

# Lyn St. James

Highlight Video Transcript



## Can women compete on an equal footing with men in the world of automobile racing?

Yes, and Lyn St. James helped pave the way. A major competitor in the Indianapolis 500 throughout most of the 1990s — and on Road Racing Circuits for more than two decades — St. James helped a new generation of women break into the traditionally male-dominated sport.

A longtime sports car enthusiast, in 1992 the Ohio businesswoman was the first woman to win Rookie of the Year at Indianapolis and went on to compete in dozens of top professional races. Over the course of her career, she held dozens of closed circuit speed records and set many other firsts, including being the only woman to win an IMSA GT race driving solo.



At a time when women were not allowed to vote, Katherine Stinson did something practically unheard of. She learned to fly.

The fourth woman in the United States to receive a pilot's license, Stinson became famous as a stunt pilot, performing graceful — and daring — maneuvers in the air.

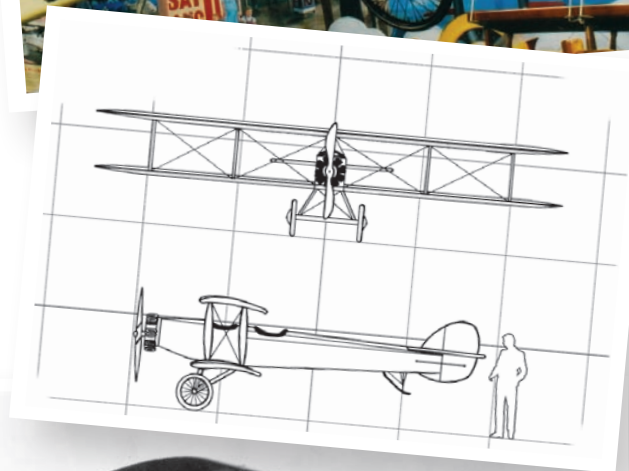
She proved, without question, that a woman's stamina, reflexes and judgment in tight situations equaled a man's in every way.

Years later, another young woman stepped into an arena traditionally reserved for men.

With many of the same qualities possessed by Katherine Stinson, she applied her skills not in the air, but on the racetrack.

She became the second woman to qualify for the Indianapolis 500 and the first to be voted its Rookie of the Year.

In the process, an invisible ceiling was shattered forever.



Top: Katherine Stinson's Laird biplane in the Heroes of the Sky exhibit in Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Michigan. Middle: A drawing of Stinson's Laird, nicknamed the boneshaker. Bottom: Matty Laird in the cockpit of the boneshaker, circa. 1916.

## Lyn St. James, Race Car Driver

Entrepreneur. Barrier breaker.

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Racing didn't really come into my life until I was around 16 or 17, when I started driving. And I had a lot of guys that were my buddies. And they took me to the races.

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And it was mostly the drag races. And I actually mouthed off at one of my buddies when they lost at this little local track that we were at. And he said, "If you're so good, why don't you drive the car?" And I said, "Really? Will you let me drive your car?"

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And I remember sitting on the line, and getting it up to about 3,000 rpm. And watching the lights. And I mean, I just came alive inside. I mean, maybe it was adrenaline. I don't know.

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But I just felt so powerful at that moment. And I had done nothing in my life ever before that I felt that powerful. And I won.

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And so I came home and showed my mom this trophy. And I said, "Wow, this was just so cool, Mom." You know?

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And she goes, "Look, I didn't send you to girls school and give you piano lessons that teach some — you know, I taught you to be a young lady, a self-sufficient, independent young — and you're not going to be doing that kind of stuff." So that came to a screeching halt.



Lyn St. James.

"Getting it up to about 3,000 rpm. And watching the lights. And I mean, I just came alive inside."  
— Lyn St. James



Lyn St. James behind the wheel at her Driver Development Academy.



## From spectator to participant

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I still was a spectator, though. I went to a lot of races. So — there was something about the sport — the sounds, the smells — all the sensations.

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It was really so exciting. It wasn't until I moved to Florida and I went to the 24 hours of Daytona and the 12 hours of Sebring. I was married to this great guy that had a motorcycle and was really cool. And we found out about the Sports Car Club of America.

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And he said, "Well, why don't we join? And let's see if we can figure out how to do this." And so we went out and I got a Ford Pinto. I put a roll bar in it and a five-point seat belt and a five-pound fire extinguisher. And so we were husband and wife, business partners and racing team. And so I raced the Pinto. I passed my first driver school. And my second driver school. And I just thought once I got behind the wheel of that Pinto I thought, "This was it, this was what I always felt like I was meant to do in this world."

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And I was in my 20s. I had no role models. But I didn't really think about that. All I wanted to do was not be an embarrassment to myself and have fun. And that meant win races and learn how to drive well.

## Preparation counts

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I noticed the car that's usually first on the grid for practice, and it's cleaned, and that's organized in the garage. It's amazing how those cars tend to be the cars that win.

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And so I started making sure I was first on the grid for practice, instead of being always last, and hustling in, you know, and never making it on time. I worked hard on our team to make sure that we looked, you know, that we had our act together, that we were organized.



Students at the Driver Development Academy.

## Persistence pays

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There was an article in Car and Driver magazine that was about Ford Motor Company wanting to sell the Capri. It was the Mercury Capri at the time to women.

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They wanted to provide equal employment opportunities for women in non-traditional roles.

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And I said, "You need to sponsor me. And if you do that, you know, I'll be able to demonstrate that women can be successful in male-dominated fields.

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"And more women will buy your car because I'm gonna race it." And they said, Thank you very much. But, no, thank you.

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"But keep us informed of your progress." So it was a "no" but with a little crack in the door. And I bugged him for three years. And every time I saw any kind of an article about Ford Motor Company.

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I would send them letters. I would send them pictures. I would send them little articles that maybe were written about me. And I hounded them to death.

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So I think Ford signed me because they said, "This woman is driving us crazy. And the only way we can control 'em is if we hire her." Absolutely convinced.



Lyn St. James.

"This woman is driving us crazy. And the only way we can control 'em is if we hire her."

— Lyn St. James



Lyn St. James demonstrating in an open wheel car.

## Race car drivers do more than race

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It was a pretty rugged year as far as success on the racetrack. I was getting very nervous. It was a one-year contract. So through that year, I would call Ford dealers.

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And I'd say, "Look, I'm gonna be racing in Atlanta." Or, I'm gonna be racing in Ohio." Or, "I'm gonna be racing in Lime Rock, Connecticut."

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Or various cities that we were going to. "And I'll come in a day early and bring my car and, you know, and help promote the fact that we're coming." 'Cause what I learned was that Ford really had to sell the dealers on this support that they were getting back into racing.

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And I convinced them then that I could do more than just drive the car for them.

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And I got a separate personal service contract from Ford to start making personal appearances for the media and for — for dealers and things like that.

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I was on a mission to sustainability for my career. And I knew that if I had to rely on just the success of what was happening while we were blowing up all these engines that I might have a very short career. And I was hoping to have a long career.

## Seizing opportunities

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I made anywhere from 50 to a 100 appearances a year.

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These organizations that were women's groups would contract with Ford Motor Company to have a display and an exhibit and be a sponsor and then, as a bonus, they got me as a speaker. And I learned how to be a speaker. Which now is how I make a living — as a motivational and keynote speaker.



Students training at the Driver Development Academy.

"I wanted to find out a way that I could help the next generation of young, up-and-coming drivers to succeed and particularly women."

— Lyn St. James



Lyn St. James giving a lecture at her school for young women race car drivers.

## Adapting is key

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The Indianapolis 500 was my first oval track race. And only my second open wheel race. All my racing had been done in sedans and had been primarily on road courses. And I never would recommend that to anybody.

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But it's the — it was the best I could do. Because when I finally got the sponsorship, that was, you know, I couldn't say, "Well, I need more money because I gotta go do some other races in an open wheel." And I mean, you just — you have to go with what you got.

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But because of the Talladega experience I had, because of all the other racing — quality racing — I'd had, and because Dick Simon took me down to Texas and taught me how to drive an oval — which means you've got to go flat. You got to put your foot on the gas all the way around that racetrack.

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And you've got to be able to turn the steering wheel and not lift. And I'm telling you there's a bone in your right foot, that when you turn the steering wheel, it's like there's a string connected and the foot wants to come up. There's just a — it's a psychological thing. And it — it — it takes some doin'. But we got there. And so with the help and the support of all the people I'd had around me, I was successful at doing it. But I'm telling ya, it was something else.

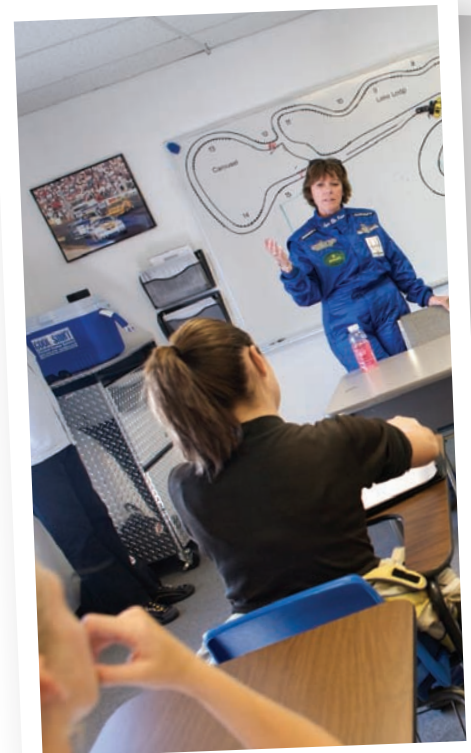
## Paying it forward

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I wanted to find out a way that I could help the next generation of young up-and-coming drivers to succeed, and particularly women. And so I started a driver development program, which I've been doing since 1994. So life after Indy — or after me racing professionally — has been race for fun, and give back to the sport and help the sport grow.

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What I'm teaching is if you are already successful as an amateur and you aspire to be a professional, then you've got to learn how to give an interview. You've got to learn how to be physically and mentally ahead of what you need to do.



Students in class at the Driver Development Academy.



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It's an invitational only thing. So I gather resumes. I go to racetracks.

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I look for the best out there. I say I look for the cream. And then I try to, you know, give them this — this educational experience . . . that'll help them be better prepared.

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I'm only about opportunity. Where my passion is, is that if somebody has the talent, the ability, the desire and they're willing to dedicate their, you know, their effort and everything, they deserve the opportunity.



Lyn St. James giving some hands on training to a student at the Driver Development Academy.

Lyn St. James has a lot more to say.  
Visit [OnInnovation.com](http://OnInnovation.com)

to see her full, unedited interview, read the complete transcript  
and connect with other visionaries thinking out loud.



Lyn St. James.