

Fast Female Drivers at Bathurst

Editor: With the 2024 Repco Bathurst 1000 this October (10th-13th), it was thought appropriate to run the following story in recognition of female drivers who continue to be overlooked in a male dominated sport.

Fast Female Drivers at Bathurst by Brian Goulding for the Australian Motor Heritage Association.

A few years ago, while working for the Australian Racing Drivers Club (ARDC), I received a phone call from a journalist. The bloke was writing a magazine article on female competitors in Bathurst's Great Race. I suspect he thought we could just press a button and print out a list for him.

We talked about high-profile women drivers like **Christine Cole/Gibson**, **Sue Ransom**, **Janet Guthrie** and **Melinda Price**. Eventually, we decided that since 1963 there have been 12 or 15 females enter the race. I decided to research the grids to see what the real figure was.

I was surprised to find that no less than 32 women have entered the Bathurst enduro since 1963, with varying degrees of fanfare and success.

1963/64

Australia's great touring car race came to Bathurst in 1963 (from Phillip Island) and the only woman competitor was regular clubman driver **Lorraine Hill** in a Morris Major Elite. She finished 35th overall and 16th in class. In 1964 in a Hillman Imp Lorraine finished 49th and 13th in class. That was it for three years.

1967/68

An all-woman crew tackled the race in 1967 in, of all things, a Morris 1100S, complete with 'big block' 1275 engine. **Jane Richardson** and **Midge Whiteman** achieved a very respectable fourth in class. They defeated an all-male team in an identical car and remain one of two all-female teams to ever finish the Bathurst race. The second team to finish Bathurst was the next year (1968) when **Midge** teamed up with **Christine Cole** in a Mini to score fifth in class.

After marrying Fred Gibson, Christine was to enjoy a long Bathurst career racing under her married name, **Christine Gibson**, until 1984.

1969

In 1969 **Diane Dickson** teamed with her husband in a Ford Cortina 240 to score sixth in class and 31st outright. In those days you could still buy a new car, run it in and then take it to race at Bathurst.

Sandra Bennett made her Bathurst debut in that same year (1969) finishing fourth in class driving a Mini K. Two all-female crews failed to finish. **Anne Thomson** and **Carole Corness** lasted 82 laps in a Cooper S, while **Christine Cole** and **Lynne Keefe** were out when their Fiat 125 crashed on lap 48.

1970

In 1970 **Christine Cole** and **Sandra Bennett** scored a fabulous 13th outright in a Torana XU1. This was the best result for a female up to that time and was way ahead of the other 1970 women **Lynne Keefe** (36th) and the team of **Carole Corness/Gloria Taylor** (42nd).

1971

In 1971 **Pat Peck** and **Jan Holland** drove an XU1 into 29th place, but the next year **Holland** joined **Christine Cole** in a Torana 2850 leaving **Pat Peck** to do the race solo. Both Torana's failed to finish.

1973

For 1973 **Pat Peck** had sports sedan VW Beetle driver **Darrilyn Huitt** as co-driver but the Torana only lasted three laps before the engine failed.

Well-known female racer **Sue Ransom** made her Bathurst debut with **Christine Cole** in an Alfa Romeo 2000 GTV, but they had fuel problems and only did five laps.



Christine Cole, who also raced as Christine Gibson, took part in nine Bathurst 500/1000 races between 1968 and 1984.

Caroline O'Shanesy teamed with Peter Williamson in a Cooper S but they finished a lowly 26th.

1975

1975 was a great year – the three females entered all finished. **Caroline O'Shanesy** was 27th in a Cooper S, **Sue Ransom** 11th in an Escort RS2000 and French girl **Marie-Claude Beaumont** scored a sensational sixth outright and first in class with John Leffler in an Alfa Romeo 2000 GTV.



Sue Ransom (left) and Christine Gibson were co-drivers in the 1973 Bathurst 1000.

Fast Female Drivers at Bathurst (cont)



International race driver Marie-Claude Beaumont, was sixth outright and B-Class winner at the 1975 Bathurst 1000.

1976

The reverse happened in 1976. Three women entered and all did not finish (DNF). **Marie-Claude** teamed with **Christine Gibson** but they only lasted 52 laps. This was better than **Caroline O'Shanessy** who was out by lap 27.

1977

For the 1977 race one of the great female racers, **Janet Guthrie**, paired up with fellow Indy legend Lone Star JR – otherwise known as Johnny Rutherford – in a Torana A9X. They only lasted 13 laps before JR ran into a bank on the top of



International race driver Janet Guthrie, was robbed of a drive when Indy car legend Johnny Rutherford crashed the Torana A9X into a bank on the top of the mountain.

the mountain while the only other female in the race, Sue Ransom, completed insufficient laps to be classified.

1978

Who remembers **Robyn Hamilton**?

Perhaps you remember her by her assumed name "Charlie", the result of a sponsorship deal with a perfume distributor. Robyn made her one and only Bathurst appearance in 1978 and along with the only other woman racing that year, **Sue Ransom**, retired late in the race.

1980

Sue Ransom was back in 1980 for her last Great Race appearance along with debutante **Alexandra Surplice** who had made a name for herself in production car racing. Both women finished but towards the tail of the field.

1981

Alexandra Surplice tried again in 1981 but the alternator failed on her Celica on lap 88.

In the crash shortened 1981 race **Christine Gibson** was classified sixth with Joe Moore in his Falcon.

1983

Christine Gibson shared a Nissan Pulsar Exa with Bob Muir in 1983, but the car broke a driveshaft on lap 14.

1984

For the last year of group C, **Christine Gibsons** was back in the Exa driving with a young guy who had the look of



Robyn Hamilton at Bathurst where her Torana A9X was a DNF but classified in 11th place. Seen here with Allan Grice (left) and Sir Jack Brabham.

a future champion, Glenn Seton. This time the driveshaft lasted 76 laps before it broke.

At least **Alexandra Surplice** could say she finished what would be her last Great Race, albeit in 26th.

1987

There was no female participation in 1985 or 1986, but in 1987 the Great Race was a round of the first World Touring Car Championship. Consequently, we saw world standard women compete.

BMW had two women in their works team: **Annette Meeuvissen** and **Mercedes Stermitz** had considerable racing experience in Europe and teaming them together at Bathurst was definitely not just a publicity stunt. They crashed their M3 in practice so badly that the TAFE boys had to source a new body to repair the car. These women didn't really get a chance to show off their talent as the gearbox failed on lap 45.



International driver - Annette Meeuvissen



International driver - Mercedes Stermitz

Fast Female Drivers at Bathurst (cont)

1990

It wasn't until 1990 that another woman tackled the mountain. **Heather Spurle** came from New Zealand to co-drive the Bob Jones VL Commodore. They finished 26th.



NZ driver and 'World Water Speed' record holder - Heather Spurle MBE.

1993

In 1993 **Tania Gulson** entered the race with her father Ray and brother Paul to drive the family BMW 635Ci which had been racing in Group A since 1984. Given Tania's limited experience, it proved too much of a challenge to qualify in the old car.

1994

1994 was the last Great Race to mix V8s with smaller cars and it was the year that the talented **Melinda Price** made her debut. Unfortunately, she didn't even get to drive the Corolla in the race as Co-driver Garry Jones crashed it on lap 16 at Forrest's Elbow.



Melinda Price not only raced at Bathurst but three times at Nurburgring (24 Hour).



Jenni Thompson and co-driver Aaron McGill ahead of the 1997 Bathurst 1000.

1997-1999

In 1997, 1998 and 1999 there were two races each year at Bathurst – one for Super Tourers and one for V8 Supercars. **Jenni Thompson** ran in all three Super Touring events but only finished in 1999.

Heidi O'Neil and **Paula Elstrek** shared a Ford Mondeo in the 1998 AMP Bathurst 1000, but a tyre failure on lap 78 put them out.

Over at the V8 race (1997 Primus 1000 Classic), **Melinda Price** and **Kerryn Brewer** teamed up as all-female Castrol Cougars in 1997 and 1998 to complete the race in a Holden Commodore VS to finish in 12th and 14th place respectively.

Also, in the 1998 V8 Primus 1000 Classic, **Nicole Pretty** in Holden Commodore VS had to retire due to a failed alternator at about midway through the race.



Nicole Pretty competed in 1998 race but had to retire due to a failed alternator.



Hill climb specialist and land speed racer Paula Elstrek competed with Heidi O'Neil in the 1998 AMP Bathurst 1000, but they retired after a tyre failure and crash.

1999 & 2000

Melinda Price continued to compete with male co-drivers in 1999 and 2000 in a Holden Commodore VS to finish 17th and 20th respectively.

2001 & 2009

In the noughties **Leanne Ferrier** made two appearances in 2001 and 2009 in a Holden Commodore (VX). A DNF and an 18th place were the results.

2015

In 2015 money from retailer Harvey Norman was used to arrange a drive for two female racers in a Pro Drive Ford Mustang. One was local Super 2 driver **Renee Gracie** while the other was Swiss/Italian **Simona de Silvestro** who had Indycar and other American racing experience. They finished 21st in their Prodrive Racing Australia Ford FG X Falcon a whopping 40 laps behind the winner after a long delay for repairs.



Kerryn Brewer teamed up as all-female Castrol Cougars in 1997 and 1998.

Fast Female Drivers at Bathurst (cont)



The Castrol Cougars raced at Bathurst in 1997 & 1998. Photo (L-R): Melinda Price, Kim Watkins (never drove) and Kerryn Brewer with Larry Perkins and Russell Ingall



Leanne Tander (Ferrier) competed in 2001 but failed to finish due to steering problems. In 2009 she finished 1 lap behind the winner.



Renee Gracie competed in the 2015/16 with Italian Simona de Silvestro. They finished 21st and 14th respectively.

2016

In 2016 they were both back in a Nissan Motorsport Altima, once again using Harvey Norman money. They enjoyed a much better run. After qualifying 26th they finished 14th in their Nissan Motorsport Altima L33 only two laps behind the winners.

2017 & 2018

In 2017 **Simona de Silvestro** teamed with local driver David Russell but they failed to finish after completing 152 laps. She was back with Alex Rullo in 2018 and although they were only placed 14th they finished on the same lap as the winner.



World Swiss-Italian racing driver Simona de Silvestro has competed 6 times at Bathurst with a highest finish of 13th in 2019.

2019

2019 was to be **Simona's** best result at Bathurst to date. She qualified the Nissan Altima in a creditable 16th spot and with driving partner Rullo they finished 13th only one lap down on the winners.

1923

In 2023 with support from Supercars Australia **Simona de Silvestro** secured a wildcard entry with Dick Johnson Racing. The category owners wanted female participation and **Simona** was still one of the best female drivers in the world. Unfortunately, she did not enjoy a great result when teamed with rookie Kai Allen. They finished 20th one lap down on the winner.

Who was the Best

So, who gets my vote for the best result by a female in the Great Race?

No contest. It has to be **Marie-Claude Beaumont** for that brilliant sixth place outright and first in class in 1975 driving with John Leffler in the Alfa Romeo 2000 GTV.

It is true that **Christine Gibson** also scored sixth outright in the crash shortened 1981 race. However, that was in an outright class car so less of an achievement than Beaumont's sixth in the little Alfa.

As for the most Bathurst starts by a female, that award would go to **Christine Cole/Gibson** with eight ahead of **Simona de Silvestro** on sixth.

Today, there is only one female driver in top level Australian racing. **Renee Gracie**, who is competing in the Australian GT Championship, the same driver who partnered **Simona de Silvestro** in the Bathurst 1000 in 2015 and 2016.

Renee came up through the normal pathway of Formula Ford, Super 3 and Super 2. Her career hit a brick wall after 2016 due to a lack of funds. In the last few years, she has funded her GT racing in an Audi R8 by creating a YouTube channel.

Renee is a talented driver, but like all would be champions, she needs sponsorship to reach the top. ■

Editor: Story by Brian Goulding for the Australian Motor Heritage Association. Thank you to the Jaguar Drivers Club of Australia for use of the story. Photographs from various websites.