

# Danica Patrick delivers firm handshake that demands auto racing respect

By **Tania Ganguli** | Sentinel Staff Writer  
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DAYTONA BEACH - The first impression is confusion.

This tiny little woman standing before you is one of the most watched, most known, most recognizable and most powerful people in motorsports. Danica Patrick is 5-foot-2 and slim with straight brown hair and plain, though attractive, features.

Her next move explains why she's the face of the IRL. That handshake, strong and gripping, is the one her father taught her when she was 13 years old. He taught her that her handshake would make people forget how little she was, forget that she was a girl in man's world and think her capable of the big things they both knew she could accomplish.

"My dad always shook everyone's hand really hard and told me to do the same thing," Patrick said. "Shake it like you mean it. That was what he always told me to do and I never knew any different."

This weekend Patrick will kick off 2009 at the Rolex 24 Hours at Daytona — a race that gets her re-acclimated to racing without the pressure of an IRL points race. From the week after she became the first woman to ever win an IRL race, last season in Japan, Patrick set her sights on the next win. She wants a lot more this season.

"There would be nothing cooler than to follow up a win with another win," Patrick said. "I thought about winning again right away. When you get a taste of it and you just want to keep having it, that's your new solid expectation. Look, I won the last race, why can't I win again?"

Patrick is as tough and determined as her greeting suggests. She has carried an unwavering confidence throughout her life.

When her father ran out of money and couldn't fund her fledgling racing career anymore, she calmed him down and said something would work out. When outsiders asked on a daily basis when she'd win her first race, she believed it would happen and that it should have happened long ago.

"I always had this blind faith that it was gonna go right and it was gonna be a big deal and it was gonna happen and I would do well," Patrick said. "I have no idea where that came from ... it must have been there all along."

She was so confident she would win in the IRL, and so aware of what it would mean to the racing world, that she, her father and her publicist had a plan ready for how to handle the week's worth of interviews. They knew who to call, they knew on which shows they wanted to appear, they knew which interview they wanted to do.

It happened in April. Patrick was relieved.

The celebration couldn't last long. The very next week, the IRL raced in Kansas, back in the United States where Danicamania was bigger than ever.

The next hurdle is having a multi-win season and contending for a championship. She also wants an Indy 500 win more than anything.

That's why her passion is so visible during those races and why her frustration is, too, when things don't

go well. During last year's Indy 500, she stormed toward an opponent's pit, ready to chew him out for wrecking her.

"I think being a girl she has to have a little more fire than the guys because she has to stand up for herself a lot more," said T.J. Patrick, her father. "It's not like she can go and push a guy because they can't push back. She can chew them out. Most women love that, a lot of women would love to be able to do that, stand up to the guys, but just don't have the demeanor to it."

He taught her to be strong and not back down — and she's never stopped doing that.