

SHAPE

EARNING RESPECT IN A MALE-DOMINATED SPORT

Danica Patrick

Barreling down the final stretch of the Indy Japan 300 in April, 26-year-old race car driver Patrick was speeding toward the record books. She crossed the finish line six seconds ahead of her nearest competitor—and became the first woman to win an Indy car race. Shortly thereafter Patrick surprised no one more than herself when she broke down in tears on the racetrack. “I wasn’t overwhelmed as much by the fact that I’d finally won, but I was just so flooded with relief to have silenced my critics,” she says. “I knew I had it in me—and now they did too.”

Patrick explains that women generally have not done well or been consistent in racing, “so most owners, pit crew mechanics, and engineers were apprehensive about giving me a chance.” Eventually she convinced backers to let her get behind the wheel for a few test runs. “Once they saw just how well I could drive, their doubts seemed to vanish,” she says. After coming in fourth in the Indianapolis 500 as a rookie, Patrick became an international sensation and went on to inspire strong opinions from critics as well as fans. She now has her sights set on the 2009 Indy 500, when all eyes will be expectantly focused on her again.

“All I can say is, driving has nothing to do with your sex,” she explains. “It’s about strategy and knowing when to be aggressive and when to back off.” That said, for years Patrick thought asserting her dominance on the racetrack meant she had to act—and dress—like one of the guys. “As I’ve grown up and gotten more confident, I’ve finally learned it’s okay to be pretty outside the car, to wear a dress and get my hair done, and then jump in and drive,” she says. “I may be a competitive race car driver, but I still like to show my femininity and softer side.”

What she wants you to know Don’t be afraid to dream big. “I love asking women what their greatest ambition is, but so many say they’re not really sure,” says Patrick. Spending some time contemplating and writing down your goals can be the first step toward reaching them. “Give yourself permission to shoot for something that seems totally beyond your grasp,” she says. “You may be surprised at your capabilities.” Her stay-healthy secret Snack frequently. To keep her energy levels on an even keel, Patrick packs her own mini meals. “If you’re going to be in a situation where you’re not eating for awhile, you need to take healthy food along—things that you like,” she says. “It makes you mentally sharper when you’re not thinking about how hungry you are.” Her favorite on-the-go snack: whole-wheat toast with a swipe of peanut butter.

Women are more patient, which can make them better drivers, says Patrick

