

Divina Galica



To date, few women have made it to the top rungs of professional motorsport, while the ones to have enjoyed a shot in Formula One can be counted on less than five fingers. Yet despite, these desperate odds, Divina Galica has achieved this and much more. Galica got her start in motorsport at the ripe young age of 28, after an extremely successful skiing career that included four trips to the Olympics and the distinction of being the female British speed record holder in the downhill (125 mph!). Galica's celebrity as a ski star afforded her an opportunity in a British celebrity race in 1974 that would lead to a 30-year career that includes saloons, sports racers, F5000, F2, Atlantics, Formula One and even international truck racing! Casey Annis recently tracked her down during a cross-country driving trip to learn more about her remarkable career and her unusual pathway to Formula One.

I understand that your route into motorsport was rather non-traditional. It was your notoriety as a world-class skier that gave you your first opportunity in racing?

Galica: Absolutely correct. I totally did not do the motor racing thing the correct way. First of all, I got involved at age 28, having had a very successful skiing career going to four Olympic games

and having some pretty good results in both giant slalom and downhill. But then, I got invited to do a race with sports personalities in England, at Oulton Park, where I ended up finishing in 2nd place. Like everything, I think there's always a little element of luck involved, I don't know whether it's luck or whether one makes one's own luck, but I just happened to be in the right place at the right time because the man who managed Brands Hatch and Oulton Park, at that time, was called John Webb and he had always realized—well before his time—that women drivers were a huge draw for the public. I sort of dropped in his lap. He was looking for a woman driver; he already had Lela Lombardi on his hooks, but Lela hated England and wanted to return to Italy. So he kept saying to himself, "Why can't I find a British woman? I wish I could find a British woman." And lo and behold, I came 2nd in that race.

This was around 1974?

Galica: That was '74, yeah. It was Easter '74 and then John got me back at the end of that year to do a race against all the British women that he could scrape together. I think there were about 15 British women driving at the time. Again, I finished 2nd. I finished 2nd to a lady called Jenny Bell and the only reason I didn't beat her was because I didn't know how to set up a pass. I was really a novice. She was a very good driver, in any event. So after that, John got me aside and said, "You know you really ought to take up this sport because you're quite talented at it." I sort of hesitated because I'd spent 10 years in the ski team and my family really wanted me to lead a more normal life—normal being getting married and having children, doing all that bit. But I didn't hesitate for long and got involved in motor sports. Loved it...still love it.

I understand you did a brief stint in super saloons in '75 before being vaulted right into Formula 5000s in '76?

Galica: Yes, I never did anything the correct way! John was in a hurry to get me qualified into the British Formula 1 race series. I actually drove a Formula 1 car the second year I ever drove. It was a Surtees TS16. I hadn't a clue quite honestly. The only clue I had was I was a very good competitor and I was quite handy at driving, but as for setting up the car or understanding cause and effect in driving, I really didn't figure that out 'til I joined Skip Barber about 30 years later. Which is quite comical when you look back on it.

So all of your driving at the time was really by seat-of-the-pants intuition?

Galica: Absolutely, and I think, in those days, that's how people drove. Skip Barber, who I've been working for for 11 years, definitely had much more thought going into why you race, how you race and what you do to improve. In England, they used to say, "There's the track, there's the car and here's the stopwatch. Just see how fast you can go."

We've spoken with a lot of women racers—people like Lyn St. James, Janet Guthrie, Lorina (Boughton) McLaughlin and the like—but what I find fascinating is how totally different your early experience was to theirs. Your story, at least on the surface, sounds very different because you were really

intentionally brought in and coached along rather than having to fight your way in as they did. Is that the case, or did you have to suffer through much in the way of discrimination in the early days?

Galica: No, I was privileged. I came in as a celebrity; I was well sponsored and yes, of course, I had no testing, I mean in those days I don't think anyone tested. I could have done with some, to improve, to have done better than I did. But I didn't do too badly, actually. But I probably needed, you know, sort of a year at a good school and a little more testing before jumping into an F1 car and trying to qualify at a Grand Prix because I probably did the wrong thing there by going to Grand Prix. However, John Webb did warn me. He said, "You know the Hesketh is a lousy car. Just 'cause it's a fun team to run with, doesn't mean to say you're going to do well in Grand Prix." He did advise me not to go for it but you don't get invited to do Formula One twice in your life and I was already in my 30's. I thought I'd never get another opportunity, so I took a shot. It didn't work out quite as well as I would have liked but I had a lot of fun, I have to say.

So do I have it correct that you ran in, was it the Rothmans or Shell Sport 5000 in Europe in '76, and that was in the Surtees?

Galica: Yes, I ran '76 and '77, both years in a Surtees. At the same time I drove a lot of other machinery, I mean, I was never idle. Sometimes I drove three races in one day, you know, three different cars. So, I did get a lot of experience from driving but very little, well, none in testing. I think the testing is one of the most important things that's come into modern racing and that's where the modern driver has an advantage over the previous drivers, really.

Divina Galica at the wheel of the Hesketh Formula One team car that she attempted to qualify for two World Championship events (Argentina and Brazil) in 1978. However, Galica did make the field for the non-championship Daily Express Trophy race at Silverstone, just before the team withdrew from racing.

So in '77 Hesketh made the offer for you to drive for them?

Galica: Actually, what happened was in '77, Olympus became my sponsors through Peter Hunt. Peter Hunt was James Hunt's brother and in '77, he became my manager because he thought, I don't know, I met him at a party or something, and he thought he could find me some sponsorship and he did. He found me Olympus. And Olympus put some money into my Formula 5000 endeavors in the

"I totally did not do the motor racing thing the correct way."

Surtees. It was really Olympus that wanted me to go to Grand Prix. They had the budget and, initially, we looked at Surtees to run a third Surtees, but John Surtees felt it was stretching, so he declined to run me. He also did say to me, "You know, you haven't really got the experience to run F1." And he was right. And so they looked around and of course with Peter Hunt's association with Hesketh, through his brother, who was at that time driving for McLaren, not Hesketh. Hesketh really had folded the year before and they revived Hesketh and built the 308, which was a very fast car in a straight line but absolutely hopeless a round corners. I wasn't a good enough test driver to be able to tell them

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Divina Galica at the wheel of the Surtees TS19 F5000 that she drove to 4th place overall in the 1976 British Shell Sport F5000 championship.

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what was wrong with it.

Was that a one-car effort at that point in time?

Galica: It was a total one-car effort and I was given two races to show my mettle and I didn't actually do particularly well in either without qualifying. Then the third race was the nonchampionship race at Silverstone in the rain which was won by Keke Rosberg. I did run in that and I did actually get up to, well last, but 8th place. I was the eighth to last person to fall off the track! I think there were 24 who started it and quite a few people with very big names like Mario Andretti and Ronnie Peterson and everybody fell off the track and Keke won it. I think five people finished that race and had I finished, I would have been 6th. Unfortunately, I again was not particularly experienced, so though racing in the rain is something we do a lot of in England, that's not so in an F1 car. That was one of my first races in the rain, '76 having been a perfectly beautiful dry year all year. To go out in the Hesketh in the pouring rain, the Hesketh not being a particularly good car anyway, was just hopeless. I stuck on for three-quarters of the race and then, like everybody else, had come to the conditions and went off, flying off at Woodcote. I have the pictures and a broken finger!

You tried to qualify for the British Grand Prix and one other?

Galica: Previous years I had tried but it really was only—I think in '76 and '77, I tried to qualify for the Grand Prix at Brands Hatch but, you know, that was just a publicity stunt and I knew it. There was no way I was going to qualify the Surtees.

The year that you were driving for Hesketh, what were the two races that you tried to qualify for?

Galica: Oh, they were Argentina and Brazil. But I did have fun. I

mean all my motor racing has been fun. I only recollect being in tears once and that was when, after the rainy Silverstone race, I went up to see the team and I walked into the workshop, unannounced, and they had Eddie Cheever's name on my car, which I was a little upset about. They hadn't dared tell me and then they lied to me and said that it was the sponsor's idea. I knew it wasn't the sponsor's idea because I was very close to the sponsor. It was their idea. They'd wanted somebody better in the car. But, I sort of stamped my foot and made a terrible fuss and they said, well we can do a back-to-back test in South Africa. So we all went to South Africa and they said, as I'd driven the car before, and Eddie hadn't, he'd get a whole day's testing. He got a whole day of practice and they took his times from that day and I got 10 minutes at the end of the day and I was only a tenth slower than Eddie. They gave the drive to Eddie, which I thought was very unfair and, I have to say, I did cry. Out of frustration more than anything else.

You later ran the Aurora AFX F1 series as well. In fact, didn't you finish 2nd at Zandvoort in the Surtees?

Galica: Yes, I did but you know I was given that on a plate. I was actually 3rd, and a distant 3rd at that, and I came 'round the last corner. Now it's a very long, straight up to the start/finish, and in the very distance I could see somebody getting out of their race-car. And I thought, "Oh, shit! I'm so far behind the winner, he's done his parade lap and he's about to get his trophy!" So I went whizzing by and discovered it was place number two was trying to push his car over the start/finish line, and I went whizzing by and took his 2nd place. It was a good drive, but it wasn't that brilliant.

Were you and Desiré Wilson contemporaries in the Aurora Series, or did you not overlap in that period?

Galica: No, we didn't overlap at all. I did do one race when she was in it, but it was a one-off drive for me in a McLaren and it was



Turning her attention to truck racing, Galica won the 1989 British Truck Racing Championship, the 1990 British Class A Truck Racing Championship and was 4th overall in the 1989 European Truck Racing Championship.

at Thruxton, a track I wasn't familiar with, so she walked all over me there. The only time I really drove against Des, on equal terms, because to drive a McLaren against her car, which she'd been driving all year, really you can't count because you don't just jump in strange cars and do well in them, was when we ran the, I think it's called, the Photo Stream Sports 2000 Series, and I did race against her in that—or she raced against me in that. We had a wonderful battle at Snetterton, which I actually won, although she'd taken pole and we were 1st and 2nd on the grid and I followed her around. But one thing I'm good at is passing people. I passed her on the outside of turn one which is very satisfying. But she is a quicker driver than me. It was just that I was perhaps on that day a little quicker.

Now after the F1 opportunities started to dissipate, you did a little bit of Atlantic and Formula 2 racing?

Galica: I started my own F2 team. But actually while the Olympus thing was going on, they gave me two Atlantic races. I raced at Long Beach two weeks after I'd broken my finger, my hand actually. I broke several bones in my hand. So that wasn't a particularly good race, but I did race at Long Beach, which was fun.

What year was that?

Galica: That was '78. I didn't finish the race, I do recollect that. I think I collected a wall somewhere. And then I think later that year, or it may have been about two years later, I raced at Hamilton and, yes it wasn't sponsored by Olympus, it was sponsored by Sheik Condoms. I'll never forget it. I was Keke Rosberg's teammate and I raced at Hamilton in Canada and actually finished 5th in that race. And there were some pretty substantial people in it. So I was pleased with that race.

And that was racing a Chevron?

Galica: Yes, I race vintage now, and I've seen the Chevron I raced. Somebody I know owns it. I've done a lot of vintage races now.

Sort of my career in motor racing that I thought I'd sort of passed my helmet and suddenly vintage appeared and now I'm racing about five or six times a year in vintage.

Now how did you manage to work your way into truck racing, of all things?

Galica: Well that was John Webb again. John and I are dear friends. We've been friends forever and although he was cross with me for doing F1, he thought it would be fun again to have a woman in the truck racing for the first truck race at Brands Hatch. So he got me a drive with Chapman Racing it was called, and I did quite well. Then Chapman so enjoyed having me in that team that I continued for three or four years with them and raced all over Europe in their championship. I had a lot of fun.

Now what's truck racing like, by comparison?

Galica: It's exactly the same except that there are no rules of etiquette at all, I mean, you just hit people. If you feel like passing them, you nudge them off, oh they're pretty savage. I know when I won the race in Austria, I sort of barged my way to the front. It wasn't very pretty.

Are the dynamics basically the same? You're talking about these massive lorries there with all this power. Are the principles of driving the same?

Galica: Absolutely the same.

Just the weight transfer is much more severe?

Galica: No, actually they handle rather well. I mean it's just like racing normally except that if you crash, it doesn't matter because they're so strong. You can just back it out of where you crashed and keep going.

It has to be a little odd to be racing in a cockpit that's now 4–5 feet off the ground rather than 1/2 inch off the ground.

Galica: Well, it was strange, it was different, it was fun though. It was a lot of fun. I mean a huge amount of fun. The team owner, who also raced a truck, and I used to have intercoms and we'd actually talk to each other while we were racing and sort of gang up on people so that he won the championship. I would be the sort of expert either blocker or be whatever he asked me to be.

The Enforcer?

Galica: Yeah, the Enforcer. I mean I would do whatever he'd ask me to do to back him up. "Don't let so and so through" and I'd make sure. I weaved all over the place so no...and there were no rules like that. You could weave, you could block anyone, and it worked.

Good entertainment.

Galica: It was terrific. To be honest with you, the start of a truck

race is one of the most exciting things I think you can watch. Because, you know, you have all these very heavy, very powerful trucks aiming for Turn 1 and half of them go around on the grass and keep their position. They don't bother with the track.

Looking back on your career now, what do you consider the high-water mark of your auto-racing career?

Galica: Well, I've never really gone for a championship 'cause I go to every race hoping to win that race, but what I'm really looking for is, what I call, the perfect lap. Which is actually almost impossible to achieve. And I have, in my career, which has now spanned 30 years or more, achieved two perfect laps or two that stand out. One was almost a perfect wave. I was racing the Surtees TS19 in '77 at Donington Park. At that race Tony Trimmer also had a TS19 and sort of went off in the distance and I was held up a bit and I was catching him and suddenly I went into what actually is called the zone. I don't think I've ever driven as well as I drove on that particular day. I did more than one perfect lap. It was almost every lap I drove what I call a perfect lap, and I didn't quite catch him at the flag but one more lap and I would have gotten him. We passed the flag pretty equal. His nose was just ahead of mine and we both held the outright lap record. I equaled his lap record. We both held the outright lap record at Donington. That was the first time I really, what I call, got into the zone where you drive so like the great drivers of any day drive. It's a very special feeling. I can remember almost every lap of that particular drive because it was so wonderful and I had to go through a lot of back markers. It just was easy. You know, they never held me up because my timing was perfect and da da da da. The second and only other time I really feel I drove to that potential was when I was driving in the women's race series in 2000, it was either 2000, 2001 and I took pole, and I want to say at Las Vegas, but it was somewhere where they had a chicane.

That's the Panoz Series that you ran in?

Galica: The Panoz Series, yes, and I pulled a lap there to take pole by a second but only...when I did it, I knew it was another perfect lap. It was just unbelievable. As a driver, that's what you wait for. You wait and you try and you try and you try to achieve that perfect lap and you never achieve it and you're always frustrated 'cause just one corner or something goes wrong and then when you actually do that perfect lap its just, you know, it's the best feeling. It's like winning lottery really. It's incredible and I did a perfect lap and I took pole by a second over everyone else. It was either Charlotte or Las Vegas and I forget which one it was but it was because I nailed the chicane, absolutely nailed it. And I think I nailed the chicane because I'm a skier, you see, we do chicanes sometimes.

During the time that you were trying to make it in F1 or running with Hesketh and running with the Surtees what was the scene with the drivers like for you at that time? Were there other drivers that you were particularly friendly with that were in the Grand Prix scene? How did you fit into the dynamic there?

Galica: I was sort of looked after by John Watson and Niki Lauda who were friends at the time and they used to take me out to dinner and really make me feel welcome. And Niki used to actually stop, when we went out for qualifying or practice, he'd stop in

front of my garage and wave me out in front of him, which was very special. When I watched the race in Argentina, I actually watched it with his then wife and she said, "Oh, Niki so terribly wanted you to qualify for this race." But he said to her that the car I was driving, not even he could have qualified in, which I thought was rather nice. And Emerson Fittipaldi was also extremely kind to me in those days. And really most of the drivers were very supportive of what I was trying to achieve and they knew that I didn't really have the machinery. And the teams were nice. But, you know, we're looking back 30 years, or 28 years, and things were different in those days, you know, it was all different.

Were there any drivers that were particularly difficult or obstinate at that time?

Galica: Not really, I mean, if I could say there was one, Clay Regazzoni was not particularly supportive of women in motor racing but then he was Swiss and he had a very—in those days—different view of women. He believed that they were not meant to be motor racing drivers, but he never was rude to me or anything. I just had it reported to me by a journalist; you know how journalists stir stuff up!

That's interesting because certainly the Indy scene was very, very different in terms of the amount, I think, of animosity toward female drivers. The male drivers were very split. They were either very supportive or very difficult.

Galica: Well, I think a series like Formula 1 is different than Indy. Remember, Indy only allowed women into the pits about 15 years ago. You know, and they had that thing about green and numbers and God knows what. I mean, Formula 1 was way ahead of them knowing, as they did, that they were a show, you know, and if a woman came in and helped the show it was a bonus I think.

Having driven throughout that period and experiencing that level and now still working in the motor sport industry today, do you see the opportunities appreciably getting better for women or do you see it as being much the same types of problems?

Galica: No, I certainly believe if I was younger and driving now, I would find a sponsor with ease. I think that has changed. I think thanks to Danica Patrick and a few other drivers, women are now accepted in motor racing far more. People realize that they can do the job, and sponsors are prepared to back them and so are teams. Yeah, I think that definitely...

Do you think we'll see a woman in Formula 1 anytime soon?

Galica: I think Formula 1 is a tough nut for a woman. Two reasons, one it's extremely physical so you're gonna have to get somebody who's as fit as I was. And remember, I came from 15 years of skiing so I was super fit when I went into F1. So I don't say women can't be that fit but that has got to be part of their build-up toward Formula 1. Yes, I think women are capable of it. I think there will be a woman, but I think she will have to work extremely hard at her fitness alongside her driving skills. So, it might be a way off. I don't know. I'd like to see it. 