



# Fuel For Thought

Landspeed Louise

## It's Tiara Time, Boys

The food has no idea, the brush oblivious and the surgical instrument not interested. All are equally subservient, responsive only to the person wielding each - just as a vehicle reacts to input from a driver. Any inference that gender makes some appreciable difference to the outcome is simply absurd, or twisted by trepidation.

It has been my great pleasure to watch women enter the driving ranks. Angelle Sampey, Zohreh Vatankhah, Laleh Seddigh, Danica Patrick, Erin Crocker, Leilani Munter, Milka Dunno, Ashley Force, Erica Enders, Katherine Legge, Liz Holiday, Tanis Hammond and Tricia Shaffer, among others, have all punctuated motorsports with brilliant driving prowess.

Joining the Steve Fossett world land speed record team in November 2007, I posed the idea of a female driver and while we foremost wanted the BEST driver, we also didn't want to overlook anyone and decided to put out the "ladies welcome here" message.

In came more than 90 replies, the vast majority from women, but less than two dozen were qualified and the short list was whittled down to eight women. It didn't matter which of these gals eventually did the deed, the epic historical point was that the 40,000HP ride would go to a woman.

Announced on a rare day, February 29th, the candidates who agreed to drive upwards of 800MPH, are from motorsports and aviation. They are:

*Vicki Cruse* - 2007 US Unlimited Aerobatic Champion; Lt. Alex "Kone" Deitrich - Naval Aviator, F-18E Super Hornet; Jessie Harris - Jet Dragster and Top Fuel Driver; Kathy Jarvis - Pro Rally, Off-Road Racer and Professional Stunt Woman; Peggy Llewellyn - NHRA Pro Stock Motorcycle Rider; Dr. Jeanine Pflum - Bonneville Salt Flats National Record Holder; Melanie Troxel - NHRA Funny Car and Top Fuel Driver; Felicia "Petey" Verrett - Motorcycle Racer.

As of this writing in late March, Dr. Pflum bowed out due to pressing medical duties and Lt. Deitrich was too tall for the diminutive cockpit. Vicki Cruse and Kathy Jarvis fit well. The remaining gals should have "tried on" the 48-foot car by the time you read this.

Assisting Program Manager Eric Ahlstrom in the driver evaluation process will be a distinguished advisory board that includes:

*Lee Bebel* - Aviation World Speed

Record Holder, Phantom pilot, Fossett LSR test driver, Reno Air Race instructor; RAF Wing Commander Andy Green - World Land Speed Record Holder, Thrust SSC at 763MPH and Dieselmax at 350MPH, Phantom, Tornado pilot; Andy Granatelli - "Mr. Indy 500", Bonneville World Record Holder, driver development expert; Paula Murphy - First female licensed by NHRA to drive a fuel car. Experienced jet, rocket, sports, off-road, stock, Indy cars and driver instructor; Al Teague - World Land Speed Record Holder at 409MPH.

"A few remaining applicants are still reviewing their ability to work with our schedule, and that's been the hardest requirement for the qualified candidates," said project manager and chief engineer Eric Ahlstrom, "The team remains committed to Steve Fossett's vision."

Driving veteran Paula Murphy believes, "It would be monumental to have a woman set the world land speed record, something that has never been done. Sponsors ought to be jumping up and down to get their name on the car. Think of the publicity with a gal driving."

Andy Granatelli arranged for Murphy to drive Walt Arfons "Avenger" jet dragster to a 226MPH USAC timed record on the salt in 1964 - long before Betty Skelton, Lee Breedlove, or Kitty O'Neill.

"Lots of press were there, but the Wingfoot Express didn't run because it had rained," recalled Murphy, "I only had 3 miles of dry salt and ended up braking through the water to best my previous 171 salt record in the Avanti."

As a testament to the drawing power of women drivers, when she arrived back at the hotel a couple hours later, still clad in her silver driving suit, comedian Jack Benny happened to ride up in the elevator with her.

Murphy about fainted when he said, "Say, aren't you that gal who was out at Bonneville and broke that speed record earlier in the day?"

Judy Sights, currently the SCTA Treasurer, recalls the myopic perspective held by many guys who often vulgarly reminded her that there was to be "No tits in the pits" usually accompanied by a snicker, chortle or self-absorbed snort.

In 1998, she and husband Bob sold their cabin in the mountains to buy a street roadster. At age 60, she donned Nomex and became the "knittin' racer" due to her propensity to knock out a sweater while waiting in line, but has never experienced any push-back about driving.

"I've had nothing but support," noted Sights, now 70, and still driving, "Often

more support - people wanted me to do better than Bob did."

As for the world record runs with a gal at the controls?

"Why shouldn't it be all women?" she says, "My mother raised me in a forward-thinking environment."

During a test session for the Fossett LSR racer, Sights met Kathy Jarvis, but initial observations led her to believe Jarvis was part of the crew. Later, when she discovered that Jarvis was vying for the driver's seat, she recognized the sincere attention to detail as immersion into the process.

Betty Burkland remembers that in the mid-80's many people, including women,



Betty Burkland

would disdainfully ask her, "How'd you get them to let you do that?" She cheerfully replied, "What do you mean? It was my turn."

Others would walk up and ask her husband Gene, "How did she do in the car?" and him being the gentleman he is, would respond, "Why don't you ask her she's standing right next to me."

"They wouldn't talk to me," chuckled Betty, "Many were very threatened by my driving a race car."

When she drove George Field's Trackmaster Competition Coupe in 2003, everything was very different. With the help of 14 hardcore racers from five different teams, grandma earned her life membership into the 200MPH Club with a 263MPH record at age 63.

Back home in Great Falls, Montana, her pinochle group stood up and clapped when she walked into the room, and she often wears her red "2 Club" hat and shirt and "rubs it in good." The prejudice, or chauvinism, has for the most part, gone limp.

Burkland was struck by the "very cool assortment of people" and concluded with, "You go girls, good luck to you all, we will be waiting to see who makes it."

There is still a long way to go for the Fossett LSR team, but if they get the job done, the crown of motorsports will become a tiara. Oh my.

### When Rockets Ran

In the mid-1970's I was running around North America racing jet dragsters and we often shared the exhibition stage with rocket car teams. Besides being wicked quick, the funny cars, dragsters and go-karts were unsettling when they launched and if you wore anything cotton near the fueling operation you would spontaneously combust.

I never got used to the petite cars that were always pushed into position on the starting line and sat dead silent until a dainty little white puff snaked out of the exhaust nozzle. Moments later, the car sprinted away with an ungodly howling screech as the chemicals went berserk in the catalyst pack. It always made my heart jump a bit.

When NHRA's Dick Wells sent me Ky Michaelson's new book entitled "Rocket man" (ISBN-13:978-07603-3143-9) I was intrigued to know how Ky saw those thrilling days of yesteryear.

In the course of 240 pages Michaelson uses 27 chapters, an epilogue and three appendixes to spin his rocket tales of land speed racing, drag racing, amateur rocketry, rocket-powered toys and personality profiles on some colorful drivers.

John Paxton, Paula Murphy, Ed Ballinger, Captain Rollerball Lee Taylor and Kitty O'Neil all get their own chapters. Capt. R is Ky's son Curt, who at age 14,



Paula Murphy

got parental permission to strap on a pair of roller skates and a rocket back pack to blast down drag strips for \$350. In the winter the kid would switch to ice skates. And some kids think their parents are

monsters for not letting them have a dirt bike.

I asked Paula Murphy about her chapter and discovered the nine-paragraph chapter had factual errors in eight. Worse, he never contacted her for an interview or to verify any details.

The most glaring is Michaelson's assertion that Murphy quit racing after crashing in his rocket car. According to Murphy, she did not quit racing, but simply refused to ever again drive anything Michaelson built.

"I crashed on the first full pass," said Murphy who had only made half passes to get licensed, "The motor was supposed

to shut-down when I lifted off the throttle but it kept charging so I pulled the parachutes and steered until it stopped in a heap."

Michaelson intimates that Murphy's broken vertebrae were all her fault because she confused parachute levers with clutch pedals in her funny car. The thing is, she never had a clutch pedal in the funny car and had never had a wreck before, or after the rocket car debacle.

Murphy and Dave Anderson also set USAC timed speed records in Tony Fox's "Pollution Packer" rocket car on the salt. Michaelson chose to provide readers with only three obscure records out of 13,

ignoring Anderson's and Murphy's numbers, yet spends half a page bragging about how they celebrated in Vegas. Go figure.

Appendix B tells reader how a hydrogen peroxide rocket works and there is a chapter where he talks about his rocket competition of the era and another with a rocket-powered blender.

Perhaps I'm too close to it all, having lived through it, to be entertained. However, for those who don't know much about the amazing jets and rockets that wowed the crowds in the stands 30 years ago, it's one man's recollection and who are we to argue with his \$27.95 vision?

Forget about referencing anything easily as there is no index. I can understand that Michaelson might not understand the essential value of an index, but a leading publisher of automotive books? Tsk. Tsk. **GG**



Vicki Cruse

*Note:* Photojournalist Louise Ann Noeth is the authoress of the award-winning book, "Bonneville: The Fastest Place on Earth," a complete historical review of the first 50 years of land speed racing now in its 7th printing. For more details and to order, go to: [www.landspeedproductions.biz](http://www.landspeedproductions.biz).

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