

Fast and Fabulous: Vogue Meets Susie Wolff

Charlotte Sinclair – Feb 27, 2014

There is no confusion as to what Formula One is about: driving as fast as humanly possible. Humanly, yes - but mostly the "manly" part of that word. This is the very apex of masculinity, a male dominion almost entirely impenetrable to women, equivalent to pit-mining in its gendered monotone. The kind of world, in fact, in which its big boss, Bernie Ecclestone, makes such charming **remarks** as: "Women should wear white, like a domestic appliance."

Which is not to say you don't encounter women at Formula One championships: "grid girls" in hot pants hold up the position boards. What you certainly haven't seen - or at least not since 1976 - is a woman behind the wheel of one of those £150-million cars. Female Formula One drivers are as rare and precious a creature as snow leopards. Until, perhaps, now.

"Do you know anything about F1?" asks Susie Wolff, a tiny, blonde, 30-year-old Scot in skinny jeans and ballet flats, standing under a denim-blue sky at Barcelona's Circuit de Catalunya. Wolff is currently the only female driver in Formula One; there are others racing up motorsport's junior ranks, including another Brit, 20-year-old Alice Powell, but for the moment Wolff is alone here. In other words, she's the fastest woman in the world. A development driver for Williams, one of the most storied teams in motorsport, the team Ayrton Senna once drove for (and died representing), Wolff joined Williams last year, graduating from seven years of racing German touring cars for Mercedes, and a career in motorsport that began when she was just eight years old.

Last October Wolff made her Formula One test. It was her first time driving a real F1 car, at speed, with g-forces to match. "People were really unsure how that day would go," Wolff says in a Scots accent flattened by German vowels, the result of her bilingual years with Mercedes. "Was I going to be able to **cope with** it? Was I going to put it in the gravel? There was a *lot* riding on that day." At Silverstone, Wolff was given 10 laps to achieve a 52-second lap time. She made it on her very last turn, clocking 52.34 seconds. "Somehow I knew I could do it," she says.

In Barcelona, it's pre-season test day. In the paddock Wolff stops to smile for fan photographs before leading me into the belly of the beast: the pit garage. It is surgically spotless. A row of men are hooked up to computers, analysing lap results while, beyond, a group of mechanics in Williams's regulation navy blue are drilling tyre bolts into place on the team's F1 car at such exquisite volume that I clutch my ears (Susie doesn't even blink).

The mechanics worry about the vehicle like newborn babies. (Such is the level of paranoid secrecy surrounding each team's design - **at stake**, potential revenues of £500 million - screens are pulled across the garage doors to stop **prying eyes**.) "What people **underestimate** is how much you have to learn even to get out of the garage," she says".

I was always an adrenaline junkie, always competitive, always a speed freak," Wolff says over a glass of squash in the Williams tent. "Racing's in my blood. My mum met my dad when she went to buy her first motorbike in his shop. While my dad was racing bikes, my brother and I used to go and play on the go-karts." Her parents soon sold the motorbikes to buy Susie her first kart. "When you're eight, you're not thinking about the future. But karting was always the big passion, the big love." The family spent the next 10 years driving around Europe, competing in championships.

Aged 13, Wolff saw a young Jenson Button win a Formula Three race (the junior category of Formula One). "That was when I decided I wanted to drive, that that was what I wanted to do with

my life." At 14, she shared a podium with Lewis Hamilton (he came first, she third). "Susie was massively fast that weekend," says Hamilton, "but she had never been to the podium before. I had to help her open her bottle of champagne."

It was not without sacrifice. "My mum worried that I missed out on the whole drinking, partying, getting-crazy teenage stage." Yet a certain steely determination **runs in the family**: few parents would pursue their daughter's passions with such determination, nor in a sport with such a high level of danger. "We are quite a strong family," agrees Wolff's mother, Sally Stoddart.

After a year at university ("I spent my student loan on racing"), Wolff quit to move down to Silverstone. "I lived in a house with six other drivers, all men, all of us chasing the same dream of F1," she says. "There was never any romance; I decided very early on that I would never date a racing driver. You can't be one and date one," she laughs.

But even at rookie levels, motorsport is exorbitant, requiring heavy cash injections. Despite being nominated, twice, for Young Driver of the Year, and winning backing from BT, Wolff couldn't meet the £100,000 annual costs of competing. Then, while out running, she broke her ankle: "It was the lowest point in my career," she says with feeling. Mercedes offered a lifeline in Germany. "I flew to Stuttgart with only my helmet, got in that car and just went for it." On a one-year contract, she raced sport-cars for the team for seven years.

Wolff has always been treated as a trophy as much as a driver. In Germany, her sponsors made her drive a pink car. "I hated it, it was such a cliché. It made me a target." No one wanted to be bested by a girl, least of all her teammates. "It's hard for a young boy of 20, who thinks he's the next Schumacher, with a girl as his teammate and he's **struggling to** beat her. But the team would catch on to the back of that and use it to motivate him. And I would be like, 'Why are you making my life harder?'" The memory still smarts. "There were definitely moments when I thought, 'Can I do this?' I remember locking myself in the toilets at a racetrack and bursting into tears. I felt so alone. It took all my strength to go back out there and face all those guys."

The pressure to continually prove herself must be exhausting. Wolff says, "There are times when you're working with new people and you can see they have doubt in their eyes. But then you do well and they say, 'You did a fantastic job.' I always reply, 'I'm only here because I can do a fantastic job.'"

"Susie has definitely got the capability," says Lewis Hamilton. "She's in good shape, very intelligent and has the ability to compete against the tough guys. At some stage there will be somebody who comes along and breaks down the barriers for a whole generation." Her achievements are already significant. Though, Susie argues, she doesn't want those achievements to signify anything other than extraordinary ability. "I don't see it as racing with all those men, I see it as racing." After all, she says, "I'm a racing driver. I just want to go as fast as I can."

Adapted from: <http://www.vogue.co.uk/news/2014/02/27/fast-and-fabulous>

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