



Sunny Hobbs

by Mary A. Tobey

Fast and Feminine

Sunny Hobbs was surprised when she was asked about the difficulties of being a woman race car driver. “I am so accustomed to competing in this male-dominated sport,” she says, “that I forget how tough it is to do so, from other people’s perspective. I think I am just ‘used to’ being the only woman and have developed a way of handling it at the track that works for me.”

That admission reflects Sunny’s approach to her chosen sport: she perseveres to find a method of surmounting the obstacles, no matter how tough they may be.

Surprisingly, Sunny Hobbs as a young girl had “no interest in cars

or mechanics at all.” In fact, she classifies her younger self as a “girly-girl,” although she admits that she was active in sports. Then, as now, she was attractive as well as strong, feminine as well as athletic. Growing up, she had been to sports car events with her parents, but her passion for racing didn’t ignite until she had graduated from college with a degree in International Relations from American University in Washington, D.C.

That fateful day, Sunny and a friend went to the racetrack. “I just focused on it in a way I had never looked at racing before,” she remembers. “I think my parents just raised me to believe that you can do whatever you want to do in life. So I said, well this is what I want to do.”

So she looked into the sport, took out a loan, and bought a 1980 Malibu pure stock. She began racing as a hobby, like others take up tennis, softball, or billiards.

The obstacles weren’t far down the road. Though any racer faces aggressive drivers, Sunny seemed to get more than her fair share. So she learned how to drive defensively, like any new driver would. “You spend your first year figuring out how to get hit and not wrecking your car at the same time,” she explained. Unlike other new drivers, though, she had extra challenges. “There’s always going to be some guy out there that has some kind of issue with you being a girl. You get the ‘Why don’t you just stay home and stay in the kitchen?’

(These guys say,) if you’re fast you cheat, and if you’re slow you stink. You know, you can’t win (with them), but it doesn’t bother me at all.... I think just like any other sport, you know, there’s obstacles.”

Sunny beat the first obstacle by learning to drive aggressively. “Circle track racing involves a lot of beatin’ and bangin’, and you have to learn to drive that way,” she explains philosophically. “And that’s what I like about it. I mean, you can’t take people out for no reason—well, you can, but I don’t do that kind of driving.”

Off the track, she discovered that most people treated her just like anybody else. “I haven’t had any really nasty experiences, and if they start, I just turn and walk away.” The

**Sunny's advice to young women:
"Listen to your inner voice. Don't
listen to anybody else, because that
inner voice doesn't go away. If you
don't listen to it now, you're going
to end up hearing it later."**

sharp curves didn't throw her off track because she enjoyed what she was doing. "I was just having a good time. I loved it. I couldn't wipe the grin off my face every time I got out of the car. I was having a blast!"

Her hobby soon became more. She has raced in the ARCA series; she has owned her own NASCAR Late Model Stock team and driven for others. She has raced in the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) and in the National Auto Sports Association (NASA), where in 2000 she won the Valentine's Day 200 endurance race at Virginia International Raceway.

Since she started racing in 1994, Sunny has seen progress for women in racing, slow but steady. When she raced at Daytona in 2002, there were five females racing—a first at Daytona. Three weeks later, at Atlanta Motor Speedway, there were three women, another record. "That is continuing to happen more and more often," she says.

Another ongoing challenge that Sunny faces is finding sponsorship. "What's different about racing from other sports is you can't just have talent or ability or drive or ambition or whatever to be successful. You have to have...first-class sponsors. Unfortunately in racing, dollars equal speed, and what I see is that women drivers are just barely squeaking up through the ranks with under-funded teams, and they're not getting the media exposure they need; it's just a domino effect."

Sunny recognizes who has the power for ending discrimination. "I look to the sponsors as being responsible for promoting talent and not gender or race or whatever," she says, "because you

can talk about diversity programs and things like that all you want, but you really have to have companies that are willing to stand behind an individual."

The race to the top has not been without its setbacks. Sunny Hobbs walked away from the track two years ago. "There's just so many factors you can't control. It's just like a roller coaster. I got really down about it. I said, gosh, you know, I've come this far, and nothing has worked out. So I didn't race at all in 2003." But she couldn't stay away. "Sitting out stinks. I don't want to do that anymore.... So last year I got back out there." In 2004, she began her comeback with a sixth place finish at New Smyrna Speedway, and a tenth place finish in her first IPower Dash race at Kentucky Speedway.

Richmond's female race car driver has learned a lot of lessons that continue to take her safely around the turns. Her self-confidence and passion fuel her drive to find sponsors. "I believe in myself," she states. "If I didn't have the natural ability, I wouldn't do it."

She's also recognized the importance of "not letting things get you down." She's faced difficult situations—a problem with the carburetor that no one could figure out; getting rained out of practice; a new car and team. But even in challenging situations, "you've still got to push as hard as you can, and drive on the edge, go as fast as you can...and talk yourself through it until you can get a pit stop and change your tire or do whatever you have to do."

Another lesson is the necessity of passing up opportunities that aren't right. A driver may have a willing sponsor, she explains, "but if the team stinks, who's going to look bad?



Me.... You can only have so many experiences like that before your reputation suffers." She's seen other female drivers choose that path, taking any opportunity they could get, just out of desperation—but they ended up looking bad.

These lessons can help any woman maneuver the racetrack of life: *market your abilities; believe in yourself; don't let things get you down; and say no to the wrong opportunities.*

This female race driver has a sunny outlook on the future, for herself and other women. "You hear more about

female drivers lately, they're in the press releases more, they're on the racing websites, there's just more visibility.... I really feel like things are turning the corner." As for her own career, she projects, "This year should be a good year for me."

Pending sponsorship, she anticipates racing in Martinsville in April in the Craftsman Truck Series, as the beginning of the rest of a long career.

"(Racing is) really addictive," Sunny Hobbs exclaims. "I can't imagine doing anything else." ▼

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Next scheduled race: The NASCAR Craftsman Truck race, the Kroger 250, in Martinsville on April 9, 2005.

For more information on Sunny Hobbs and on sponsorship possibilities, visit www.sunnyhobbs.com.