



JANET GUTHRIE

VICTORIOUS WOMAN OF THE MONTH

MARCH 2007

While women everywhere were struggling to find their place in the feminist movement, women like Janet Guthrie were already embracing their passions, defying tradition, challenging their fears...and paving a victorious path forward for other women. Janet Guthrie's persistent and gutsy style is worthy of attention during Women's History Month...and the reason she is this month's **VICTORIOUS WOMAN OF THE MONTH** honoree.

Growing up in the forties and fifties, Janet had just graduated from high school when she earned her pilot's license. She got into a bragging match with another pilot, a young man a couple years older. Their teasing grew into a bet about who could fly higher. They competed. Janet won.

Though she liked the man, in her autobiography, *Janet Guthrie: A Life at Full Throttle*, she admits, "I had read about it, that you weren't supposed to beat a man at any game." She won the bet and figured that was the end of it.

On the contrary and much to her surprise, Nick asked her out. They dated for a year and she was heartbroken when it ended. However, their relationship taught Janet a lesson that would hold her in good stead through many victories. She wrote, "No matter what the contemporary culture said, I needn't suppress my true nature in order to hope for love."

Unlike many of the women of her day, and much to the consternation of the Dean of Women, Janet Guthrie didn't go to college to get her "Mrs." Though she started college intending to get a degree in aeronautical engineering, she changed her major to physics when she realized no one was likely to hire a woman to fly their airplanes.

When she graduated in 1960, Guthrie took a job with a New York-based company that was just beginning to get into the aerospace industry. Her job as an engineer kept her inside, unhappily cooped up with research projects. She felt itchy for something more...and found it in a used Jaguar that she located through a classified ad. Little did she know buying that jazzy car would change everything!

By the following year, Janet Guthrie started racing her Jaguar. She became a regular competitor and earned both level of success and a good reputation. As the years went by, she advanced as a race car driver from amateur to professional.

For many years, men tried to keep women like Janet Guthrie out of serious racing. Until then, car racing in the United States was - exclusively - a male sport. Women were relegated to "powder puff"

programs that the races occasionally held for its feminine contingent. Organizers often cited “insurance” as a reason why women could not be a part of the main events.

Even when, in 1974, a promoter agreed to allow women to participate, it would only be if she had a doctor’s certificate, issued by a hospital that same day, stating that she was not pregnant. If the certificate was not issued on the exact day (it could not be dated even one day before), or did not include the explicit words “examined by a doctor,” then the women was denied an application.

In 1976, when car builder Rolla Vollstedt announced his intention to enter Janet Guthrie into the Indy 500, sparks flew. Male drivers complained long and loud. They protested that a woman didn’t have the strength or endurance. They grumbled about a woman’s lack of emotional stability and carped that their lives would be endangered.

The fans weren’t any better. In her autobiography, Guthrie talks about large signs held high in the stands. One read, “JANET GRAB THAT POLE...illustrated with a barber-pole striped phallus. Another placard showed a big, sloppy pair of boobs.” The crowd taunted and screamed for Janet to sign it.

In spite of the obstacles both on and off the track, Janet Guthrie persisted. Knowing what was at stake, personally and professionally, before she qualified for the Indy 500, Janet Guthrie wrote about fearful feelings. She handled them by telling herself, “So you’re scared. So? Go ahead, let yourself feel scared for a while. Let it out in the open.” To have permission to feel the fear and do it anyway was a winning move for Janet. It is sage advice that today’s woman can take to heart and act on, no matter what her challenge!

Janet Guthrie stunned the sports world - and made front-page news – by becoming the first woman to compete in both the Indianapolis 500 and the Daytona 500. She eventually amazed the men who would have kept her out of those, and other, competitions. She earned the respect and acceptance of professionals and fans alike. Guthrie’s capable and honorable races against her very formidable male rivals earned her a place of honor in NASCAR history. With courage and dedication, she paved the way for other women, including Danica Patrick who was the Indy 500’s 2005 Rookie of the Year.

In 1980, Janet Guthrie was inducted into the International Women’s Sports Hall of Fame along with Amelia Earhart, Billie Jean King, Mildred "Babe" Didrikson Zaharias and other amazing women athletes. Janet’s helmet and driver’s suit have a place of honor in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

As it sometimes happens, Janet Guthrie found her passion serendipitously. As pioneer in the field of racing and as a feminist, she admirably modeled victory-making behaviors for all women when she confronted her fears, challenged the norm and beat the odds.

CONGRATULATIONS, JANET GUTHRIE!

AND, THANK YOU!

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