

Mid-Unit 3 Assessment: Janet Guthrie Pioneered the Fast Lane

Four decades have passed since she first stepped foot on the track in her fire suit, yet Janet Guthrie’s impact remains just as prevalent in 2016 as it was in 1976. She continues to inspire some of NASCAR’s most successful athletes, including Dale Earnhardt Jr. and NASCAR Camping World Truck Series wheelwoman Jennifer Jo Cobb.

Guthrie’s recent nomination for the Landmark Award for Outstanding Contributions to NASCAR is confirmation of her legacy and acknowledgement of the adversities she had to overcome. It has, after all, taken her years to move from being the hecklers’ main target to an embraced figure.

The nomination was “a completely unexpected honor,” she told NASCAR.com.

Earnhardt, an avid historian of the sport, is pleased she is getting the recognition.

“You know, she was tough,” he recalled. “What it must have been like in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s to be trying to get out there and compete as a female. That was unheard of.”

Recounting to NASCAR.com a scene from 1976 when she drove for team owner Rolla Vollstedt, Guthrie is honest about what she faced each day at the race track.

A group of bystanders asked her:

“Hey Janet, you gonna go out on the track today?”

“Yes, I hope so,” Janet responded.

“Well we don’t. We hope you crash on our corner.”

“I went back to Rolla’s garage,” Guthrie explained, “and kicked a few tires, but by the time I went out on the track I had made that (anger) vanish.”

It could be a different day, race track or group of critics, but both the spoken and unspoken message was always the same: she was not welcome.

Guthrie had the brains—with her Bachelor of Science in physics and aviation license—the talent, resilience and a fiery personality to boot. It was her gender that was her shortcoming in the eyes of so many.

Today, however, is a different story. She is celebrated as a pioneer who helped break down gender barriers in a high-octane, male-dominated arena.

“She proved being a female race car driver is possible,” Cobb told NASCAR.com.

The Iowa native was the first woman to compete in the Indianapolis 500 as well as the Daytona 500. Her sixth-place finish at Bristol Motor Speedway in 1977 is shared with Danica Patrick (2014, Atlanta Motor Speedway) for the top finish by a female in NASCAR’s premier series in the modern era, 39 years later.

She clearly wasn’t crashing on too many corners.

A steering wheel and a gas pedal

It all began with a classified ad that read, “1953 Jaguar XK 120 M coupe, \$1,200 ...”

This one advertisement would mark the beginning of her story.

Guthrie admitted in her autobiography, “Janet Guthrie: A Life of Full Throttle,” that by 1954, the Jaguar “was a sensation.”

Six years later, Guthrie purchased this “sensation,” and it would eventually accompany her on her first racing venture: gymkhanas—an intricate car course in which competitors drove one car at a time, as fast as they could. The fastest car, of course, won the event.

Guthrie was a natural and, she wrote, her Jaguar “became one of the cars to beat in gymkhanas.”

More than two decades after reading that all-important ad, another life-changing event would come her way. It, again, came in the form of a message—but this time a voice mail.

“This is Rolla Vollstedt in Portland, Oregon,” the voice said. The name rang no bells. “Please call me about a possible ride in the Indianapolis 500.”

At first, Guthrie was sure it was a scam.

“Well, of course, I had no idea who he was when he first told me,” she said.

But after investigating Vollstedt’s name she quickly realized, “Vollstedt was real.”

Once they connected, Vollstedt told the young Guthrie he was interested in having her race for his team.

But he also gave her a harsh truth: “You will never be a winning driver, because no one will ever give you a winning car, because you are a woman.”

Guthrie’s biggest break occurred when Vollstedt invited her to test one of his Indy cars for the 1976 Indianapolis 500.

Influencing the next generation

Guthrie did not qualify for the Indianapolis 500 in 1976, but did so for the 1977 Indianapolis 500. It launched her professional racing career. Yes, with backlash. But it also was off to an unprecedented start.

Guthrie went on to compete in 33 NASCAR premier series races, and notched five top-10 results. She also participated in two 24-hour races at Daytona International Speedway (1966 and 1967).

As Earnhardt Jr. said: “She didn’t just race once or twice then disappear. She was very good.”

Reflecting with NASCAR.com on her decorated career, Guthrie revealed how she stayed passionate while surrounded by countless critics.

“The only way to deal with that stuff was on the race track; there was no other way to deal with it,” she said. “As long as I had a car to drive, I figured I could handle whatever came with the territory.”

Her legendary tenacious drive still impacts today’s talent, including Cobb, who has nothing but appreciation for the pioneer female racer.

“Foundations must be strong in order to endure, and I don’t think female drivers could ask for a stronger foundation than Janet,” Cobb said.

More history at 78

When NASCAR announced on Feb. 24—12 days shy of her 78th birthday—that Guthrie was nominated for the Landmark Award, she was honored, but it also left a reminder of a hole in her resume that will never be filled.

“I’d give anything to have been able to continue competing in NASCAR Cup races for the necessary 10 years to be eligible for the NASCAR Hall of Fame,” she told NASCAR.com. “I truly believe that I would have won Cup races in less than the five full seasons that was standard at the time.”

Her admirers believe that, too.

“There are people in this world who are just born with it— and that means a special case of perseverance and true grit—and it seems that she has that factor that would enable her to make her mark no matter what generation of NASCAR she was involved with,” Cobb said.

It’s that same perseverance and grit that Guthrie hopes is reflected in the future. Most of all, she just hopes that drivers get an opportunity to shine.

“There is female talent out there, and the only question is will another talented woman get the chance,” Guthrie said.

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