

Fuel For Thought

with "Landspeed Louise" Ann Noeth

Paula Murphy, Grand "Marshallette"

I remember the first time General Motors asked me, a lowly novice, to a fancy schmancy dinner party in Hollywood. Because the invitation required attendees to arrive wearing a "suit coat & tie," I complied. I also wore a mini skirt and 4-inch heels. It was amazing how much technical information I could collect by simply sipping a cocktail as the engineers and the execs pleased themselves by trying to impress a pretty face.

There were damn few women in automotive journalism at the time, let alone ones who could drive racing machines so the PR folks took for granted the invitees could grow a beard, had an Adam's apple and could relieve themselves standing up. The invitations continued to arrive, but I think they had me back more for the novelty than because of my driving skills. I didn't care, as long as I got to drive hot machines, I was happy.

This all came back to me when I heard that my heroine Paula Murphy was named "Grand Marshal" for NHRA's California Hot Rod Reunion (C.H.R.R.) Friday through Sunday,



Oct. 1-3, 2004. (Shouldn't she be a "Marshallette?") Nevertheless, Murphy, unlike me, is a bonafide racecar driver who in her day beat the pants off her competition and that competition was 99 percent male.



She had to endure loads of goofy prejudice for no other reason than she was a woman. Where I made a game out of it after awhile and even admit to taking a few pot shots at some guys who were particularly mean and rude, Paula Murphy was always a lady whose conduct both on an off the track was a lesson in elegant diplomacy.

It was part of the reason "Mr. STP", a.k.a., Andy Granatelli, fell in love with Paula Murphy 45 years ago. What's more, Mrs. Granatelli never minded a bit. More than her sparkling wit and her feminine allure, it was primarily because of Paula's remarkable ability to proficiently drive any vehicle offered to her.

Ms. Murphy's driving career began in the late 50's with an MG and she quickly proved it was utter nonsense that motorsports was only for men. Some less talented men started to gesticulate wildly that a woman behind the wheel of a powerful racecar was dangerous and tried to permanently park the lady many came to know as "Miss STP" who was also the first woman to hold rocket and funny car professional driving licenses.

So it is interesting to me that NHRA, the same organization that decades ago made the hysterical decision that women couldn't drive fuel-powered cars and jerked Ms. Mur-

phy's license today shower her with the great honor of being the 2004 C.H.R.R. Grand Marshal. The pronouncement was handed down not because she had made any driving mistakes. Oh no. NHRA pontificated that it was for no other reason other than her chromosomal makeup, that the fuel category was "unsafe."

Really? I submit it was fear that moved the organization to act so irrationally. NHRA was forced to return Murphy's license when STP's attorneys (Paula's sponsor at the time) promised to drag the racing organization down the proverbial judicial quarter-mile if it didn't.

Imagine a girl beating the boys at their own game "fair and square" then touching up her lipstick before she collects her trophy. Sweet. Of course, the Indy car folks are still frozen in fear that the day will come when a lady sips that glass of milk at the end of 500 miles. NASCAR at one time banned women from the pits but allowed them on the track. Go figure. How completely stupid is that?

There has never been a racing machine that knows whether a man or woman is driving it. Machines respond to input. Period. Good input yields good results and vice versa. In motorsports, gender should be a non-issue. Women should be accepted into the racing ranks for no other reason other than how they handle the machine, for their skill and competency behind the wheel and not how they look. ANY racing hopeful should be judged on demonstrated skill nothing else. Anyone who thrives on competition wants to win, not just in a particular gender classification.

"If Paula were a man and not subject to the pressures and prejudices that are bound to exist in our sport,"



Granatelli candidly revealed years ago and reconfirmed in a recent interview, "She could be a candidate for a ride at Indy any old time. She is a racing star in her own right. As long as Paula Murphy remains a racer she'll be a credit to our sport. A careful, brave consistent and thoughtful example to all racers regardless of race, color, creed- or sex."

Granatelli explained that over the years he had employed more than 70 drivers and that overall Paula was the best to work with. "She couldn't be any better," he said with conviction, "Not only was she a very beautiful woman with a great PR sense- she knew what to say and do at all times, with me, the fans and sponsors. She was congenial, warm; she took instruction well and was as brave as she could be. All she wanted to do was drive, Paula was never a 'prima donna'."

Many people who attend racing events like to empathize with a driver, someone they can identify with and since a great many spectators in the stands are women it follows that women drivers would be easier to champion. Factor in the enormous purchasing power that women wield and it is simply foolish for manufacturers to ignore competitive female racecar drivers.

As for endurance- well few men could handle the rigorous gymnastics of childbirth. I'll admit that wrestling with cars of the 30's and 40's would have probably been brutally exhausting, but as the mechanical aspects improved and suspensions were refined, it obviated any concern about physical differences between men and women.

"A matronly Granada Hills housewife," is how the STP public relations staff used to refer to Paula Murphy. She who spent more time clothed in a fire suit than an apron, notched a spot in the speed business.

"She's made mark that will live in racing history as the greatest of all U.S. girl drivers. And after years of pushing racecars as both a hobby and a vocation, she is today as cultured, refined and as feminine as any gal you'd want to date," affirmed Granatelli who had read about Murphy's west coast racing exploits in Scooter Patrick's full-race P.A.M. Porsche and tapped her to help set a huge pile of national and international endurance records on the Bonneville Salt Flats driving Studebaker Larks and then Avanti's.

Together with pal Barbara Nieland, they were dubbed "The Flying Housewives". Paula scorched a two-way flying mile average of 161.29 MPH at the time, the fastest a women had ever driven under official U.S. Auto Club observation.

All three Granatelli boys (Andy, Joe and Vince) together with Barb and Paula, set more than 400 LSR records -- some of which still stand today. This was the first litmus test of Murphy's talent.

"When she started to lose control of a speeding car at well over 100 MPH, she learned to sit back with complete cool and correct gently without a trace of panic. Paula showed me then and there that she had the inner qualities of calm and judgment that make a race driver. She took instructions well, never cocky and always anxious to learn," concluded Granatelli.

Next she and Barb made four-way trans-continental record runs that is a saga in itself under full USAC steward ride-along observation. Next, without ever seeing one, she agreed to drive a jet dragster simply because Granatelli asked her.

So it was on a wet and sloppy salt surface at Bonneville in early 60's she drove Walt Arfons J46 "Avenger" jet dragster. The open-cockpit meant she was brutally buffeted by swirling air blasts throughout the runs. Murphy recalls "being battered about like a rag doll" at over 200 MPH. Vision blurred, she hugged the black line and hung on waiting for the promised excitement of stopping the car in 2 inches of standing water at the far end of the course.

"It was a whole new sensation," Murphy recalled, "Like a giant hand pushing me along by the seat of my pants with me coasting free."

Then car started to fishtail and she knew that if she spun out at that speed it might induce the car into a disastrous roll, maybe even tumble end over bone-busting end, so she pulled the parachute.

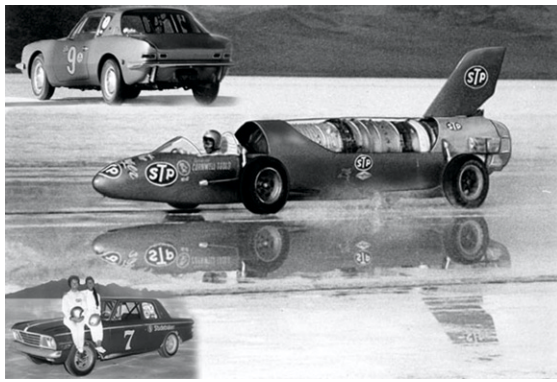
"I was already splashing water like a hydroplane by the time the

parachute popped and pulled the car straight to stop the fishtailing. The car slowed as if I'd hit a snow bank, I hit the brakes and when the car stopped I was in four-inches of water."

Top speed? 243 MPH. Imagine what she would have done on a dry surface with some gription. She purposely made the required return run slower, but the combined average was 226 MPH and the crew carried the rookie jet jockette out of the car on their shoulders.

It was also Granatelli who gave her the immortal spot of being the first woman to take a high-speed Brickyard spin piloting a Novi-powered champ car. Up until that point the only other gal who had driven the famed high-banked oval behind the wheel was aviatrix Amelia Earhart. As Granatelli put it, "We got it done in the combined name of chivalry and sweet publicity."

Just for the record, to inspire you gals out there who still think it can't be done, here's a short list of some of Paula's racing accomplishments:



- Consistent winner of women's events in California Sports Car Club road races, 1959-1962.

- Consistent winner in early model stock car races, small southern California tracks, 1960-1962.

- Annual competitor in Mobil Transcontinental Economy Run, 1961 through end of series.

- On Bonneville, in 1972, drove the Pollution Packer Rocket Dragster through the quarter mile in 6.7 seconds. At the 1973 NHRA Winternationals, her top speed in the quarter-mile was 258 MPH.

- Ran Talladega at 171.499 MPH to set a closed course record in 1971 driving one of Richard Petty's STP Plymouths.

- Driving a Studebaker, she became the first woman to compete for land speed records' at Bonneville and pushed her car to a record 161-MPH in 1963.

- She is the first woman in history ever to drive a racing car at competition speeds at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

- Drove around-the world in 1976 for GM and National Car Rental setting a record of 104 days.

- Drove in the grueling Baja 1000, Baja 500 and Mint 400 off road endurance races.

- Voted one of the four outstanding women athletes of 1972 by the Associated Press.

- Won more individual events than any other driver in the 1968 Union-Pure Oil Performance Trials.

- As the first woman ever to drive a jet dragster, her speed averaged over two runs was 226 MPH for the flying mile.

- And for all that, especially the last point, she has been denied membership into the Bonneville 200MPH Club. What a shame. Never mind, at least NHRA has finally realized what a multi-faceted gem of a role model Paula Murphy has been in motorsports. Good for them. 🏆

Ann