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Through The Esses - Lyn St. James Mentors Fast Females

12/08/06 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

She has been referred to as “The American Woman Racing Icon Of The Century”. She was the first woman to ever win the coveted Indianapolis 500 Rookie of The Year award (1992). She has been invited to the White House to meet several presidents (Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Bill Clinton). She was selected by “Sports Illustrated for Women” as one of the Top-100 Women Athletes of the Century. She has spent years as a professional presenter speaking before large audiences - from varying segments of the business community - on the merits of positive thinking and reaching for goals through preparation.



And, if she absolutely had to, she could probably still teach you how to play the piano, having earned a certificate from the St. Louis Institute of Music.

Who is this accomplished, dynamic, award winning product of the racing world? She is none other than Lyn St. James

We spoke with St. James recently and our conversation took us down several paths. And that was only fitting for this experienced racer has seen her life path take many turns, and not all of them at speed or with a wheel in her hands. And it is the travels she has taken, and the lessons learned along the way, that she has committed herself to sharing with other young racers who would like nothing more than to enjoy the kind of career St. James has enjoyed.

To have a very real and positive impact, she founded the non-profit Lyn St. James Foundation (<http://www.lynstjames.com/ljsfoundation.htm>) in 1993. From the foundation website we extracted this mission statement: “*The Mission of the LSJ Foundation is to provide leadership, vision, resources, and financial support in order to create an open environment for women's growth in automotive fields.*”

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We soon learned that St. James has made it her mission to support and help guide young racers with real racing potential through the complex mix of emotions, mental diversions and stressful situations that are all a part of the world of professional racing. By sharing her experiences, and having professionals from various areas within the sport provide guidance and instruction on everything from talking to the media to landing sponsors, St. James is helping to position young talented women for a shot at real success.

But she was once a young woman on the way up in the sport herself, and so we asked her to go back in time for us and let us know how she got involved with racing at all.

“I enjoyed drag racing with buddies when I grew up. It was the muscle car era after all. I still am in contact with several of my friends from those days and they like to tell me they outgrew racing. And I just tell them I didn’t!

“I started going to the races and I soon learned it was not the kind of thing that pleased my parents, or society at that time, in the least. So I went to school and got the degree and the piano teaching certificate and there was simply no outlet for this exciting and interesting thing that I wanted to do. So I simply didn’t do it. But then I got married. My husband loved cars. He took me to the 24 Hours of Daytona and the 12 Hours of Sebring. I saw A.J. Foyt, Roger Penske, Mark Donohue, Pedro Rodriguez and all those famous people but towards the back of the grid I also saw there were Camaro's and Corvettes being driven by not so famous people. And I got a realization that ordinary people also drove race cars, not just super humans.

“I was now married and 21 and no longer under the influence of my parents, and with a guy who wanted to figure out a way for us to be involved in racing. We lived in South Florida and went to the regional races down there and became members of the Sports Car Club of America. We went to driver’s school and he got a Corvette and built it into a race car and I went out and bought a Ford Pinto from a local dealer and started running it in the Showroom Stock class. This was in 1973 and 1974 when Showroom Stock just started.

“In Showroom Stock you had to run the car absolutely stock. You couldn’t modify the car at all. For us to go racing, because of financial and technical considerations, I drove the Pinto on the street and then drove it to the race track and ran it as it was.

“Eventually the Showroom Stock Class became so popular that they divided it into three classes, A, B and C. I was in the C class with the Pinto and I wanted to run in the top class so I got a Cosworth Vega. It was all amateur racing but I took it very seriously and I worked very hard at it. My goal was to be a national champion because I still think that is one of the most accomplished things for a road racing driver.

“From 1974 to 1978 I ran in the class and eventually qualified for the SCCA Runoffs in Atlanta. I blew my engine in qualifying! I didn’t have a spare. And I had driven the car to Atlanta. It was a very good lesson in understanding the difference between preparation and desire. You can desire something and want to do it but unless you are prepared the likelihood is you are not going to be successful.”

St. James took this knock to heart and used the negative emotion it generated to examine her future involvement in this often-times exasperating sport.

“It was a turning point for me to have worked all year to get the points and finish second in the Southeast region and be invited to the run offs. And then to have it all come to a screeching

halt so early was quite devastating. I contemplated quitting that time, and several other times along the way, but I always reassessed the situation. I realized I had choices. I could quit, or I could decide not to take it so seriously and go out and have fun; or I could decide to learn what it took to be professional and be prepared. And that was the choice I made.

“I started doing some IMSA races. I co-drove with my husband in his Corvette. In 1979 the Kelly American Challenge series started and I was the first woman to compete in that series. They had a bonus pay out for the highest finishing woman driver who completed at least half the race. And they created an extra bonus points and prize fund for the Top Woman Driver at Year End. In my first race I finished second to Gene Felton, just 79/100ths of a second behind. Quite frankly, that result put me on the map. It made people realize that there was actually a woman out there who could drive a race car and be competitive.”

One successful race does not a career make, as St. James soon learned the hard way.

“I ran the full season and won all the bonus money. The owner was pretty happy and I was hoping he would renew for the next season, but he didn’t. He told me his wife was jealous! The following year was a bit of a struggle. I did some IMSA stuff but it was scattered. I was actively seeking a sponsor, which I had started in 1978, when I wrote letters to car companies. I looked around and saw the Peter Gregg’s of the world, and others like Bob Tullius and Bob Sharp, who were being supported by the factories. It wasn’t until that engine failure at the run offs that I really became aware of what sponsorship was all about, and how it lent so much towards the goal of being prepared.

“I wrote to Ford, Chevrolet, Chrysler and more. I thought they needed to have a woman driver to support. Of course, they all turned me down but I just kept hounding them. I didn’t have much luck until 1981 when I finally did get Ford as a sponsor. Ford was not in racing at the time and Chevrolet was doing it in the background. Although everyone turned me down, Ford was the one that sort of kept the door open and I was finally able to land them as a sponsor for the IMSA Kelly series. I drove a Mercury Capri with Motorcraft sponsorship.

“I started racing for Ford in 1981 but going to Indy was not even on my radar screen. I was a pretty big thinker, but Indy never even entered my mind. When Janet Guthrie ran Indy in 1977, ’78 and ’79, I was still racing my Cosworth Vega and the Corvette. And I was having a blast! I was going to the races and working my butt off. I had some great and some devastating experiences but all in all I was having a really good time.

“When I watched Janet at Indy those years it came across to me that she was not having fun. It was obvious that they didn’t want her to be there. That certainly wasn’t what I wanted to do. I had some scrapes with some people but I was a part of my sport. I was the race director of the Florida region. I felt welcome and I was having a good time. What I saw of her experience made me think why would I want to do that? Why would I want to go someplace where people don’t want me and it doesn’t look like they are having any fun?

“And I was racing in cars with fenders, and at that time NASCAR wasn’t so hot, so it wasn’t like I was looking for that either. I just wanted to win a championship. I wanted to win the Kelly American Challenge Series and I wanted to win the GT championship when I was doing IMSA. My goal was to win the championship wherever I was racing.

“When I first got Ford as a sponsor, that’s when I realized I was a professional racer. Until you know where your next race is – I mean, let’s face it, we all know when the race is on the calendar but that doesn’t mean you’ll be able to make it. When you are a professional race car

driver you have a schedule and commitments and you have to manage the budget and it is a whole different world. It was a huge leap but I got there. I absolutely enjoyed it but at the same time we were blowing a lot of engines so it wasn't all rosy. I only had one year contracts with Ford so I was always on the edge wondering if they were going to renew.

"It was a huge step into an arena with PR people, photo sessions and making personal appearances and more. This is, quite frankly, one of the reasons I started the driver development program. It is true when they say be careful what you wish for because if you get it and you are not prepared for it, it can be an incredibly difficult change to manage. I was lucky that I was mature enough that I 'got it' real quick and realized that I had to step up my program.

"I have had a wonderful life in racing. When I got to Indy in 1992, it was another huge leap from the world of professional racing I was in for 10 years, to go to what was, quite frankly, the top of the heap in racing. The flood gates opened! I got so much fan mail. And they weren't just requests for an autograph; many people were asking me for advice. I did not anticipate this at all. And I didn't feel it was the right thing to do to just send back an autograph when these people wanted some constructive advice. They wanted to know how to get started in racing, or how to be like me or how to get to and win the Indy 500. I mean there were just all kinds of questions.

"I was challenged by the letters. I knew that the only way I could give them good, valuable advice was if I knew how good they were as racers, what their resources were, and what their potential was. The only way to do that was to have them come to me. I decided to create what I called a driver development program because I was hoping to be able to help these young people realize their potential.

"I couldn't find any way to fund it so I started my own foundation. At that time I was the president of the Women's Sports Foundation and I understood about not for profits. I realized that if we could do it in women's sports then we could do it in motorsports, so I started a 5013c and the IRS approved it. I then thought about all the things that I always felt I learned too late, or those things that I knew helped me be successful. You know how you say I wish I had known that five years ago? I tried to build a curriculum and a program that incorporated as many of those things as I possibly could. And in 1994 we ran our first program.

"To build this program I looked to the people who were my friends, advisors and contacts. For example, Human Performance International (HPI) in Canada came down to Indy when I ran there, and tested a bunch of drivers and I was the only female. It was watershed at the time. Race car drivers were always under scrutiny about even being considered athletes. Well HPI tested a certain number of mental and physical skills and they compared the data to other athletes that they had tested and they came up with hard core facts about our skills and reaction times, physical fitness, strength, cardiovascular fitness and more. They tested about 20 or so Indy drivers and fortunately I knew someone who was involved and they asked me if I wanted to participate. I said 'Sure, why not'?

"I found the data was so valuable to me about my personal level of fitness and particularly specific to racing. Upper body strength, grip strength, flexibility and cardiovascular and more. I had no idea how important cardiovascular fitness was! I changed my whole workout program and I am absolutely convinced that had I not made the changes and become a discipline of cardiovascular fitness I never would have been successful when I got to Indy. It also helped me be successful with victories at the 24 Hours of Daytona and 12 Hours of Sebring. I would have just continued doing what I was doing, which was a reasonable amount of training, but it was not to the degree that I needed it to be."

St. James called upon friends and associates to help her form the nucleus of her program to help young women – and in the early years, young men – who wanted to succeed in racing.

“When I started the foundation I asked HPI if they would work with me and talk to these drivers and give them a kind of mini-camp version of what they do. They were with me at the start and they come every year to help with the program. And other people I respect, like Judy Stropus from the media field, will come in and talk to the ‘students’ about how to write their own bio and write a press release. Many of these young people are still doing all these things by themselves, just as I did in the early stage of my career. Until I got a sponsor who would put together a press kit for me, I had to do it on my own.

“I tapped the resources of people who have helped me over the years, and those I respect in the industry. That gives them a chance to give back and it gives the up and coming drivers a chance to know who is out there they can look to for advice or maybe even work with at some point down the road.”

The foundation’s program isn’t open to everyone. Participants have to express an interest and then be extended an invitation.

“We do one four day seminar a year. I decide who gets invited by looking at resumes, reading bios, checking references and so on, and I look for people who have already tasted victory and have been in racing for enough time to know what it takes just to survive in this sport. And I am not just talking about physical survival. I am talking about mental determination. This sport will beat you up and I want to make sure they have been beaten up a few times and kept coming back. I look for people who can meet a challenge time and again.

“The program is my way of giving back to racing. In the beginning it was open to both sexes. Danica Patrick came when she was 14. Sarah Fisher came when she was 15. Andy Lally and B.J. Zacharias also came through the program. While racing at Indy I donated 5% of my prize money and 5% of my sponsorship money into the foundation. When I retired I became concerned about the longevity of the foundation, so we had to figure out how to fund the foundation other than through individual donors. So four years ago we created the ‘Women In the Winners Circle’ luncheon as a fund raiser. It’s been extremely successful and raises just enough money to keep our boat afloat.

“Because we really talk about women, and our funding is coming from individuals and the industry that are trying to help women in racing, the last four years we have only had women participate.”

The message St. James imparts is one of determination, preparation and persistence. She also delivers this same message outside of the foundation program, through paid presentations made to businesses and organizations seeking inspiration for their employees and members.

“I am a keynote motivational speaker and I make about 10 to 20 presentations a year. It keeps my name in the public eye and keeps my juices flowing. It enables me to have the luxury to donate my time to the foundation. Some people have the misperception that I am independently wealthy and that I just do this (the foundation) to have a tax write off like some other wealthy athletes. That is simply not the case! Some people also think that if they write a check to the foundation that I am taking money out for my own expenses. That is why I am considering a name change for the foundation but perhaps getting the word out here will mean that won’t be necessary.

“I totally donate my time and will occasionally make an appearance for another non-profit or a racing organization as long as they made a significant donation to the foundation.”

St. James has found that she still enjoys the challenge of stretching herself mentally to be prepared for what is to come.

“The message I deliver as a speaker is tailored to the audience. I do a lot of research on the company or organization beforehand so I can deliver an appropriate message not just about my personal experiences, but there are so many analogies in racing that transfer well to business. One example is when I talk about how important communication is and how hard it is to maintain success. I use the example of how Roger Penske failed to have either of his champion drivers – Al Unser Jr. and Emerson Fittipaldi – qualify for the 1995 Indy 500. Penske is the team owner with the most wins at Indy and one of the most successful owners in the history of motorsports, and yet that still doesn’t guarantee that he will succeed every time out.

“I really enjoy the experience of being a motivational speaker. It is mentally stimulating. In racing you use 100% of your mental and physical capacity and park your emotions. There is nothing else I have done that has similar characteristics that challenges you and lets your emotions rest. I play tennis and engage in other athletic activities but they don’t provide that same mix. Making presentations doesn’t challenge you physically, but it is mentally stimulating and requires concentration to relate to the audience.”

Today, racing rosters do include the names of women like Danica Patrick, Liz Halliday, Dana Moore, Sarah Fisher, Katharine Legge, Milka Duno, Melanie Troxel and others. But St. James would rather those rosters reflect a greater degree of acceptance and success by females in the sport she loves. But she sees a future that is getting ever brighter for women.

“There are more opportunities for women now than there were in the past, but I haven’t seen the amount of progress I had expected. I mean, when I ran for Ford in the ‘80s, I didn’t understand why every other car company didn’t at least try to hire a woman driver. Most of the time, when something is successful, people tend to replicate it. Even after I was no longer racing for Ford, none of the car companies picked up on the idea. It amazes me that in today’s society, when you have so many companies under scrutiny to make sure they provide equal opportunity, that there isn’t a proactive effort to change the look of the grid. It makes good business sense to have your sport represent society a little better....and it’s the right thing to do.

“But I am enough of a racer to know that racing consists of individuals competing against one another! There isn’t a big collective GOD out there in racing saying ‘OK, we have to do the right thing here.’ So I don’t criticize the sport so much as I wish it were different. That is probably why I am motivated to try and make a difference and engage other people in the process. I’d like to give them an opportunity.

“The sanctioning bodies are actually the ones who have begun to realize this and I am pleased that they have been so supportive.”

Throughout her active racing career, St. James worked with or raced against many people, some of whom would become good friends. One of these is Jack Baldwin, the legendary road racing competitor. He had this to say about St. James:

</>“Lyn is a good friend and I always look forward to seeing her big smile wherever our paths cross. I think Lyn was and still is quite remarkable. Lyn St James had the dream and desire to

excel as a race car driver in what was and still is a man's world. Although Lyn was very competitive behind the wheel, and qualified for and finished the Indy 500 as well as winning races, that was not her greatest asset. She was absolutely the best at creating opportunities by marketing her talents to corporate America. Lyn set the bar for professionalism, and laid the way by example for other talented female drivers with similar dreams to chart a course in motorsports. It is a pleasure to say I raced with her and to call her a friend."

Before we finished our conversation with St. James, we simply had to learn more about her experiences in the world of music. After all, if her passion to pound a keyboard had overwhelmed her passion to drive race cars, we would probably never have had this conversation at all. But we learned that, for her, hitting the right note was never as important as hitting the apex.

"I went to the St. Louis Institute of music primarily because my parents had paid for 13 years of lessons. When I graduated I decided I should try to do something with my training so I went to this store that sold pianos and organs and I became a part time teacher on weekends and evenings. Playing was never a passion for me. As a child you really don't know what your passions are. But I can tell you that I am not a musician! Later on, as I got older, I even tried to play after having a few drinks a couple of times to see if that would loosen me up, but playing the piano was just not what I was meant to do!"

"I do think practicing all those years did supply me with discipline and some things I was able to apply in life, including driving race cars. But I am a disciplined person anyway."

And still a competitor at heart.

"I do some vintage racing and I've raced at Goodwood a few times. I don't own any race cars and I don't have the funds to do it on my own, but if there's someone who is gracious enough to invite me to drive their race car... I'm there!"