

FORGET F1, I WANNA HAVE FUN

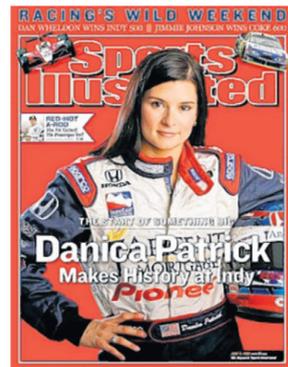
Danica Patrick is the best female driver in motor racing, but is still derided at home in America for her glamorous media image. Men underestimate her at their peril, finds Mark Harris

Danica Patrick is more than just a pretty face. The 28-year-old racing diva has achieved more than any other female driver on the track. She was the first woman to win a race in the IndyCar series, the closest America gets to Formula One racing. She also came third last year in the prestigious Indianapolis 500 — the highest finish by a woman in the event — and along the way has had to deal with macho accusations that she is more interested in photoshoots than photo finishes.

She recently appeared in an episode of the crime drama series CSI: New York, playing a racing driver suspected of murder. She has starred with the rapper Jay-Z in a music video and revealed her other talents in a swimsuit edition of Sports Illustrated. When she's not wearing fire-resistant racing suits, it seems, she is posing in a bikini.

Despite — or perhaps because of — this, Patrick has taken motor-mad America by storm. And there is a good reason for that. Racing in the US is dangerous — that's the way the crowds like it. And for all her flirtations with the glamour industry, Patrick has won respect, as well as acclaim, for her fearless driving and for how she has dealt with high-speed crashes.

So far, so American, but Patrick



learnt her trade in the British motor racing arena with what she calls the F1 "brat pack", including a 21-year-old Jensen Button. Aged just 16, she moved from Illinois to Milton Keynes, a rookie go-kart driver with a precocious talent.

"I wasn't going to be a go-kart driver for ever," she recalls when I meet her in New York. She's looking flawless, not a trace of grease or motor oil sulling her designer outfit. "As soon I was old enough to race cars, I took it to the next level. I was told that I could learn more in a year in the UK than I could in five years in the United States," she says.

In Britain, Patrick began a three-year campaign through Formula Ford, Formula Vauxhall and the Formula Ford festival, where she eventually claimed a second place. "It was a downer trading in the [Ford] Mustang I owned in the

States for a Fiat Punto in England — although I could get it up to 108mph with the wing mirrors tucked in," she recalls. "Then I had a Vauxhall Vectra and an awful 20-year-old brown [Ford] Granada."

She narrowly missed racing against Button in Formula Ford but ended up socialising with many of today's F1 elite. "I met Lewis Hamilton at Jensen's 21st birthday party, by which time Jensen was already an F1 driver," Patrick says. "We were a brat pack of friends, him and a few other drivers. Button's a nice guy — I was happy to see him win last year."

Despite the jibes she has received from some American racers — Kyle Petty, a driver turned commentator, recently said on air that Patrick was "just a marketing machine" — she regards sexism as more prevalent in Europe.

"It felt much more old school over there [in England]. Women still cooked and cleaned. I feel the women's movement happened a little faster over here. I remember I was the quickest one day in practice, and one of the team owners I drove for couldn't believe it. To the male drivers he was like, 'She's the quickest — what are you doing? Get out there, go!', as if it wasn't okay to be slower than me. He would tell his wife to fetch him beers."

On her return to America, Patrick found her success in England had earned her a place in an IndyCar team co-owned by David Letterman, known mainly for hosting a late-night talk show on CBS.

Since then her racing career has taken off. "I'm competitive at everything I do," Patrick admits. "You name it: cards, running or beating people off the line at a red light."

At this year's Indy 500 race, in two weeks' time, she intends to surpass her previous best and claim outright victory. "It's my favourite race of the year," she says. "I really like the ovals at Indy and Daytona — big drafting [slipstreaming] tracks where it's like a chess match. You have to be patient, pick your battles and stay in it to the end."

Talking to Patrick is very different from talking to a European F1 driver. While Hamilton, for example, gives the



Danica Patrick in practice for an IndyCar event in Kansas last month; and, inset left, in Sports Illustrated

impression of being reticent, shy and wary of upsetting sponsors, she is a bundle of enthusiasm, speaks her mind and doesn't do media training courses. She says this is the difference between the two disciplines in general: F1 takes itself very seriously, while racing in America is more open and informal.

"Something that's very important to me is having fun, and I think the environment of F1 is a little bit less friendly than American racing," she says. "In F1 you just don't see the drivers hanging out. Drivers such as Takuma Sato [of Japan], who came over after doing F1 for a while, says everyone's so nice here.

And it's true — everyone is so calm, relaxed and friendly."

Calm and friendly, perhaps, but her lifestyle could hardly be described as relaxed. As well as her growing media commitments and IndyCar fixtures, Patrick is squeezing in a season of Nascar stock-car racing. "The schedule for this year and next year is: do both IndyCar and Nascar and then I'll decide if I want to do that again, or focus on one or the other. I always go with my gut," she says.

Which brings us to the long-running rumour that Patrick may one day decide to move sideways into F1, in which

there has been a dearth of female drivers (Divina Galica, the best known in Britain, raced for the Surtees and Hesketh teams in the 1970s — one of only five women who have raced since the inception of F1 in 1950).

It is just a rumour, apparently. "I really like being with my family and my friends, being close to home and having the creature comforts of the States," she says. "I'll never say never, but it would have to be a really unique opportunity for me to change what I'm doing."

The road cars Patrick now drives are certainly a step up from her clapped-out Punto. "I drive an ML 63 AMG — it's the

DANICA PATRICK: MY LIFE IN CARS

MERCEDES ML 63 AMG
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FORD MUSTANG SVT COBRA
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FIAT PUNTO
A move to England meant trading down to a basic warm hatch

MY STUFF ...

ON MY DVD I just watched Avatar for the first time. I love funny films, any comedy. The cheerleading movie Fired Up! is hilarious.

ON MY MP3 PLAYER I listen to all kinds of pop, especially Pink, Beyoncé and Alanis Morissette. I even listen to some country now,

which is weird. I must be coming down with stock-car syndrome.

MY FAVOURITE GADGET I have a BlackBerry. I like the iPhone but the BlackBerry is a bit more efficient for emailing, and the battery is better. I really want an Apple iPad — that's my new thing.

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09/09 Porsche 911 Turbo Tiptronic, Basalt Black	6,000M	07/07 Mercedes-Benz SLK 3.5 350, Obsidian Black	25,500M	06/06 BMW 520d 2.0 SE, Titanium Silver	87,250M
09/58 Rolls-Royce Phantom Coupé, Anthracite	5,000M	07/07 Lexus GS 3.5 450h, Red	66,250M	05/55 Bentley Continental GT 6.0 W12, Black	36,500M
08/58 Porsche 911 3.6 Carrera 4 Targa Tip.S, Silver	14,750M	07/07 BMW 520d 2.0 SE, Silver Grey	69,750M	05/55 BMW M3 3.2 CS SMG, Silver Grey	60,750M
08/58 Lexus IS F 5.0 V8, Palladio Silver	18,000M	07/56 Volkswagen Phaeton 4.2 LWB V8 4Motion, Black	43,250M	05/55 BMW X3 2.5 Sport, Bluewater	144,250M
08/08 Nissan GT-R Premium, Black	2,000M	06/56 Aston Martin V8 Vantage 4.3, Coupé, Silver	9,750M	05/05 Ferrari 360 Modena 3.6 Spider, Roadster, Nero Daytona	17,250M
08/08 Jaguar XJ Series 3.0 V6 Sovereign, Azure Blue	15,500M	05/05 Aston Martin V8 Vantage 4.3, Coupé, Monaco Blue	22,500M	05/05 Range Rover 2.9 TD6 Vogue, Silver	85,500M
08/08 Bentley Flying Spur, Dark Sapphire	18,000M	06/56 Mercedes-Benz S320 3.0 CDI, Obsidian Black	39,500M	04/54 BMW 320i 2.2 SE Touring, Silver	69,750M
08/08 Lexus GS 3.5 450h SE, Mesa Red	28,250M	06/56 Range Rover 2.9 TD6 Vogue, Silver	52,750M	04/54 Mercedes-Benz CLK 5.0 500 Avant Garde Conv., Black	86,000M
07/57 Audi TT 3.2 Quattro S-Tronic Coupé, Grey	21,000M	06/56 Jaguar XJ Series 2.7 TDVi Sovereign, Midnight Black	74,250M	04/04 Bentley Continental GT 6.0 W12, Black	73,000M
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07/57 Range Rover Discovery 3 2.7 TD V6 GS, Blue	22,000M	06/06 Aston Martin DB9 5.9 V12 Volante, Conv., Blue	51,500M	04/53 Bentley Continental GT 6.0 W12, Green	51,000M
07/57 BMW 525d 3.0 SE Touring, Platinum Grey	85,500M	06/06 Range Rover Sport 2.7 TDV6 HSE, Black	51,750M	03/53 Bentley Arnage R, Silver	38,000M
07/07 Porsche 911 3.6 Carrera Tiptronic S, Meteor Grey	19,750M	06/PP Rolls-Royce Phantom 6.7, Black	64,500M	99T Bentley Arnage, Blue	56,000M

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