

She Helped Put Women on Track

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Take a look around the pits and garages at NASCAR races or Indianapolis Motor Speedway and you may be surprised at how many women are working in what was once a men-only sport.

Women have permeated motor racing in all facets, as drivers, crew chiefs, mechanics, manufacturers' representatives, public relations personnel, course workers, TV announcers and sportswriters. And all have access to the once sacrosanct garage-pit area.

It wasn't always that way.

Norma "Dusty" Brandel, president of the American Auto Racing Writers & Broadcasters Assn., remembers when she and other female journalists could only stand outside the fences and peer inside, hoping to learn what was going on. Women were as forbidden as peanuts and the color green, two longtime racing taboos.

Bessie Lee Paoli owned the car that finished second in the 1953 Indianapolis 500, but she was not permitted in the pits to celebrate with driver Art Cross.

Brandel, then with the now-defunct Hollywood Citizen-News, pioneered the women's movement in racing, first at Riverside International Raceway and later at Indianapolis Motor Speedway, in the 1970s.

She was allowed inside Indy's hallowed grounds for the first time in 1971 and A.J. Foyt was one of the first to spot her.

"What in hell are you doing in here?" Foyt asked.

"I'm the token female," snapped Brandel.

As she continued walking through Gasoline Alley, she heard garage doors slam shut until she reached the Granatelli compound.

"Vince Granatelli, whom I had known for some time, ran out, gave me a big hug and invited me in," she said. "When some of the other guys saw me inside, it sort of eased the tension. And Aggie [promoter and car owner J.C. Agajanian] welcomed me because I knew him from going to Ascot Park."

Only in NASCAR and in U.S. Auto Club open-wheel racing were women not allowed in the inner circles.

"I never had any problems with drag racing or sports cars," says Brandel. "We were always welcome there."

Brandel covered her first race, for the Citizen-News, in November 1955, at the Grand Central Airport in

Glendale.

The sports car course was laid out on the airstrip and entries included future Formula One champion Phil Hill, Carroll Shelby, Ken Miles and other international drivers.

"I had been to an auto show with Bill Kibbin, the auto editor, and afterward I told him I would like to see the race because it was close to my home in Burbank," Brandel recalls. "He said as long as I was going, why not cover it for the paper. From that day on, I have been a race fan. I love it today as much as I did then."

It was then, though, that she got a hint of the problems that lay ahead.

"The sports editor said they couldn't have a woman's name, like Norma, on a race car story byline," she said. "He kicked around a few ideas and decided on Dusty. The only connection, as I recall, was something to do with dusty roads, but it stuck. Some people have known me for 20 years and never knew my name was Norma."

She wore a hat that day in 1955 to keep the wind out of her hair and another tradition was born. Brandel is never seen without a hat. Her collection runs from colorful to outrageous and has earned her another name, the Hat Lady.

During a career that included writing for the Citizen-News, San Fernando Sun and Valley View, Glendale News-Press -- Glendale sports editor Al Ames referred to her as "my guy in racing" -- and Motor Sports Weekly, Brandel became involved with AARWBA when then-president Johnny McDonald asked her to be executive secretary in 1970.

Years later, when a power struggle within the organization forced the president out, Brandel took over on an emergency basis.

She is still there after nearly 20 years.

"It wasn't planned that way," she says. "No one else seems to want the job, so here I am."

Saturday night, she will preside over AARWBA's 50th anniversary party at the Sheraton Suites Fairplex in Pomona. Drag racing legend Kenny Bernstein will be honored as a pioneer in racing, and seven members of the All-American race team -- Tony Kanaan, Ron Fellows, Scott Pruett, John Force, Bobby East, Bill Auberlen and Thiago Medeiros -- will receive their awards.

The winner of the Jerry Titus Memorial Award, given to the driver receiving the most All-American votes, will be revealed. The dinner is open to the public. More details are available by calling (818) 842-7005.