It’s a Guy Thing: The Experience of Women in Canadian Sports Car Competition

David A. Charters  
University of New Brunswick

I remember once finishing a race... and getting out of my car. Took my helmet off, and this little kid pointed and said, ‘Look, Dad, it’s a girl!’

Jane Jenkins laughed when she related that child’s remark to me. As a history professor, she is now in her element in the classroom. But as a college student herself, she had been equally at home behind the wheel of a Datsun 240Z, hurling the car through a twisty slalom course. In 1986 she was the Saskatoon Sports Car Club’s Rookie of the Year in auto slalom racing.

Professor Jenkins was not the only or the first woman to race a car in Canada. Many Canadian women have been involved in all aspects of auto sport since the dawn of the twentieth century. That said, relative to men, few of them competed and none have yet made it to the top: Indy Car or Formula One. So that child’s reaction to Jane as “racer” was understandable and common. Our society does not naturally assume that women do car racing. Likewise, the scholarly and popular literature on women in sport is extensive, but there is little on their role in auto sport. Why, then, is it so hard to conjure up the image of the female racer? Because, like the so-called mainstream stick and ball sports, auto sport is overwhelmingly a male activity, played by men and almost exclusively run by men. Until very recently, all of its “superstars” have been men. The primary audience is young men, and the sponsors (automakers, breweries, and tobacco companies, for example) tailor their advertising to appeal to that market. And above all, auto sport uses the quintessentially male technology: the car. Sports cars, in particular, have been promoted as “toys for boys.” In short, “It’s a guy thing.”

In that respect, it differs little from other sports. Still, to leave the story at that would be a “double fault.” First, the social portrait of the sport would be incomplete. Second, and more important, it would not do justice to the many women who refused to be constrained by prevailing attitudes and who successfully broke into what was otherwise an exclusively male activity. The historical record makes an important point: that women have competed—and excelled—at all levels and

Charters is with the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, New Brunswick E3B 5A3, Canada.
in all forms of international auto sport. However, both formal and informal barriers have kept their numbers small. The history of women in Canadian sports car competition represents a microcosm of that larger experience.

Up to this point, however, it has been a largely untold story, for several reasons. First, despite auto sport’s huge and growing popularity, academic historians have tended to exclude it from the wider sports history narrative by suggesting that it is not actually a sport. Focused on athleticism and the stick and ball sports, they see auto racing only as a technological activity in which the car does all the work. Thus, they tend to ignore the fact that the physical and mental demands of its top levels—Indy Car and Formula One racing—require their drivers to be superb athletes in all respects. Consequently, while auto sport in general has an extensive popular literature, there is relatively little scholarly work. Second, since the sport lacks the national profile of hockey, Canadian auto sport historiography is particularly weak. Finally, women are scarcely mentioned in either.

This article attempts to place the experience of women in Canadian sports car competition within an historical context. First, for comparative purposes it briefly surveys the female experience in auto sport in the United States and Europe. Second, it discusses the extent of their participation in the sport in Canada over the period since 1950. Finally, it suggests why so few Canadian women have competed and thus why none have reached the top rank.

Fast Women: The Female Experience of International Auto Sport

Auto sport emerged quickly following the invention of the automobile, first as a marketing tool and later as a sport in its own right. Women competed during the sport’s infancy, and one of the first to achieve international renown was Canadian Kay (Defries) Petre. Born in Toronto, she pursued her avocation in Britain and France in the 1930s. Known as “The Queen of Brooklands” (a track near London), Petre placed thirteenth overall in the 1934 Le Mans twenty-four-hour race, and later became the first woman to be hired as a factory team driver, for Austin. After a serious accident, she retired from racing and became a motoring journalist. Although she never competed in Canada and her achievements were all but unknown here until the 1960s, in 1995 Petre became the first woman to be inducted into the Canadian Motorsport Hall of Fame. Along with other female racers of the interwar period, Kay Petre established the principle that women could compete alongside men in the “major leagues” of auto sport.

In the postwar period, several women distinguished themselves during the “amateur age” of American sports car racing (1950s–1960s), among them Susie Dietrich, Ruth Levy, Donna Mae Mims, Paula Murphy, and Josie Van Neumann. The female star of that period was Denise McCluggage. A natural athlete, she founded AutoWeek magazine in 1958, and continued writing for it until 1990. She tried racing out of curiosity and quickly demonstrated her ability. In 1961 McCluggage won the Grand Touring (GT) class in the Sebring twelve-hour endurance race, and later became the first American female factory team driver in European rallying. In fact, the 1960s marked the heyday of winning women in international rallying. Pat Moss-Carlsson (sister of Formula One racer Stirling Moss and wife
of Swedish rally champion Erik Carlsson) and Rosemary Smith of Ireland won many major European and international rallies, and several ladies championships. Both were highly respected factory-team drivers.\textsuperscript{15}

It is probably no coincidence that it was in the 1970s that women broke into the highest levels of racing. The women’s movement came to maturity during that decade, and activism for equality included the domain of sport. Consequently, women have competed in the top ranks of auto sport since that time, but not continuously or in large numbers. Lella Lombardi of Italy was the only woman who has raced for a full season (1975) in Formula One (F1), finishing sixth in the Spanish Grand Prix and seventh in the German Grand Prix. She was also dominant in the first half of the 1981 World Challenge for Endurance Drivers, a seventeen-race series.\textsuperscript{16} However, she has had no successors in the F1 world championship.

More recently, British racer Divina Galica has competed successfully in British non-championship F1 events. Likewise, fellow Briton Katherine Legge tested in a Minardi F1 car in 2005.\textsuperscript{17}

But most of those who have reached the top ranks were Americans in American racing. Janet Guthrie achieved a “double first”: the first woman to compete in a NASCAR Winston Cup stock car race (1976) and in the open-wheel Indianapolis 500 race (1977). She raced for three seasons in Winston Cup and ran three Indy 500 races; her best finishes were a sixth and a ninth respectively. She opened the door for Lyn St. James, who competed regularly in the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) Trans-Am sedan racing series in the 1980s, and then jumped to Indy Car racing in the 1990s. St. James competed in seven Indy 500 races, and was the first woman to be awarded the title “Rookie of the Year” (1992).\textsuperscript{18} Patty Moise also followed Guthrie, racing in Winston Cup in the 1980s, and then becoming the first woman to compete in NASCAR’s Busch Grand National series; her best finish was a seventh at Talladega in 1995. She retired in 1998. Her successor in Winston Cup was Shawna Robinson.\textsuperscript{19} Although not the first woman to enter drag racing, Shirley Muldowney was the first to be a National Hot Rod Association “top fuel” drag racing champion. She was also the first racer (male or female) to earn that title three times (1977, 1980, and 1982). Thus, she ranks as one of the elite of drag racing. Robert Post, historian of that sport, has described her as “the most famous and successful woman ever involved in auto racing, indeed in any sporting endeavor in which men and women met as equals.”\textsuperscript{20}

But, Indy Car racing seems poised to produce the sport’s first female “superstar.” Sarah Fisher placed second in the Indy Racing League (IRL) Grand Prix of Miami in April 2001.\textsuperscript{21} She has since been eclipsed by Danica Patrick, who in 2004 placed third overall in the Toyota Atlantic championship, being the first woman to win a pole position and a podium finish in that series. She entered the IRL series in 2005 and became the first woman to lead the Indy 500, where she finished fourth. She capped that season by winning the “Rookie of the Year” title.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{For the Record: Canadian Women in Sports Car Competition}

A sports car competition subculture developed in Canada after 1945, stimulated by British automobile marketing and an influx of British enthusiasts, and drawing
upon the growing “car culture” of middle class men with disposable income and spare leisure time. A national governing body—the Canadian Automobile Sport Clubs (CASC)—was founded in 1951. By the late 1960s the CASC included more than 100 car clubs comprising thousands of members, and was sanctioning major international events such as the Canadian F1 Grand Prix. That race and the Canadian “Champ Car” races now attract on-site audiences that exceed 100,000, with millions more watching them on TV. Like so many other sporting events, they have evolved into “pop culture” occasions that are more spectacle than sport.

Women took part in all aspects of this growing and changing sport: as competitors, officials, club, regional and national executives, crew members, marshals, media, and spectators. One—Jacqueline Paradis—owned and ran Le Circuit Ste. Jovite, one of Canada’s major race tracks. Throughout, however, they remained a marginalized minority in a men’s domain.

Alice Fergusson, the wife of Toronto car dealer, racer, and sponsor Jim Fergusson, was probably the first woman to enter post-1945 sports car racing. She drove a Fiat 500 in the inaugural British Empire Motor Club (BEMC) Spring Trophy Races at the Edenvale, Ontario, airport circuit in June 1950. In the same event in 1955, Vivian Petura of Toronto placed second in the modified sedan class. These women set a precedent for Canadian female racers: that they could—and should—race wheel-to-wheel with the men.

In the first half of the 1960s, Diana Carter was the most prominent woman racer in Canada. In 1959, a friend invited her to a race and she helped out in the pits for driver Jerry Polivka. He later taught her how to race, and she won her first novice event at the Connor Circuit airport track at St. Eugene, Ontario. Her victory made national news: “Imagine . . . ‘a girl had beaten the guys in auto racing.’ So, now I was really hooked. A checkered flag will do that to you.” Soon Diana was working with Polivka for Canada Track and Traffic (the national auto sport magazine), was involved in planning the construction of the Mosport race track, and was racing. She had acquired Jerry’s car and was sponsored by Volvo. Thus, she was thoroughly immersed in the sport and as committed to it as was any man:

I was very serious about my capabilities on the track: concentrated on winning and drove to the best of my abilities with the equipment I had. I think that this ethic earned me respect and helped me to be “just one of the guys” around the track.

Her results proved that point. Carter won the touring class championship in 1963 and the production car class in a three-hour endurance race at Mosport in 1964, sharing the drive in a Mini Cooper with Shirley Bowles. The “highlight” of her racing career, she says, was winning the “Ladies Race” at the Nassau Speed Weeks. Driving a Formula Vee (a VW-engined, open-wheel racing car), she beat both Denise McCluggage and Janet Guthrie. “Highly regarded by the men competitors as a fast, smooth driver.” Carter’s results drew praise from her employer: “Diana’s performance also proved a point. That the Toronto girl should not be considered a ‘woman driver’ as she has shown she deserves the respect given to everyone who races a car.”

After retiring from racing at the end of the 1967 season, she worked as public relations director for Michigan International Speedway. After three years at trying
to convince newspaper editors and sports journalists that auto racing deserved as much coverage as other sports, she’d had her fill of auto sport, went into advertising, “and never looked back.”

In eastern Canada in the early 1960s, Diana was often the only woman competing. Later, Stephanie Ruys de Perez drove for the Comstock Racing Team—Canada’s first commercially sponsored team. Wendy Keith, wife of racer Peter Keith, initially was the only woman racing in Quebec. But she was later joined by Toni Ramsey and Nicole Martin-Favreau, both also wives of racers. In the 1966 Quebec championship, Nicole (driving a Ford Cortina) tied for sixth overall in the sedan class with her husband Francois, who was driving a Mustang. In 1968 she created an all-women team to race a single-seat, open-wheel Formula C. On the Prairies, two women entered a novice race at Davidson, Saskatchewan, in May 1960. In 1962 Janet Sharp took a fourth place finish at Bon Accord, Alberta, and Fran Hamilton won the women’s section of a novice ice race run by the Saskatoon Sports Car Club. Out on the West Coast, Diana McColl of Vancouver was a frequent winner in the early 1960s in her H Production Austin Healey Sprite. Hilda Randall raced a Fiat Abarth in Sports Car Club of BC and American-based International Conference events for several years in the 1960s, with some success. She got started by taking her son John to the go-kart track and waiting for him. “I wasn’t the knitting type, so I got bored, and they bought me a go-kart.” When John moved up to racing cars, so did she. Similarly, Karen Hall followed her husband onto the track in BC and began winning races in a Mustang.

Yet, in spite of the ground broken by Fergusson, Carter, and the others, few women competed in the major Canadian racing series. Louise Roberge, Patricia Smith, and Linda Wilson all ran in the (national championship) Formula B Player’s Challenge series for brief periods in the 1970s. Wilson was sponsored by Imperial Oil, allowing her to enter the “pro” ranks. That was a significant step for women in Canadian racing, but it was not sustained. By the end of the decade, the championship had become the international Formula Atlantic series, but no women competed in that series until the 1990s.

Until the late 1980s, the only Canadian woman who had established an international reputation in auto sport was Agnes “Aggi” Hendriks, a drag racer from BC. That changed when Kathryn “Kat” Teasdale of Toronto became the first Canadian woman to hold an international racing license. She moved up rapidly from Formula 2000 to the Player’s GM Motorsports and the Firestone Indy Lights series (the Indy Car “minor league,” where she was the only woman). In 1994 she shared a drive in a Porsche to take seventeenth overall in the IMSA/Rolex twenty-four-hour race at Daytona. By the end of the decade, however, her racing career was “on hold.” At that time, Marybeth Harrison from BC had come up through go-karts, racing schools, and the ProFormance Toyota racing series to capture the 1998 Canadian Formula Racing Drivers Association championship. Two years later she entered the SCCA Trans-Am series, driving a Camaro. In 2003 she won the GT1 class in the Canadian GT championships. Despite being a skilled racer and a savvy businesswoman, she was unable to raise enough sponsor funds to compete full-time, and thus did not supersede Teasdale.

Instead, women remained most active at the regional level. For example, in the 1981 Castrol Race Ontario Championships, there were many regular female competitors. They included Jill Foster in the Honda/B.F. Goodrich sedan series; Krista...
von Engelbrechten and Susan Burgess in stock production; Penni Barker-Adams and Judy Ferchat in Formula 4; and Pamela Dix, Karen Wagner, Patricia Blouin, and Donna Seaman in the novice class. Barker-Adams won her class championship many times. In the 1990s, Tiina Larsen and Elaine Willis won Formula 2000 championships, and Barker-Adams is still racing. But in the Maritimes in 2004 only two women were sports car racing: Linda Neal in a formula car, and Diane Standing in a sedan. They were outnumbered by the men by about fifteen to one.40

But for misfortune, Ashley Taws of Toronto might have surpassed all of her predecessors. She started racing go-karts at age nine, winning several championships. Taws graduated to a Formula 1200 race car at sixteen, placing third in the CASC Ontario Region championship in her first season, and second the next year. Ashley jumped to the national Formula Ford championship in 2002, where at age eighteen she tied for third overall. Having shown so much promise so early she seemed destined to reach the top ranks, but injuries from a serious traffic accident in 2002 put an end to her racing career. However, she finished fourth in the Formula Ford race at the 2003 Molson Indy Toronto, before retiring from competition.41

In rallying, it was a different story. From the outset, there were many more female entries, probably because rallying requires a two-person team (driver and navigator or co-driver). That effectively doubled the opportunities for women who wished to compete. Even though it became an article of faith that rallying with one’s spouse was a quick route to divorce, many couples competed as teams, most often at the club level but in some regional and national rallies as well. For example, John and Nancy Gallop and Ruth and John Searle were among the couples who competed in the SMCC’s First Evening Rally in 1960. Husband and wife teams took the top two places in the Moncton Motor Sport Club’s Lobster Rally in 1962; at least five other couples competed.42 Similar teams entered the demanding Canadian Winter Rally as early as the 1950s.

Even when rallying became more “professional” with introduction of high-speed “stages” in the mid-1960s, spousal teams continued to participate and often did very well. Top contenders included Gordon and Linda McCallum; Burckhard and Catharine Skowronnek; Dwight and Dorothy (Hondorf) Scott; John and Lynn Nixon; and Bruce and Betty Schmidt. Betty was three-time winner of the Joan McAlpine Trophy (1965, 1969, and 1970), awarded to the top Canadian woman rallyist. Teamed with George Mitchell, Gale Berry of St. Catharines was champion co-driver in the 1978 Molson/Auto Sport (magazine) Ontario Rally Series. The Nixons, from Calgary, won the national rally championship (production class) in 1979; Lynn had been second in the co-driver standings in the class the previous year. In 1980, as co-driver for Taisto Heinonen, she won the SCCA’s Nevada Rally. Lynn, who owned and managed an automotive shop in the late 1970s, got into rallying initially out of curiosity about her husband’s hobby. After two years of working on his car service crew, she told John she wanted to try co-driving because, “I got tired of freezing as a service crew member.”43

But all-women teams were also quite common, even in the early years. They included Diana Carter, Margaret Taylor, Ann Coombe, Alice Fergusson, Clare Stuart, and Heather Wilson, not to mention foreign entries, such as McCluggage and Rosemary Smith. Gillian Field from Syracuse, New York, was the top woman in the 1958 Canadian Winter Rally, and she teamed up with Carter for that event in 1964 and 1966. They won the Coupe Des Dames in the 1963 Shell 4000
Women in Canadian Sports Car Competition

(Trans-Canada) rally, and Carter won it the next two years running with other women navigating. Smith—the European woman rally champion—won it only twice in that event (1966, 1967). Dorothy Hondorf (Scott) was the first woman to win the Quebec rally drivers championship (1966), and, Katherine (Kay) Edmond, served as the CASC National Director of Rallying in 1971.44

Women also excelled in auto slalom racing. Ruth Halliday of Oshawa won the Ontario slalom championship three times by 1972, beating all the men. But as late as 1981 the CASC national championship still had a separate woman’s class, won that year by Debbie Parker of Nova Scotia. Two years later, Wanda Angelomatis won the national auto slalom title outright.45 Today, more women compete in auto slalom, but they are still outnumbered by men.46

Behind the Curve: Gender Barriers in Canadian Auto Sport

The evidence from racing, rallying, and auto slalom is probably sufficient to make the fundamental point that, just as in auto sport elsewhere, many Canadian women have competed as equals and have excelled in a sport otherwise dominated by men. Compared with their American counterparts, however, Canada’s “fast women” are still “behind the curve.” No Canadian women have yet reached the exalted the heights of first-rank Indy Car or Formula One.

How do we explain this? After all, at the highest levels of auto sport, the formal barriers to female participation have long since disappeared. So the playing field seems almost level. Moreover, auto sport seemed to offer more opportunities for women’s participation than some other sports. First, even though it is physically demanding, it does not require the size and brute strength of many stick and ball games.47 Second, there was a “couples” aspect to auto sport. Especially through the car clubs and rallying in the 1950s-1960s it was quite easy for women to enter the sport with their husbands or boyfriends. Taught to drive at age thirteen by her father, Diana Carter had many school friends who were car buffs. “I spent a great deal of ‘date time’ in garages while guys worked on their cars and I believe the motorsport seed was planted during this time.”48 Third, the sport requires a large infrastructure of supporting officials, which provided another way for women to become involved.

That said, they did not start out as equals. In particular, those women who entered racing had to work harder to prove themselves in competition and to attract sponsors. To explain this, one must examine the experience of women in wider society, especially their relationship to the automobile, and the culture of the sport, all of which placed disincentives in their path.

Women first had to overcome prevailing social attitudes about their roles in society, among both men and women. In Canada and the United States, they had gained some ground toward equality during the war by entering the workforce or the services, but much of that was lost in the early postwar period. As veterans returned, they displaced women, who left the workforce en masse to become homemakers and to raise families. Meeting the needs of husbands and children and doing volunteer work in the community consumed much of their time. And to a considerable extent they socialized their daughters into the same roles. Those who remained in
the workforce—and many did, often out of necessity—suffered discrimination in salaries, opportunities, and promotion. Consequently, unlike men, many women had little or no disposable income of their own, being financially dependent on their husbands, their “allowances” consumed by family expenses. That situation began to change in the mid-1960s when the daughters of the wartime generation, many with university degrees, returned to the labor force and entered the male-dominated businesses and professions in large numbers. Between 1971 and 1981 the number of women in the workforce doubled. By 1981 more than half of all Canadian women over the age of fifteen were working. Even if they still faced many inequities, many had careers and—by staying single longer—discretionary income, a necessity in auto sport. Almost all the women who achieved some prominence in Canadian auto sport, such as Diana Carter, Linda Wilson, and Marybeth Harrison, had careers and thus some degree of financial independence. Thus, auto sport could be seen as a natural extension of their professional lives and of car ownership.

That is consistent with the middle class character of the car culture that created the Canadian sports car subculture. Yet, even with the increasing prosperity of the post-1945 period, the two-car family did not become the norm for several decades. Thus, many women in the 1950s and 1960s shared a car with the husband. Sole ownership was less common until the 1970s, when the single career woman entered the car market in increasing numbers. Moreover, those who did drive were burdened with the stigma of the “woman driver”: slow, cautious, and uncertain. Women supposedly lacked the aggressiveness behind the wheel so characteristic of the male driver and considered by men to be the hallmark of good driving. But results on the track showed that women could drive just as aggressively and competitively as men.

Still, they have had to overcome a persistent mindset about how women relate to cars and to technology in general. A recent study points out that the male “love affair with technology” is “considered a matter of fact that needs no further explanation.” For example, working on a car together is a classic father-son bonding activity. However, that kind of “play” is not usually shared with daughters. So, “boys are more likely than girls to be socialized into hands-on tinkering with mechanical devices.” Deriving pleasure from technology “appears to be more legitimate for adult men . . . than for adult women. . . .” Machines may be inanimate, but our culture has invested them with gendered meanings and values. The car may be the most obvious example of a “male” technology. Jane Jenkins, speaking as a historian rather than as a former racer, points out that the consequence for women is a cultural impression that

> cars are a guy thing, that men are more capable with cars. . . . And it’s also just the whole notion of a big machine. Women are . . . deemed to be inept around machinery, and cars are big machines, so women culturally are not supposed to . . . feel comfortable with them or feel accomplished around them.

Moreover, during the sport’s formative period in Canada—the 1950s and 1960s—social stigmas and gender stereotyping discouraged female athleticism or channeled it only into those sports, such as figure skating, which were deemed appropriately feminine and did not challenge men on their own turf. Relatively few women challenged these norms, had access to a car, and had the financial means to engage in automobile competition.
Many of the women in the United States and elsewhere who did shrug off all the social impediments and then took the courageous step of entering competition encountered reactions ranging from indifference to outright hostility. Racing, in particular, was a male domain and sexist attitudes prevailed. At the track, women were often consigned to and exploited for explicitly sexual “decorative” purposes; it was not uncommon for winning trophies to be presented by scantily clad “beauty queens.” In his foreword to Denise McCluggage’s memoir, former world champion Phil Hill confesses that when McCluggage began racing in 1955, he was not entirely comfortable with the idea. Rallyist Rosemary Smith experienced similar reactions from both men and women. The SCCA—the governing body of sports car racing in the United States—had begun in 1944 as an exclusive club of wealthy men. It was very conservative in its approach to auto sport, not open to radical change. It encouraged women to enter the “ladies-only” races, so-called powder puff derbies, which it did not phase out until the early 1960s. McCluggage recalls that men promoted these events in a competitive atmosphere of “my-girlfriend-can-beat-your-girlfriend.”52 Likewise, in Canada during the 1950s and early 1960s, women often were confined to the “ladies only” races, but as journalist and competitor Heather Wilson noted in 1959, “the general attitude of most people, especially the men, toward the ladies race—it was a joke.”53 She agreed with fellow racer Alice Ferguson, who argued that women should be allowed to compete with the men on an equal footing and by her own example had proven they could do so.

Initially, then, men did not regard women as serious competitors. That didn’t change until promoters and competitors alike realized that having women compete attracted bigger audiences. Legendary drag racer Don Garlits, who assessed Shirley Muldowney for her Top Fuel license, was shrewd enough to recognize that “the battle of the sexes” would be a box office draw. Up to that point, he remarked, “the men had to drag the women to the drag strip”; Muldowney gave them “someone they could root for.”54 For Canadian spectators, however, a woman sports car racer was still a novelty in the mid-1960s. When Diana Carter rolled her car at Mosport in 1965, two children rushed over. “They didn’t know I was a girl until I took my helmet off and then one of them said, ‘Gee, she must be a really good driver to roll like that.’”55 Likewise, woman racers were rare enough to disorient male sportswriters conditioned to a male-only sports milieu. Writing in Macleans in 1966, Alan Edmonds observed the following.

Their involvement is the more surprising because there’s something oppressively masculine about a racing car . . . the fat, muscular tires, the squat body shell and the uninhibited exhaust that produces a primeval cross between a bellow and a call to arms. It’s a shock to see a driver remove a helmet—and shake out a tumble of women’s hair.56

At the governing levels of the top ranks of auto sport, attitudes have proved resistant to change. Indy Car racing has been a notoriously “men-only” arena; the Indianapolis Motor Speedway did not even allow women into the garages in the 1950s. An uncompetitive car, not lack of talent, hampered Guthrie’s Indy Car efforts. McCluggage later remarked that, “if drivers were lined up according to IQ, Janet would have the pole position.”57 The same could be said for Sarah Fisher, who graduated from high school with a 4.1 GPA, and enrolled in mechanical engineering at university. Formula One chief Bernie Ecclestone scorned Danica Patrick’s
 Indy 500 success by remarking that “women should be dressed in white like all the other domestic appliances.” It is hardly surprising, then, that sponsors focused on their mostly male audience and tended to overlook the marketing potential of female competitors. As a result, women racers found it difficult to attract adequate financial backing, and thus could not hope to compete in the big leagues on an equal footing with men. And when they failed to perform as well as the men, that fact just confirmed the prejudices of potential sponsors.

Thus, most women in auto sport competition have been caught within a closed loop of limited expectations, opportunities, and achievements. It forced Sarah Fisher out of Indy Car racing and into the less-prestigious NASCAR West stock car series (although doing well there could rejuvenate her career). Canadian women racers Kat Teasdale and Marybeth Harrison also saw their promising pro careers cut short by this double standard.

It was in an effort to break that cycle that racing entrepreneur Don Panoz decided in 1999 to create a professional race series for women only: the Women’s Global GT Series (WGGT). He hired Lyn St. James to run it, intending that it would provide promising women a chance to gain high-level competition experience and thus to attract the attention of professional racing teams. The series ran for only two seasons before being merged into one for both women and men. Not surprisingly, few of the women who ran in WGGT have moved on to the new series. Nor is it clear that the WGGT, running for such a short time, generated the anticipated influx of women into the pro racing teams. Sarah Fisher and Danica Patrick achieved success in Indy car racing without the benefit of that series. What made the difference for Patrick was being signed by the Rahal/Letterman team, one of the best in the IRL. Team owner and former Indy car champion Bobby Rahal started her in the demanding Toyota Atlantic series, which has groomed most of the best Indy car racers, and provided her with a competitive car. But her experience has been the exception. For most women in racing, the invisible “tire wall” remains in place.

Although rallying attracted more women, that did not make it a haven of equality. Nor did rallying as a couple ensure that a woman would rise to the top. Instead, as rallying became more professional and oriented to high-speed performance, the demands it placed on the crew members forced some to choose between their relationships and their avocation. Dorothy Scott explained that many couples found it too stressful to compete together in high-level events:

You’ve been sitting in this tin can . . . driving and driving . . . the rallies were . . . twenty-four hours . . . you really had to push yourself, and that one stupid mistake (!) at five a.m.—that was the whole rally for you. It’s really hard to be competitive, and . . . have to look at them at breakfast time the next morning.

After rallying briefly with Dwight, she decided that “if I wanted to save the marriage, we had to stop rallying [together]. So I went into scoring.” Dwight, however, continued to compete. Dorothy’s decision to sacrifice her hobby while her husband continued was not dissimilar to the career/family choices that many women have been forced to make in their professional lives.

By contrast, there are no obvious gender barriers in auto slalom, the most accessible of all the auto sport disciplines. Any licensed driver with a street-legal
Women in Canadian Sports Car Competition

Women in Canadian Sports Car Competition

It is a safe, inexpensive contest that is oriented more to skill than to speed. So the fact that female competitors remain a small minority even in this activity suggests that competing in auto sport generally lacks appeal to most women.

Yet, as important as it was for women to achieve visibility and success in competition, in some respects, that mattered less than the power they didn’t wield in the sport. Within car clubs in the 1950s and 60s, it was common for one or two to serve on club executives, most frequently in the position of secretary and/or treasurer and as social convenor. Such roles, of course, were comparable to those traditionally assigned to women in wider Canadian society, and which prevailed well into the postwar era both in business and in the community. In Ontario until 1990, only two had become car club presidents: Barb Williams of the Hamilton Motor Sport Club and Jean Marshall of the Essex County Sports Car Club. Muriel Knap, one of the pioneering women in Canadian auto sport and executive secretary of CASC Ontario Region for some twenty years, asserted that women encountered opposition as club leaders: “When a woman becomes the president of a men’s sport club, the men even today don’t accept it.” So they tended to be confined to secondary roles in clubs and at events: as organizers, crew, clerks, timers, and marshals. Even there they faced discrimination; the Canadian Race Communications Association, of which Knap was a founding member, did not allow women to serve as flag marshals until 1973.65 Today, however, Kay Wilson is chief marshal in Atlantic Region.

Although women attended the CASC AGMs as voting delegates representing their clubs, there were no women serving on the CASC National Board of Directors until Kay Edmond became national rally director in 1971. No other women served at that level again until 1982, when Katherine Dionisi was elected director of karting, and Gail Lewis was BC region president. The only woman to achieve a high-ranking organizational position in a (partly) Canadian racing series was Vicky O’Connor, an American who was president of the Formula Atlantic series from 1985 to 1996.66 This meant that during the crucial first two decades, when the shape and direction of the sport in Canada were being determined, women were effectively shut out of the decision making at the highest levels. In the formative years, the men who were auto sport entrepreneurs set a course toward “world-class” commercial professionalism that initially opened up, but over the long term would limit, the opportunities for all enthusiasts, men and women alike. Indeed, one could argue there has even been some regression; by 2004 the national auto slalom championship had returned to running separate “ladies” classes.68

Conclusion

Clearly, the role of women in Canadian sports car competition has changed from the 1950s to the present, but change has been modest at best. The subculture has lagged behind wider Canadian society in terms of gender equality. Women remain a minority within the sport at all levels in Canada and none have yet achieved international “superstar” status.

Given the evidence presented in this essay, this should not be surprising. First, the sport has drawn its membership largely from among Canadian middle
class men, and was unlikely to adopt female-inclusive attitudes more rapidly than its social base. Furthermore, social attitudes during the formative years of the sport in Canada did not promote female participation in what were seen as men-only activities. Nor were women encouraged to develop an affinity for cars. Likewise, they usually had less access to cars than did men during that period. These factors seemed to forestall the influx of many women into competition until the 1970s.

Second, except for club-level auto slalom and rallying, sports car competition also was (and is) expensive. To be competitive today even in amateur racing, some degree of sponsorship is almost essential. That alone may have been sufficient to discourage a broad base of participation among Canadian men, but especially among women. Again, during the early years of the sport, most women lacked the financial independence needed to compete. More recently, the obstacles to Canadian women racers gaining sufficient sponsorship to be competitive at the pro level thus far have proven insurmountable.

Third, faced with these barriers, women were largely limited to supporting roles in the sport. Yet even there they were not equal; in the first twenty years, when the shape of the sport was being defined, men dominated its power structure at the highest levels. Thus, women were marginalized in major decision making as much as in competition. In short, they lacked power.

Finally, it is noteworthy that relatively few Canadian men participated in the sport. In spite of the successes of racers like Gilles and Jacques Villeneuve and Paul Tracy, Canadian sports car competition has never captured the national imagination, unlike hockey, which has the status of a national sport, if not a national obsession even among many women. By contrast, sports car competition has involved only a few thousand people out of a population of over thirty million. Thus, even for men, it has been an exceptional activity.

The result has been a self-selecting, if not exclusive, subculture, the majority of whose members were men, and of whom only a very few made it a career or a lifetime commitment. Of the thousands of Canadian men who competed, only about a dozen have achieved success at the highest levels: in Indy Car or Formula One. Given this, the conditions and attitudes prevailing in the subculture, and the relatively low participation rates of women in Canadian auto sport during the past fifty years, it would have taken nothing short of a miracle for a Canadian woman to achieve comparable stature in the sport. So, inclusiveness is not yet equality. It is conceivable that a Canadian woman will someday compete—and win—in auto sport’s major leagues. The go-kart junior leagues and professional racing schools that groomed Paul Tracy and Greg Moore also produced Teasdale, Harrison, and Taws. But Diana Carter remains skeptical: “I have always believed that the top driver in the world . . . will never be a woman . . . . The mix of muscles/guts/reflexes will always put a guy in first place.” Perhaps Danica Patrick or a Canadian woman racer eventually will prove her wrong.

In the meantime, the time is long overdue to integrate the history of auto sport into sports history in general. That applies equally to the Canadian auto sport experience, and to the role of women in the sport. This essay represents one short drive in that direction. Beyond it, an open road beckons the historian.
Notes

1. This essay is limited to examining the participation of Canadian women in sports car, sedan, and open-wheel formula car competition. Except in passing, it does not address stock car or drag racing, both of which would be worthy of separate studies of their own. Portions of this article are reproduced in the author’s forthcoming book, *The Chequered Past: Sports Car Racing and Rallying in Canada, 1951-1991*, University of Toronto Press, 2006. It is based upon extensive research in original documents, such as club and event files, and on interviews with participants. For this essay the author is also drawing upon his own experience as a competitor in Canada’s Atlantic Region for the past fourteen years.


3. Auto slalom is a form of racing in which cars are timed as they drive one at a time through a course marked out by pylons. The fastest time through the course (without penalties for hitting cones) determines the winner.


10. The Canadian literature consists mostly of a handful of a few dated journalistic accounts, some popular histories, biographies and coffee table books, and the enthusiasts’ literature (magazines). The sole scholarly work is Mark Douglas Lowes, *Indy Dreams and Urban Nightmares: Speed Merchants, Spectacle and the Struggle over Public Space in the World Class City* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), which is a study of the marketing of auto sport and the resistance to it in one Canadian city. The author’s forthcoming book is the first attempt by an academic historian to present a comprehensive history of the sport in Canada.


27. Ibid., 3.
35. Karen Hall was shown leading the B Sedan class in the BC Region Championship: *CTT*, 10, no. 11 (July 1968), 55. She and McColl had both competed in a “powder puff” race in 1961.
42. “Sports Motor Car Club First Evening Rally, 7 June 1960 [results],” *The Exhaust*, 17, no. 3 (June 1960), n.p., copy in private papers, John Gallop; “Club News East and West”, *CTT*, 4, no. 3 (November 1962), 49. *The Exhaust* was the Sports Motor Car Club’s monthly newsletter.
44. *Canada Track and Traffic* provided detailed coverage of these two major rallies every year. I am relying on its accounts. On Gillian Field in the 1958 event, the official results are from the BEMC files, CASC. See also: CASC, *Yearbook 1971*, 16; and Dwight Scott, interview with author, 17 April 2001.
45. “Don’t Knock This Woman Driver—She’s Champion Behind the Wheel,” *The Oshawa Times* 27 April 1972; 1981 results in National Autoslalom Championship file, and Memo, Judson Buchanan, National Director of Solo Events to CASC Executive Committee, 17 May 1984, CASC.

46. For example, women comprised about 10% of the competitors in the Atlantic Regional auto slalom event at Slemmon Park, PEI, August 2005. That was slightly higher than the female participation rate in the 2004 national championship, held in Quebec.

47. On the physical stamina and mental focus that top-rank racing requires, see: St. James, *Ride of Your Life*, 8-9.


53. See, e.g., the “Powder Puff Derby,” described in “Westwood Ho!” *CTT*, 2, no. 4 (December 1960), 34. Wilson quoted in “Reflections,” *CTT*, 1, no. 1 (September 1959), 35.


57. St. James, *Ride of Your Life*, 14; McCluggage quoted in Hogan, “Foremothers,” 18. Guthrie had been a physics major at the University of Michigan, an academic stature that set her apart from the vast majority of her male auto sport contemporaries.


64. Ibid.
65. Muriel Knap, interview with author, 2 March 1990 (on-tape). The author did not find data to prove or disprove this assertion. Preceding information on women’s roles came from files of twenty-four clubs spanning the 1950s to 1980s, but was not complete for all clubs for all years.


69. A typical amateur racer in Atlantic Region might spend $5,000 over the course of a season, over and above the original purchase of a race car and the mandatory safety gear, such as helmet and racing suit. Depending on the car acquired, that initial investment could cost $5–10,000.