done statistically better in a shorter amount of time, with 11 top 5s in 24 starts, Robusto fails to receive the same mainstream media attention that her contemporaries do.

Robusto does receive media coverage, but it primarily comes from niche, racing-focused publications like Sportscar365.com, thepodiumfinish.net, kickinthetires.net, and Autohebdo magazine. Autohebdo, a French magazine like Match l'Intra and L'Auto, said of Robusto: "At twenty years old, Robusto is driving this year in ARCA, the fourth national division, after a stunning debut in 2024. In four starts, she has simply finished in the top 10 three times, including two top 5s, one of them being a second place at Springfield."[81] Much like the French newspapers nearly a century ago that regarded Odette Siko with the respect she deserved as a racing driver, not as eye candy for the male spectators or a marketing tool to sell Dunlop Tires and Alfa Romeos to the audience, Autohebdo treats Isabella Robusto as a racing driver, as someone to be judged based on her on-track performance. The description of "stunning" for her 2024 debut is apt, considering that in her first three starts, she averaged a fourth-place finishing position. Breidinger averaged a finishing position of 13.33 across her first three starts, and Deegan averaged 12.33. Robusto, by comparison, averaged fourth. Her performance was immediately competitive in a way that her contemporaries' careers were not. Robusto doesn't harken back to racing's past solely from her media coverage, though. According to heavy.com, "she's doing all this while pursuing a degree in aerospace engineering at Arizona State University."[82] Similarly, before she began her career in the SCCA, Janet Guthrie graduated from the University of Michigan and worked as an aerospace engineer with Republic Aviation. Even without the mainstream press coverage, Robusto harkens back to the days when merit took precedent over marketing, and a driver like Guthrie or Alan Kulwicki, with his mechanical engineering degree from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, could contend for top 5s, wins, and championships with a degree in one hand and a steering wheel in the other.

Entertainment, and Everything After

“All we are is entertainment, caught up in our own derangement… All we are are pretty faces, picture-perfect bottled rage, packaged, synthesized versions of you,” Tim McIlrath snarls the first verse of “Entertainment” by Rise Against, the lyrics a fitting reflection of the current state of women racing drivers, where a driver’s marketability, her ability to be “entertainment,” is more important than her results on track. Kévin Estre, André Lotterer, and Laurens Vanthoor won the 2024 WEC Hypercar World Endurance Drivers' Championship because they got to drive for Porsche Penske Motorsport on merit, not because they were good-looking or had modeled for Calvin Klein. Joey Logano won the 2024 NASCAR Cup Series Drivers' championship because he got to drive for Team Penske on merit, not because he could sell Shell gasoline or Pennzoil motor oil to the viewer sitting at home.

Yet for the likes of Sara Christian, Michèle Mouton, Hailie Deegan, and Toni Breidinger, the press leverages appearance and marketing in ways that undermine their legitimacy as competitors. By contrast, Odette Siko at Le Mans in 1932, or Isabella Robusto nearly a century later in ARCA, were judged by niche racing outlets on the merit of their on-track results. Janet Guthrie, too, demonstrated endurance and skill at Indianapolis, yet was framed more as a symbol of progress than as a driver systematically let down by her machinery. Across these seven figures: Siko, Christian, Guthrie, Mouton, Deegan, Breidinger, and Robusto, the history of women racing drivers reveals a shifting but persistent tension: legitimacy is rarely measured solely by performance. Instead, whether through novelty, symbolic “firsts,” or marketable branding, women have too often been packaged as entertainment rather than respected as athletes. Until the press and sponsors recalibrate to value skill above spectacle, the best finish a woman can achieve may remain overshadowed by the story written about her.

What these histories make clear is that the question has never been whether women can drive a racecar. They have, across continents, eras, and machinery that would have broken lesser men. The underlying question has always been who holds the authority to define legitimacy. When credibility is granted only when it flatters the institution, when merit must present itself wrapped in novelty or marketable softness to be seen at all, the record becomes warped by the vantage point that produced it. To write women into motorsport history as competitors rather than curiosities is to refuse the terms on which their stories have been filtered, packaged, and sold. It is to insist that results, not narratives, are what endure. And when that standard is finally applied without caveat or asterisk, the archive looks very different—and the history of motorsport stops being a boys’ club and starts being what it always was: a proving ground where speed, endurance, and skill have never belonged to one gender. To write women back into this history is not an act of novelty, but of accuracy. The record is not complete until they are recognized for what they have always been: racers.

Appendix

Figure 2: A photograph of Liam Crider meeting Isabella Robusto pre-race at the DuQuoin State Fairgrounds while holding an autographed draft of this study. Taken August 31, 2025 by Tommy Venturini.

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