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Through The Esses - Mary Katharine's Dreams Have Persevered

03/02/08 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

Mary Katharine is a name followers of the Spec-Miata class may be familiar with. Anyone that followed the 2006 SPEED World Challenge series may also recognize the name. It is also entirely possible that movie goers will one day come to know Mary Katharine and her life story, for it is a story filled with desire and heartbreak and one that has come full circle to a point where her earliest dreams have come true.

Katharine raced a Tindol Motorsports prepared Mazda Protégé in the 2006 World Challenge series and equated herself quite well for someone who was running in her first full season of racing at that level, and while driving a car that was at least a year behind the rest of the field in terms of competitive potential.



A much abbreviated rendition of Katharine's story follows here. While space and time constraints have prohibited us from providing the kind of in-depth detail one would expect in a motion picture, we will at least attempt to give you a picture of this amazing woman who found the drive to put her own life in motion – fast motion – after having her 'life's tires' blown out when she least expected it

"When I was a little girl, playing with my toy cars instead of dolls, it was always in the back of my mind that one day I'd like to be a race car driver. There were two things I wanted to be back then: a chef and a race car driver. I first went to a local cooking school when I was 11 and I actually began catering parties shortly after." My passion for cooking continued long after I was married at 19. Years later, after starting a family I knew I couldn't devote the time required to become a professional chef, but, pregnant with my third daughter, I enrolled in culinary school to become a pastry chef. Pastry chefs' hours, I knew, were far more flexible. I started working for a country club and would arrive at 4 a.m., run for an hour, then shower and work from 5 to 1, when I had to leave to pick my daughter up from school.

Katharine's life was moving along as well as any family could ever wish for until one wretched day in September of 2002.

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“In the fall of 2002 I found myself going through a very unexpected divorce after 17 years of marriage. I had been out jogging and when I returned home my husband told me that he was going to leave me. It was a complete surprise. “When he left I was completely devastated and suddenly I had to hold the world together for my five daughters, then aged 1 to 9. I soon found that the best way for me to do that – and keep from succumbing to my grief - was to immerse myself in something in addition to my normal routine.

“Racing was something that I had not thought seriously about, except for that dream I had in the back of my mind as a little girl. Shortly after my husband left I decided to learn how to race cars. I knew the discipline and level of concentration required would leave me little time to think about my situation.

“I did some research and learned that the Justin Bell Motorsports Experience was at Moroso Motorsports Park, which is only about 40 minutes from where we live here in Florida. I enrolled in January of 2003, and I learned to race in Corvettes and Camaros. It was a challenge to learn all the techniques in cars that felt so big to me. I was used to my Lotus that I had run a couple of auto-crossing events in. I told my instructor at Bell that the Corvette felt like a Newfoundland to my Jack Russell Terrier!”

“When I went to racing school, the only person that knew about it was my younger brother, Michael. He also races, in the Milwaukee area. Even my mother didn’t know about it. My children only knew that I was doing ‘something with cars’ for the weekend.”

Her first taste of speed left this pastry chef hungry for more just desserts. She found a second helping in the form of a Japanese race car. It wasn’t a Corvette, but it was a way to enter into the world of sportscar racing. That gave her the outlet she needed to distance her mind from the heartbreak.

“A friend of mine had an old Mazda RX-7 that had been mothballed and he wanted to bring it back on track and have me run a few endurance races with him. My first ever race in the RX-7 was a vintage event that took place during the Sebring 12 Hour weekend. As you know, the crowds for the 12 Hour are huge, so I thought it was that way at all races. At my next race I was really disappointed in the size of the crowd!”

For that first race, Katharine may have noticed that there were many unknown faces in the crowd, but there was at least one very familiar and special.

“When I went to Sebring for that first race, my brother Michael flew down just to buckle me in. That was a pretty emotional day for me. As a tribute to him, when I eventually had my own race car built, I painted the bottom of it the same color as his car. In that way I have my brother with me every time I race.”

“I only did a couple of races in the RX-7 when a friend suggested that I should try racing in Spec Miata. He said it was very competitive and relatively inexpensive to get into. My friend had also told me that if I could do well in a class like Spec Miata then I could really feel accomplished as a driver. He told me it would be extremely challenging and at times humbling - and that is still true today. I was hooked on the class after my first race in a rented Miata in August of 2003. Meanwhile, I was given opportunities to race a few times outside of the Miata box, and won races in Improved Touring and Vintage.

I raced in rented cars until February of 2005, when I had my own car built. It made economic sense because satisfying my insatiable appetite for racing had become quite costly in rented

rides. I ran 20 race weekends that first season with my car, earning several top 5 finishes. Since then I have won in the car and taken pole position with it as well. In my last race at Sebring, I finished seventh out of a field of 51 cars. “

And just as has happened at least once with every other friction-fighting pedal-pushing racer before her, Katharine had her one big moment at speed where fate takes the wheel and all she can do is go along for the ride.

“I had a memorable, literally earth-moving crash at Road Atlanta on the front straight at the start of a race. After taking the green flag, I felt heavy contact in the right rear and that turned my car and shot me head-on into the concrete wall, where I spun and continued to make contact for what seemed like an eternity. The other car involved ended up in a horrific quadruple barrel-roll across the track and over the tops of several other cars. I came out of it with a very minor injury but my car was severely damaged. Every body panel except for the roof had to be replaced, but the car was repaired perfectly and lives again.”

(A video of the crash can be found at this url: <http://video.search.yahoo.com/video/play?p=spec-miata+crash&b=1&ei=UTF-8&fr=yfp-t-501&tnr=21&vid=1292598998> - Crash begins at 2:00 into the video)

Katharine was able to put her experience of being in a front row seat for the impromptu Mazda acrobatics display behind her quickly enough to begin the search for a bigger racing challenge.

“During 2005 I became friends with Mike Flynn, who was campaigning a Subaru in World Challenge. We talked about my possibly joining him in a second car that he was building. However, as the beginning of the 2006 season loomed it became apparent that the car was not going to be finished in time. But I was ready to jump into the series. My appetite had been whet!

“I met with Chris Tindol of Tindol Motorsports and he had an old Mazda Protégé - this was when the car to have was the Mazda 6 – and he said if I wanted to race it, it was still eligible for the series. I joined his team and I have to say he was very fair with pricing and he really helped me out. The car wasn’t quite as competitive as I would have liked but he was getting to rent it and he was doing me a favor as well.

“I ran and finished all 10 World Challenge races in that car. At the end of the season I was awarded the Hard Charger of the Year Award for advancing 71 positions over the course of the season. And while I was involved in World Challenge, there were several wonderful people who were so very good to me. They all made me feel welcome. They included all of the World Challenge staff and the other drivers but in particular Michael Galati, Peter Cunningham and Randy Pobst, who went out of their way to answer my questions and offer advice. Michael would watch me go into a corner and he would say ‘I think you could do this better, or try that’. Randy coached me often and my teammate, Charles Espenlaub gave me a lot of good advice as well.”

At this point we wondered how Katharine had been able to provide for the support of her five daughters, run a household, and still be able to afford to go racing.

“I was able to race that year because I had saved up enough money to fund that first season, but I knew that in order to continue I’d need the partnership of a sponsor. I was fortunate enough to work with an enthusiastic sponsor for the last two races of the ’06 season, and we all looked forward to the ’07 season in a new, more competitive car. The first race at Sebring did, in

fact, find me in a Tindol Mazda 6. Heartbreakingly, after the first race the sponsor company went bankrupt and in an instant my World Challenge dreams were shattered.”

Once again an unexpected and sudden turn of events would force Katharine to find a way to keep her dreams alive.

“For the rest of 2007 I went back to my Spec Miata and worked on keeping my skill levels up through some relatively inexpensive seat time. For the current season, I am seeking sponsorship partners to run in the Grand Am KONI Challenge series. I ran the first race at Daytona with GSM in a Volkswagen GTI. John Lewis and the rest of the team offered me a great opportunity to cut my teeth in a different series. I’m hopeful to continue with them for the remainder of the season.”

We mentioned at the beginning of this column that Katharine’s life story may one day be told on the big screens of movie theaters across North America. She supplied us with some of the details surrounding that project.

“I have had several lengthy discussions with some people who will be making a movie of my life. At the moment the objective is to release it as a full length motion picture for showing in theaters. The wheels in Hollywood seem to turn slowly but we are under contract with a production company that owns the rights to my story for a couple of years and I believe they have just secured funding for the project.”

If images of her life ever do brighten movie screens, we – as certified car nuts - have to wonder if the childhood objects of her intense affection will be accurately portrayed. We would think this is an important consideration for someone who has used auto racing as a way to drive her life forward despite a serious off-course excursion.

“I still have some of those toy cars today, despite the fact that my younger brother stole a lot of them! (We continue to fight over ownership.) My first toy car was a John Player Special – the F1 car. I loved, loved, loved that car! That was the one that spawned those initial images of me behind the wheel. I’ve been so fortunate to have been able to realize my dream and that today I continue to live it through my pursuit of club and professional racing.”

Somehow we suspect Mary Katharine’s five daughters; Nancy, Maggie, Lane, Mia, and Helen also feel pretty fortunate to have an accomplished racer in the family. A racer they call ‘Mom’.