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“What on earth are they doing in a racing car?”: Towards an Understanding of Women in Motorsport.

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“What on earth are they doing in a racing car?”: Towards an Understanding of Women in Motorsport.

Motorsport is an under-researched area of socio-historical study. There is particularly limited academic understanding of female involvement in the social world of motorsports. Therefore, this article focuses on the role of the media in presenting and establishing motorsport for women. In particular, a documentary analysis of articles published by a UK national newspaper group from 1890, and a case study of an all-female UK-based motor-racing championship are used to account for gendered processes that have influenced attitudes and behaviours toward women motor racers. The motor car emerged through technological progress in an overtly masculine-dominated industrial period. Traditional assumptions and biologically-deterministic attitudes toward women were used by men to position motoring and motor-racing as a male preserve. Newspaper reporting throughout the 1930s suggests an era of heightened success for women motor racers as a result of gaining access to a key resource in the form of Brooklands motor-racing circuit. Following the Second World War, there was increasing commercialisation and professionalisation of male-dominated motorsport, as well as renewed marginalisation and trivialisation of female participants within the newspapers. These processes continue to influence perceptions of women in contemporary motorsport.

Key Words

Brooklands; Formula Woman; Gender; Media; Motorsport.

“What on earth are they doing in a racing car?”: Towards an Understanding of Women in Motorsport.

Introduction

In 2011, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* published a special issue of papers focusing on the social world of motorsports. Prior to this issue, Pflugfelder had argued that ‘what we might call “motorsport studies” exist in fragments, as there have only been a handful of academic articles seeking to understand motor-racing culture’.¹ This earlier scholarly work had primarily focused on the dynamics of motorsports with tobacco sponsorship,² health,³ staging and managing events,⁴ and the environment.⁵ Hassan argues that the lack of academic engagement with motorsport is surprising considering the industry is worth an estimated £50 billion per annum with a global audience upwards of one billion people.⁶

This paper addresses an under-researched aspect of motorsports culture; the participation and experiences of women, with particular attention to the role of the media in representing and encouraging female participation.⁷ Following Hassan,⁸ we wish to engage with the ‘fascinating future’ for motorsport research considering the complexities of identity politics and specifically focusing on issues of gender and the history of women’s involvement in motorsports. Our study is based on a documentary analysis of *The Times* newspaper group from 1890 to 2010, and a case study of the all-female UK-based motor-racing championship ‘Formula Woman’.

Methodology

We undertook a documentary analysis of articles published in *The Times* groups of newspapers from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. Documentary analysis allows a greater socio-historical analysis of gender relations over time.⁹ Indeed, the analysis of representations of sportswomen in the mass media has a long and widespread history, with particular interest related to marginalisation, ambivalence and sexualisation of women in sport.¹⁰ Analysing media sources, such as the newspapers selected for this study, ‘offered insights into political, cultural and social thinking, conventions and values’¹¹ as they are presented by the journalists, and informed contextual understanding of how women's participation in motorsport has developed, as well as its impact on corresponding networks.¹² This analysis was informed by feminist theory – a group of perspectives which focus on gender relations in society, particularly those relations which subordinate and are oppressive toward women – in order to explain the evidence of changing attitudes and behaviours to women's participation as drivers in wider society, and within motor-racing, which we sought from the newspapers.

The original period of analysis was January 1890 to July 2010. 1890 was the year when the first recorded motor car reliability trials and motor races occurred.¹³ *The Times* newspaper group was chosen as there is a readily-available archive online that allowed for suitable and widespread searching of newspapers, including Sunday editions, back to 1890 – The TimesOnline archive. However, the archive only stores newspapers up to 1985, and *The Times* website only records articles from 2000-2010 so a fifteen period from 1986-1999 was not available for research. Key terms such as women/woman/female/females/women-only were systematically paired with other terms such as motorsport/motor-racing/racing drivers/automobile(s)/car manufacturers in order to collate as many relevant articles as possible. Furthermore, we searched for known associations, organisations, and committees as well as prominent start and finish locations to motor races such as Paris, France; Berlin,

Germany; and Madrid, Spain; and motor-racing circuits such as Silverstone, UK, in order to analyse a wider range of articles. In total, 125 papers were analysed. We were particularly interested in the social construction of texts, where readers are positioned within ideological content¹⁴, and so we explored any words that indicated a particular position regarding women in motorsport, along with words which described an emotional response to their participation or positioned the desirable behaviour of women in sport and society. The messages from the media sources were then cross-referenced against research findings from academic studies of women in motorsport cultures.

We also considered the role of the media in constructing a ‘new’ sport form with the development of Formula Woman, which was initially presented as a reality-television style competition. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the lived experiences of women involved with this all-female motor-racing championship. Interviews were held with three women motor-racing drivers and one championship associate who was directly involved in Formula Woman. The questions that were asked of the interviewees focussed upon three areas: their experiences of being involved with the Formula Woman series; their general opinions of views expressed towards women racing drivers; and their views on the unequal representation of women drivers in wider motorsport compared to males.

Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of the interviewees. Following the feminist principle of reciprocity throughout the research process,¹⁵ all women were sent their interview transcripts to review although no additional comments were received.

Starting from the Back of the Grid?

Motorsport is an umbrella term for many different types of motor-vehicle racing (including motorcycles, aeroplanes, and motorboats) but is commonly associated with the motor car.

Organisationally, motorsport is very diverse. Categories range from 'single-seater' 'open-wheeled' cars used in series such as Formula 1 (F1) and IndyCar, to 'multi-seated' 'closed-wheeled' series like the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) and the World Rally Championship (WRC). Away from the elite level are numerous sub-disciplines with different car makes, models, specifications and rules, including karting which provides the majority of young boys and girls with their first experience of motorsports.

According to the UK Motorsport Association website in May 2015, motorsport is 'one of the few activities that allow men and women to compete against each other on a level playing field'. This liberal feminist oriented statement espousing equal access to opportunities¹⁶ does not correlate to elsewhere on the website which states women 'make up only 8% of registered licence holders [and] are hugely under-represented among competitors'. In F1 for example, the Italian Lella Lombardi holds the distinction of not only being the last woman to start an F1 race in 1976 but also the only woman to have won points since F1 started in 1950. At the time of writing, significant attention in F1 was being paid to Susie Wolff, who was the first woman in twenty years to participate in a grand prix weekend when she drove in a practice session for the British Grand Prix in July 2014, but in 2015 she decided to retire because she 'believes her aim of racing in F1 "isn't going to happen"'.¹⁷ Women participate more regularly in North American-based IndyCar and NASCAR series, and the European-based Le Mans (France) and Deutsche Tourenwagen Masters (predominantly hosted in Germany and commonly known as 'DTM') championships, but they are still significantly under-represented in comparison to their male counterparts.¹⁸ In addition, motorsport networks such as pit crews, course marshals and team owners are primarily male preserves.¹⁹ Thus despite claiming to be a gender-equal sport, motorsport appears to share characteristics of many sports in that it is inherently gendered in favour of male involvement and control.

The challenges encountered by women in motorsport was recognised by the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), the governing body for world motorsport, in the creation of the FIA Women in Motorsport Commission (WMC) in 2009. According to the WMC website, it was formed to 'create a sports culture which facilitates and values the full participation of women in all aspects of motor sport'; thus following tenets of liberal feminism by focusing on equal opportunities and inclusive access for women in motorsport.²⁰ For example, in 2011, members of the WMC stated that dominant attitudes towards women in motorsport and the lack of female elite-level role models could be detrimental to a new generation of young female karters who do not see motorsport as a worthwhile career to pursue.²¹ In the following sections we will explore the historical trends, predominantly focusing on developments in the UK, which established a culture of marginalising and trivialising women drivers and then examine the lived experiences of some women who entered this male domain.

Early Gendered Relations and the Motor Car

Increasing industrialisation in the late-1800s in the UK brought about new technologies and inventions such as the motor car, whose 'association with the engineering industry implanted the car in a world of masculine language of engineers and entrepreneurs'.²² Indeed, Pflugfelder notes that 'the realm of the automobile was initially constructed as a largely masculine sphere'.²³ A monopolisation of knowledge and use of this new technology by males, due in part to the male dominance of the workforce during the industrial period, culminated in 'the social and cultural construction of much technology as masculine'²⁴, thereafter shaping gendered perceptions of women in motor-racing.

Of course, such attitudes were not exclusive to motorsports, and there is a raft of evidence which indicates that the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time when sports were used to develop ‘character’ among boys and young men to become effective leaders (in the upper classes) or discipline (in the working classes). Meanwhile girls’ and women’s involvement was certainly restricted and often repressed as a result of medical discourse which encouraged them to preserve their energy for their essential role in bearing and raising children.²⁵ Motorsport was ‘ostentatiously social’,²⁶ organised as it was by elitist, exclusive gentlemen’s clubs who worked to limit women’s participation. For example, Williams explains that at the turn of the twentieth century, the Royal Automobile Club (RAC) only permitted women into its offices between 3pm and 6pm.²⁷ The motor car itself epitomised privilege and upper-class lifestyle, and the burgeoning technology challenged the status quo of elite sections of British society and the traditional horse-and-cart culture,²⁸ as outlined in an article titled ‘The Motor Problem’.²⁹

Despite this prevailing culture, women were competing in motor-racing in this early period in some parts of continental Europe,³⁰ although not in the UK because the sport was illegal due to national speed limits which were not relaxed until the first decade of the twentieth century. Individual achievements were recorded such as: ‘Mrs Laumaille completed at Marseilles-Nice in 1898, Mrs Labrousse at Paris-Spa in 1899 [and] ... Camille du Gast finished 33rd out of 122 participants in the 1901 Paris-Berlin race’.³¹ Du Gast was a widower of a Paris department store manager and enjoyed extreme sports such as parachuting and powerboat racing. She managed to mix ‘her wealth, her magnetism, her independence, and her gallantry’ with participation in the 1903 Paris-Madrid race where speeds approached 75mph.³² However, these few well-connected societal women often competed against hundreds of other male drivers. Most early motor cars were owned and maintained by men, and ‘given the dominant gender ideology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

– the driver’s seat was seen as a naturally male position’.³³ The beliefs held by males in powerful societal positions transitioned into control of a new form of dangerous, exotic technology and worked to limit the involvement of early female drivers, including racers.

To allow for the sport to occur in the UK, but to bypass public roads where accidents and fatalities were increasingly commonplace,³⁴ 1907 saw the completion of Brooklands – the first purpose-built, privately owned, continuous motor-racing circuit in the world. As with most early motor-racing, Brooklands took its initial rules from those based on horse racing, such as coloured silks for the drivers, until it was realised numbers on cars were more easily visible. Furthermore, ‘the Brooklands Automobile Racing Club [BARC] officials pointed out that, as the Jockey Club didn’t allow women jockeys, they saw no reason why they should allow women drivers’.³⁵ Brooklands helped establish male dominance and exclusivity over early aspects of motorsport and, despite attempts to establish networks and organisations for women racers such as the Ladies’ Automobile Club in the early-1900s, the BARC officials were ‘worried about the effect women drivers might have on the macho image of motor-racing they wanted to create’.³⁶ For example, Lowerson claims that the 325 members of the Ladies’ Automobile Club ‘were essentially motor tourists; racing was usually regarded as distinctly unladylike’.³⁷

However, one article reporting from the Brighton Motor Week, where women had won some of the events against men, claimed ‘the ladies invaded the domain of the sterner sex, and not without success’.³⁸ Before Brooklands was built and barely a decade after the first recorded races when women had competed against men, the dominant gender discourse of the time was evident with motor-racing deemed by the reporter as a male domain. Although it would be another twenty years before women raced against men at Brooklands, in 1908 it was reported that there was a single ‘novelty’ race staged for women only.³⁹ Bullock explains that although growing spectator numbers were ‘enjoying’ races and ‘giving

the women a great ovation,...officials of the BARC were not impressed and were still unable to accept the thought that women were taking part'.⁴⁰ The male-exclusivity of motoring and motor-racing was maintained through traditional assumptions and biologically-deterministic attitudes evident in the newspaper reports:

It seems difficult to reconcile the right practice of motor-driving with the feminine lot and temperament. Feminine nerves are sadly liable to lapses through such prolonged trials ambitious motor-driving entails. The moral is that, when ladies go in for motor-driving, as they will do more and more, they must beware of the flattery which would make them believe that their more delicate organisation is specially adapted to control the sensitive mechanism of a motor-car.⁴¹

A broad belief by influential authority figures in society in 'innate biological and psychological differences between the sexes constituted a powerful and pervasive form of sexism ... systematically subordinating women in sports'.⁴² Nineteenth century masculine public school values such as courage, strength, independence and confidence both characterised motorsport pursuits and were oppositional to virtues of charm, grace and tenderness expected of women. The monopolisation of early motor-racing resources by males, a masculine industry from which the motor car emerged, and pervasive assumptions of female driving skill were to become so internalised over time that they became common-sensical, with motoring and motorsport 'constantly identified as a natural masculine quality and a regular stream of contributors to the popular and motoring press expressed a firm belief in the incompatibility of "feminine" traits and driving'.⁴³ Gendered perceptions in society and within other sports such as football – where women were banned from competing on Football Association affiliated grounds in 1921 – worked to constrain women from gaining access to

the same opportunities as some men in motorsport.⁴⁴ Some physiological opinions regarding women at the time are unsurprising, for unlike the racing cars of today, those of the early-1900s often weighed a couple of tonnes, were over fifteen feet in length, but could still travel at 100mph which meant that controlling these machines was challenging for both men and women.

The Impact of the First World War

Opportunities were provided for some women to drive when many men were called up for service in the First World War (WWI). Newspaper reports had begun to positively acknowledge the benefits of motor car development in society, including war, for ‘it would move troops rapidly for seizing strategic points, destroying bridges and railways and would carry stores and ammunition whilst moving artillery’.⁴⁵ The technologies and advancements that resulted from the war also increased reliability with mechanical breakdowns less common than before. Significantly, necessary changes to traditional gender roles meant that women filled the void of jobs left behind, including masculine-perceived occupations such as driving. Women gained more familiarity with a technology that previously had been beyond reach as ‘during the conflict they had been ambulance drivers, taxi drivers, lorry drivers, and occasionally, military motorbike couriers’.⁴⁶

As society witnessed more women driving motor cars, perceptions toward the female driver started to change:

It is an uncommon thing today to see a car badly driven by a woman, and when the very large number of new women drivers is considered, this can only be attributed to the awakening of some dormant mechanical sense hitherto unsuspected. That quick-

brained women can and do make excellent drivers and mechanics has now been amply proved. It is one of the most remarkable results of the war, and probably the one least generally recognised. They are every bit as efficient as their male contemporaries, often a good deal more so.⁴⁷

Women's increased involvement started to shift attitudes, but they were still compared to a male 'norm' in motoring; signifying the gendered control men had quickly established.

Furthermore, despite the enactment of liberal laws such as the Parliamentary Qualification of Women Act (1918) and the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 which enabled women to enter work, often these were introductory roles interrupted by dominant gender discourse and the expectation that women would leave to marry and start a family.⁴⁸

Additionally, while the motor car grew in popularity in the 'Roaring Twenties' and 1930s, it was a luxury few women could afford, and despite emerging employment opportunities, dependence on dominant males continued.

After WWI, motor-racing was slow to restart due to the immediate lack of material resources needed but 'one aspect of Brooklands that hadn't changed since the war was the autocratic attitude of the officials towards women drivers'.⁴⁹ It was only when the owner of Brooklands died in 1926 and responsibility of sole proprietor was left to his wife, Ethel Locke-King, that she lifted the ban on women racing and created opportunities for women to enter the male-exclusive domain. The following newspaper article recognises the effect that the increasing democratisation of British society had begun to have on Brooklands, albeit through a liberal feminist model of women joining the men rather than changing the male-dominated culture:

There was one innovation at the meeting. The Brooklands Club has, throughout its 21 years of existence, prohibited the entry of women drivers into races organised by the club. During the present season it has been induced to accept women's entries for its evening meetings, and yesterday there was a separate race for women drivers only. It must *now* be accepted that women drivers have arrived officially at Brooklands.⁵⁰

Women's greater participation at Brooklands came at a significant time. The British Racing Drivers Club (BRDC) was formed in 1928 and as with the RAC, only afforded women and 'foreigners' the lesser associate membership status.⁵¹ While this enabled greater involvement for women it was far-short of equality, meaning control still resided with male-dominated organisations. However, Brooklands, and BARC, had staged prestigious events before the BRDC was formed and the following section details why these developments were so crucial for women in motorsport during this period.

Changing Perceptions and Increasing Opportunities

The 1930s can be considered the golden age for women in motorsport. At the start of the decade, female drivers such as Kay Petre were regularly racing at Brooklands – the centrepiece of high-profile racing in Britain, and Europe, at the time. The daughter of a wealthy Canadian family and wife of a lawyer and member of the Brooklands flying club, Petre was one of the icons of the sport during the period.⁵² Women were demonstrating that they could race competitively compared to men on the high Brooklands banking in treacherous weather and endurance races; both time- (e.g. a 12 hour race) and mile-limited (e.g. a 1,000 mile race). Early motorsport focused on speed and endurance records because manufacturers were vying to claim they had the quickest, most reliable, and efficient motor

cars in the world.⁵³ The commercial importance was further amplified because of nationalist interests between the countries from where the manufacturers originated. Brooklands' continuous circuit, as opposed to point-to-point races on public roads or hill-climbs, allowed such records to be attempted; enhancing the importance of its existence.

Yet women's achievements were still compared to that of men by the media, rather than being based on their own merit. As one article on a 1,000 mile race won by a woman proclaimed; 'perhaps the greatest compliment is to say that [the women's] performance differed in no way from that of the great men drivers who have achieved victory in the past'.⁵⁴ In 1934, women raced against men on equal terms at Brooklands for the first time. The newspaper claims Petre won with an average speed of over 100mph,⁵⁵ and, a year later reports that, 'women won first and second places at a Brooklands Open meeting when competing with men'.⁵⁶ Another article suggested that 'motor-racing is becoming more popular with women drivers'.⁵⁷

One example of women's increasingly successful involvement was a promoted showpiece in 1935 involving Petre and Gwenda Hawkes. Hawkes was the daughter of a Major in the Royal Engineer Corps and had been twice-married to Colonels who both shared her passion for breaking speed records around Europe in the early-1930s. With Petre's success in solo races at Brooklands and Hawkes' own speed-record reputation, the showpiece aimed 'to find out which was the fastest and entitled to be called "The Brooklands Speed Queen"'.⁵⁸ Both topped 130mph and large articles reported on the event⁵⁹ leading some officials 'who had reservations about women drivers to admit that these were the two finest performances seen at the track'.⁶⁰ Perhaps in direct response to this, in 1936 it was reported that 'the BARC has decided to abolish all restrictions on women drivers, and in future events women will be able to compete on the same terms as men'.⁶¹ Gradual involvement by women over time had favourably shifted male attitudes toward what women motor-racers could

achieve. As a further sign of equality, women's records were also erased as a special category so that men and women competed for the same records.⁶²

This increased visibility of female drivers is reflected in an article which explained the role of Britain as the leading force in the motor industry.⁶³ Although the text focused on the famous male drivers of the day, the three large pictures are of Petre, Hawkes, and Elsie Wisdom – another famous racer to compete at Brooklands and Le Mans in the period, whose family were all involved in motorsport. The changing perceptions are characterised by one race report that stated 'the drivers are the leaders of the motor-racing fraternity, which now includes the women drivers'.⁶⁴ Indeed, it was not unusual to see examples of industry support during the period, for in 1935 an all-female team was assembled and sponsored to compete in the Le Mans 24 Hours Endurance Race.⁶⁵ Williams demonstrates the regularity of women's participation by providing a list of the most prominent female racers at Brooklands. Between 1920 and 1938, nineteen women had attended between eight and thirty separate meetings and raced in up to 62 events.⁶⁶

Huggins notes how by participating in motorsport, women were a symbol of 'modernity and "modern" independent femininity',⁶⁷ at a time when various women's sports received heightened attention in cinema newsreels which were 'the leading interwar commercial leisure pursuit for women'.⁶⁸ Moreover, during the interwar period, 'many women racing drivers and aviators willingly collaborated in the creation of their own celebrity status' through their poses and clothing.⁶⁹ Male drivers wore a variety of garments to both protect them from the cold winds and dust generated at speed and enable them to act upon frequent mechanical malfunctions. Yet women had no dress capable of such endeavours, thus in this 'alignment of femininity and speed and modernity, ... the everyday dominance of restrictive, enveloping and cumbersome clothing literally lay between women and their aspirations'.⁷⁰ Goggles, helmets and all-in-one overalls all worked to blur the

gendered boundaries and the latter, which could be personalised with embroidery to display previous achievements yet also become eroticised through displaying contours and being partially opened from the torso, is argued by Burman to be ‘one of the most suggestively liberating female garments of the century’.⁷¹

O’Connell claims a ‘feminisation’ of the motor car began to occur as aesthetic qualities started to be prioritised above mechanical-based engineering performance to attract emerging wealthy female consumers.⁷² Indeed, *The Times* reports that ‘women’s ideas have had, and are having, a great influence on car design, making car manufacturers vie with each other in perfecting these details’.⁷³ As growing male and female car ownership levels before the Second World War (WWII) challenged gender relations, legal arguments were provided in an attempt to prevent women from driving. These were reinforced by ‘scientific sources prevailing pseudo-biological accounts of women’s unsuitability as drivers’.⁷⁴ The power of male experts at the time meant the scientific ‘truths’ were rarely questioned,⁷⁵ so despite ‘growing evidence of female competence at the wheel, the myth of greater masculine ability was not allowed to die’.⁷⁶

The Long Term Effects of WWII

During WWII, the Brooklands circuit was turned into an army base and dismantled for resources, forcing it to close and so removing a key facility for women drivers at which they had gained visibility. Moreover, government focus switched to repopulating the country due to lives lost during the war, transcending ‘a mood no longer conducive to women [racing] on the tracks: public-spiritedness required that every woman look after her war veteran husband and produce children’.⁷⁷ Bullock adds that ‘the death of a man was bad enough, but the public outcry that would almost certainly occur if the driver was a woman could seriously damage

the future of the sport when everyone concerned was trying to get it re-established'.⁷⁸ High-profile male and female racing drivers had died during the war, whereas others, such as Petre, had aged or suffered injuries and could not continue. In response, barriers to stop women from competing were enacted by dominant males who, in acknowledging the dangers of the sport, were once again highlighting the societal gender divide of what was suitable for men and for women of the time. This was despite the fact that men were regularly fatally injured. For example, in 1955 the most deadly crash in motor-racing history occurred at Le Mans. Even though none of the women taking part in this race were involved in the crash, women were banned from Le Mans until the 1970s.

The networks involved with Brooklands had also dispersed, and with new British tracks such as Donington Park and Silverstone becoming more popular, traditional opinions returned opposing women drivers' involvement in motor-racing and resources were again monopolised in favour of men. The BRDC was based at Silverstone, which within a decade following WWII had become home to the F1 British Grand Prix, and its 'eventual predominance meant that motor-racing became almost a male preserve'.⁷⁹ Bullock concludes that 'the odds were again consequently heavily stacked against women becoming racing drivers, as they had been for many years before the war, but this time the reasons were not only different, but even more difficult to overcome'.⁸⁰

Much of the focus of women's motor-racing in this period was with rallying⁸¹ with one article acknowledging 'Miss Moss and Miss Wisdom being remarkably successful in the big international rallies this year'.⁸² Pat Moss (the sister of British F1 driver, Stirling) and Anne Wisdom (the daughter of Elsie Wisdom) were friends who became successful European rally co-drivers throughout the 1950s. Rallying gained significance for women because 'there was a "couples" aspect, especially through the car clubs and rallying in the 1950s-1960s as it was quite easy for women to enter the sport with their husbands or boyfriends'.⁸³ Once again,

male figures acted as enablers for women's participation because of the gendered socio-cultural barriers that the sport posed toward female involvement.⁸⁴

Throughout the 1950s, the technological advances made during the war influenced manufacturing methods. Power steering for motor vehicles made them easier to drive and less physically strenuous. Articles during the 1950s and 1960s reinforced an increasing commercialisation of the motor car, as well as apparent feminisation⁸⁵, by stating that 'cars should be built to please women as well as to satisfy men';⁸⁶ motor car salesmen 'agreeing on the discerning judgment and positive influence of women in selecting the style and colour of family cars';⁸⁷ and the awakening of British car manufacturers 'to the market potential of women drivers, increasingly taking note of what women say they want'.⁸⁸

Yet because women were not engaging as successfully with the elite level of motorsport, societal beliefs towards women in supportive roles rather than as merited participants in races continued to be perpetuated. Media reports suggest that those women who were racing were being used by manufacturers to highlight the shifting gendered identities of the motor car:

Ford are undertaking their biggest international racing and rally programme this year – linking motorsport with an unprecedented drive into export markets. For the first time a woman driver has been signed by Ford for saloon car racing. The idea is to spread Ford sales appeal among women.⁸⁹

With a cigarette in her hand, surrounded by the aura of grease, roaring engines and complicated discussions about carburettors, she can combine a feminine air with a sound knowledge of the game. There's no nonsense, though, about equality of women from fiancé David. It's a man's world, and of course he's the better driver.⁹⁰

These articles portray motor-racing as a masculine-dominated culture. Women have entered a complex domain and the reader is reminded that 'it's a man's world'. During the 1960s 'the atmosphere in racing was changing and, with the arrival of sponsors, money became more important than the sport'.⁹¹ The gendered roles of men and women in relation to the motor car were well-established by the 1970s. With the advent of increased sponsorship and professionalism of motorsport, assumptions of women mirrored those from the early-1900s as they were 'type-cast as chattels, prizes to be won or spoils to be seized in war'.⁹² Women were again portrayed by the media as 'entering the arena'⁹³ of motorsport and challenging dominant social norms regarding women:

Motorsport is a bit too sweaty and dangerous for women, although they may have their place in the pits. Women are something like obligatory extras at a laureation ceremony, their arms wreathing the champion as the champagne flows.⁹⁴

Miss Divina Galica [British F1 driver] saw no reason why a woman should not be able to drive a car as well as a man, since physical strength was not involved. "But", she added in a moment of mock cynicism, "I know very well I'll get the blame if ever I'm involved in a shunt". On the surface she is a realist; her parting words being "please don't expect too much too soon".⁹⁵

The majority of articles from the 1960s focused on F1, despite the many different forms of motorsport that exist, signifying its influence on British society's familiarity with motorsport. Between 1958 and 1992, very few women competed in elite motorsports series', let alone attain success.⁹⁶ For example, only five women have participated in F1, resulting in fifteen

starts. As a result, more recent articles continue to perpetuate traditional concerns regarding the 'reasons' why women cannot and do not race in 'a man's world':

[British female racing driver] Stoddart admits "I have heard reasons why women haven't made the grade before – how supposedly we aren't strong enough or that we lack the physiological attributes to perform at 220mph – they are nonsensical".⁹⁷

At most events, McKenzie [a British F1 television reporter] is the only woman working trackside. "It is still very much a man's world," she says. "There are about two hundred guys to every woman. The only girls there are models or girlfriends. It is very chauvinistic".⁹⁸

This gendered history has shown motorsport, and indeed motoring, emerged in a male- and masculine-dominated environment, which is both acknowledged and perpetuated by media coverage. After dispelling some early prejudice in the 1930s, the domesticisation of women coupled with the rapid professionalisation of the sport has limited participatory opportunities and continued to fuel mediated stereotypes about women drivers and motor racers. Women have 'had to fight prejudice and bias in a sport dominated by men as men made the rules to suit themselves and the women were expected to accept them'.⁹⁹ The following section will explore ways in which women continue to be marginalised and trivialised in contemporary motorsport drawing on a case study of women motor-racing drivers from a media-oriented championship; Formula Woman.

The Twenty-First Century and Formula Woman

Formula Woman was a UK motor-racing championship from 2004-2007 that had the unique criteria that only women could race. The championship was created and promoted in association with the British media and, as such, suggests an interesting development from the media simply offering coverage of earlier women's motor-racing to providing opportunities and controlling aspects of the sport in more recent years. Although not the first single-sex championship in motorsport to ever be staged, it was the most high-profile attempt for women in the UK since the 1970s with the 2004 championship televised on British terrestrial channel ITV and the following championships broadcast on satellite channel MotorsTV. The amount of drivers that took part in each Formula Woman championship varied, as did the number of races, which were staged at some of the UK's most established and recognised circuits. All drivers raced the same car; a Mazda RX-8 for the 2004 season and a Caterham Seven for the following championships. Interviews with three drivers and one championship associate connected to Formula Woman were undertaken to determine how they became involved in Formula Woman, their experiences and opinions of the championship and its legacy, and thoughts regarding women in motorsport in general.

A unique characteristic of the 2004 championship was its link to the burgeoning 'reality-television' and celebrity culture throughout the UK media in the early-2000s. Prospective female racers were invited to submit an online-application with reasons why they should be selected. A series of assessments ranged from driving skill, fitness, and physical tests, to media and public relations management – all designed to mould the drivers for a possible future career in the sport – and which resulted in 2004 with sixteen finalists chosen from 10,000 applicants after the final 'elimination camp'.

Kay was associated with organising the championship and explained that Formula Woman was 'run by limited companies, not government initiatives'. This is significant because Andrea, one of the racers, recognised this as a problem for 'motorsport is not

something that you can actually make loads of money out of'. The organisers hoped that the advent of the reality-television format would allow viewers to build stronger connections to the women through their career. Yet on reflection, Kay stated the reality-television format was 'good and bad' because:

We got quite a few people enter who were more interested in being on the television than racing, but hopefully we weeded most of them out. We did end up with girls turning up in six-inch high-heels and things like that and you thought, "I don't think you're going to help the image of women in motorsport!"

Furthermore, once the championship was underway, Kay said she was 'disappointed that so much coverage was cut from the footage ... meaning you didn't get to know the women taking part in the same way you could have done'. Andrea also said the drivers were disappointed at the lack of coverage for it may have facilitated more sponsorship and recognition. The lack of coverage compounded some commercial issues that were experienced when establishing the championship. In an interview, the principle organiser of Formula Woman stated, 'all my problems began when we got the television company involved; we'd lined up sponsors, but then the television deal started to take a turn for the worse'.¹⁰⁰ A schedule change to an earlier timeslot by the television company meant that the original sponsors, a condom manufacturer, did not meet parental-watershed advertising rules set by the Independent Television Commission. An insurance company 'were brought in to save the day' and the inaugural championship went ahead.¹⁰¹

During its early stages, there was also 'a steady stream of rumours and innuendo that the championship was not quite what it seemed'.¹⁰² According to Alexis, a driver from the 2007 championship, rumours spread within the close-natured, cohesive motor-racing

networks that payments had not been made to manufacturers and that the cars had unequal performance levels. The drivers interviewed claimed that Formula Woman was poorly managed by a company that went into liquidation after the first series and further management companies 'could not make it financially viable' (Kay). By the latter series the women were expected to find their own funding, approximately £12,000, which impacted upon the drivers who could not afford to enter every race or had to leave the championship due to work commitments. Coverage of the championship moved from terrestrial to satellite television after 2004, and Kay stated that it was interesting to see the original reality-television format evolve into a generic motorsport programme because 'I don't think that's what was ever planned for it'. Jolene admitted she was surprised that major motorsport magazines did not cover the series but was heartened by the amount of local media support in her home town. The combination of declining viewing figures from the change of television station, media constraints, major financial limitations, and regular changes in management companies over the remaining years, meant Formula Woman confronted too many barriers and discontinued in 2007. Such factors have been continually recognised for confronting progress for women in sport generally.¹⁰³

There was disagreement among the drivers interviewed as to whether Formula Woman was a genuine attempt to establish a women's motor-racing series. Jolene, Andrea and Kay believed the idea was worthwhile but the concept was not fully developed, with Kay adding that the low media profile ultimately limited the growth of the series. However, Alexis valued the concept but felt that it was ultimately no more than 'a gimmick' over which the media had too much influence:

It almost made a mockery of it. There are women out there that are actually doing it of their own accord and getting a more established view from other people than the girls

coming from Formula Woman. When I say to people that I'd done Formula Woman they almost look at you like, "Oh yeah Formula Woman, the crappy girly racing series". It's almost like a bad stain on your record.

Jolene acknowledged that the women-only structure of the event meant it offered little in the way of a direct challenge to gender-based stereotypes that women are slower than men, but also argued that it may have attracted women to the sport who may not have been comfortable racing against men. Nevertheless, Alexis believed that a single-sex event compromised the mixed participatory nature of motorsport. She also claimed that it could ultimately limit women's involvement because women would have no experience of racing men who dominate global motor-racing series. Formula Woman followed a radical feminist model in its formation as a new, women-only event.¹⁰⁴ But because it was standalone it did not positively impact upon the wider motor-racing structure and the sports' unequal gender relations.

The women were asked how people responded to them as a female motor racer in a sport dominated by men; why they believe people have these opinions; and whether these opinions have changed over time. While all the women claimed positive experiences, they could also provide many examples when their motor-racing ability was assumed to be of a lower standard because of their gender. For example in 2013, former F1 driver Stirling Moss (brother of successful rally driver, Pat) provoked debate when claiming 'I think [women] have the strength, but I don't know if they've got the mental aptitude to race hard, wheel-to-wheel'.¹⁰⁵ Jolene indicated that the power of such attitudes towards women's involvement in the sport may limit participation:

I organised a bunch of us to go karting and it was me and fifteen blokes. The guy doing the [pre-race] briefing just looked at me and said, “oh you’re brave”, and I said, “Why’s that then?” “Well, you’re the only girl here”, and I just said to him, “*I’m the reason* that they are all here”. He didn’t expect me to do very well...I won the race, and then the guy was like, “ooh, didn’t you do well”; really patronising.

Despite this example, Jolene did acknowledge that ‘people racing probably would like to see more women racing, and a lot of the racing drivers I have come across don’t see women drivers as inferior’. Alexis agreed, believing that the number of women competing or seeing it as a hobby had increased: ‘it’s obvious it’s a minority, but it’s getting more and more popular’.

These changing social attitudes were reinforced by Andrea who stated that ‘the typical opinion is that most people think women can’t drive; particularly from men, but when they actually find out you can, the respect is quite phenomenal’. Similarly, Kay experienced a generally positive reception, but did add that she may be only one of four women at a race including up to seventy men, with the result that she would ‘stand out ... which is a big advantage ... everyone knows my name but I don’t ever play the female card ... I’m there for the same reason all the lads are’.

When asked whether they experienced any differences in sponsorship in comparison to their male counterparts, the women believed that being a woman helped, although it was not a crucial factor in securing sponsorship deals. Kay admitted that being a woman ‘is something extra you can use as leveraging when trying to persuade sponsors’. Alexis questioned whether ‘being a bloke giving a sob-story would make sponsors more accommodating...the fact that I was a girl, and in need and flattering my eyelashes a bit... you’ve got to use it, why not?’. In further discussion during the interviews, Kay and Alexis

said their behaviour was no different to a male racer using a unique feature of himself to secure sponsorship, providing the example of British driver Lewis Hamilton being the first black F1 racing driver.

The Future of Women in Motorsport

This section considers the likely future of women in motorsport. With regards to the continued influence of the media, the Formula Woman interviewees did not believe that women receive less media coverage in motor-racing, rather that there were simply less women in motorsport: ‘when you are good, you get coverage, whether you are a boy or a girl’ (Alexis). Since 2013, the FIA has produced dedicated women in motorsport publications¹⁰⁶ but they are produced and advertised ‘within’ motorsport networks, events, and organisations. As such, women outside of the sport may not be aware of the publications or realise that motorsport can be a hobby. Alexis claimed this constrained encouraging more girls into motorsport:

Whenever I have seen it [adverts], it seems to be in male-orientated places, if they put it in Bliss magazine or whatever it’s called now, that’s what I used to read when I was a kid, I don’t know if girls would look at it but it would be nice to have it across other sorts of media rather than just around motorsport ... you need to aim at different areas. It might be really interesting and there might be girls out there who read it and think “oh yeah, I’d like to have a go at that”.

The financial costs associated with motorsport are further barriers to long-term involvement, but short-term, the interviewees claimed that as well as greater media coverage (especially

because Formula Woman did not garner mainstream motorsport magazine attention), role models at the elite level were needed. All the women claimed a woman participating in the ‘pinnacle’ of motor-racing, F1, would help challenge societal assumptions regarding women motor-racing drivers. As well as the aforementioned Wolff (British Williams F1 Team development and test driver since 2012), Carmen Jorda (Spanish Lotus F1 Team development driver for 2015), Simona de Silvestro (Swiss Sauber F1 Team affiliated driver for 2014) and the late María de Villota (Spanish Marussia F1 Team test driver for 2012) have all had significant driving roles in F1 teams but are yet to compete in a race. Furthermore, Monisha Kaltenborn became the first female team principal (Sauber F1 Team) in 2012 and Claire Williams is, as of 2015, the current deputy-principal of the Williams F1 team. Notwithstanding, Andrea was aware of the challenges that a woman may confront when reaching F1 because ‘if she did really badly that would be because she is a woman, not because of the car, and if she did really well, ooh that would turn things on the head wouldn’t it?!’

However, the predominant image of women in F1 and other areas of the motorsport sector is often highly hetero-sexualised guises such as ‘grid-girls’, such as when the top-three drivers are given a ‘guard of honour’ from the track to the podium by up to one hundred female models applauding them, or in other supporting roles, as suggested by the following article:

The only women you will see on an F1 grid next season will be clad in Lycra and holding a flag. Either that or they will be dripping in Armani and walking on the arm of a multimillionaire who is being shepherded along as one of the sport’s VIP guests. One thing is certain: women are for decorating F1 and not for taking part in it.¹⁰⁷

In the interviews, Alexis recollected track-day experiences at which ‘generally race girls tend to be quite blokey, quite tom-boyish and when I’m at a race meeting I do tend to look like a tom-boy’. This counters Pflugfelder’s argument that women drivers involved in motorsport heighten their femininity to ‘defuse the threat they pose’.¹⁰⁸ This is also an interesting contrast to Alexis ‘fluttering her eyelashes’ to attract sponsors; illustrating how women in motorsports, as in other sports, often have to negotiate their dual identity as ‘female’ and ‘athlete’, to continue to conform to feminine norms while seeking sporting success.¹⁰⁹ Pflugfelder cites Danica Patrick – widely regarded as the most successful contemporary female racing driver for American IndyCar and NASCAR series’ successes – who has, via extensive media advertising portrayals, ‘articulated a sexualised, feminine identity that she blends with her position as an aggressive racer’.¹¹⁰ As more women continue to enter elite motor-racing series, more research is needed to understand this dynamic.¹¹¹ Interestingly however, it should be noted that motorsport is one of the few sports in the world where the gender of the competitor is not immediately recognisable because of their location within the vehicle and the wearing of their overalls and helmet.

We conclude this section on the possible future of women’s motorsport in the words of Kay who warned of the danger of promoting women’s motorsport, and increasing media coverage, unless it was based on the performance of the drivers:

I want to see women doing well on merit, and merit alone. I think it would be damaging for women to be pushed forward beyond their talents...because I think that could have a backlash effect and start causing problems for women in motorsport. If you make sure that the opportunities are equal and they are based on merit then that’s fabulous. If you go a step beyond that, then you distort things and then you start to create resentment and problems.

Conclusion

This article has contributed to the limited academic literature on motorsport, and helps to address what Williams states as ‘one of the most neglected topics in sports history generally’¹¹² by focusing on the development and experiences of women in motorsport, and the influences of the media. In so doing, the paper speaks to the wider ‘sexual geography’ of sport, illustrating how gender remains the great divide in sport both in terms of competition and consumption, with men continuing to dominate sport on both counts.¹¹³

In terms of motor-racing, the motor car emerged from an industrial yet elitist, masculine-dominated Western culture. Males were often those who manufactured early motor cars and were able to monopolise the early resources available to them. Motoring was associated with mechanical engineering, speed, and bravery; traits not ascribed to women of the time.

Furthermore, this article contributes to the increasing focus on women and sport during the interwar period.¹¹⁴ Unintended consequences of WWI facilitated female entry into motorsport and broader societal acceptance of the motor car culminated in a high-profile era for women motor racers.¹¹⁵ Inter-war economic prosperity allowed vehicle manufacture to expand and this, in turn, was influenced by women’s increasing engagement with the motor car and the need to consider aesthetic, as well as mechanical, features.¹¹⁶ However, WWII constrained female participation as the nation re-built and re-populated. Motor-racing was deemed too risky for women, and with the increasing emphasis on the professionalisation and commercialisation of motor-racing globally, women became increasingly under-represented in terms of numbers and success.

The marginalisation of women over time impacts upon contemporary motor-racing. The female racing drivers and associate of Formula Woman interviewed highlighted the ways in which their involvement has been negatively affected by attitudes toward women in motorsport perpetrated by the media. Formula Woman was beset by financial and structural constraints throughout its lifespan, and some of its participants are unsure whether it was the correct mechanism to increase female motor-racing involvement. Instead, they recommended enhanced media coverage, and role models in particular, to influence current attitudes. Indeed the FIA is attempting to address these issues, through the very creation of a women-focused commission, and commentary in FIA publications encouraging parents and young girls to see motorsport as a worthwhile career option.¹¹⁷ However, the fact remains that a generation of young people have not seen a woman start a F1 race; regarded as the pinnacle of motorsport by the interviewees. The situation has been aided by a relative influx of female racers into F1 (albeit in test/development driver roles) since 2012 but the predominant image of women in F1 is in supporting roles – whether as grid-girls or close-family of the male drivers – and not as participants. In other elite series' however, women are competing more regularly. More analysis is needed to understand why some series have been more successful in facilitating women's involvement in motor-racing than others.

Evidence from this study suggests that instigating radical changes such as a championship-quota for women drivers may cause more problems. Instead, working within the liberal agendas currently favoured by sports' organisations to enhance women's participation, but lacing these with radical developments to instigate change, may facilitate Alexis's optimism for the future of women in motorsport:

I was really looking forward to meeting [famous motorsport figure] but I was told beforehand not to go on to him about women driving because he is very much of the

opinion that it's not right, it shouldn't happen, and women should stay at home, cook and clean; "what on earth are they doing in a racing car?" And I think there are probably people out there with that opinion but with more and more women out there racing and taking part, that opinion will dissolve.

As more women and girls are encouraged to recognise motorsport as a viable career option (not just as drivers, but also as mechanics and data analysts, for example) through non-discriminatory, equitable media coverage and exposure, enhanced governing body support with inclusion of women's commissions and women's programmes, and greater partnerships throughout the sports structure to generate, nurture and facilitate young talent and opportunities, there should be an exponential, albeit gradual, shift in perception not too dissimilar to that achieved by Hawkes, Petre, and Wisdom for women in motorsport nearly a century ago.

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