

GO MILKA GO!

Latina racer defies stereotypes and speed limits

BY TTXTXTXTXTXTXTX

MILKA DUNO LIKES NOTHING more than to jump in her car and go out for a ride—at 200 miles per hour. The Venezuelan race car driver is known as much for her handling on the track as for her smoldering looks. In fact, she has accomplished what few women have even dreamt of.

She is the first Latina to win an international sports car race in North America and she was the first woman to win the Grand American Rolex Sports Car Series Grand Prix in 2004. Just two years after taking up racing, Duno became the first woman to win the 1,000-mile Petite Le Mans in Atlanta, Georgia, one of the top sports car races in the world. Her life has been in high gear ever since.

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ule but I am very happy now," says the curvy Caracas native, who is now settled in Miami. "It means that everything is going well."

Though she has made lots of history on the track, Duno, 33, does not have the typical race car background. Prior to getting behind the wheel, she earned four masters degrees in as many subjects—from organizational development to marine biology—in her quest to become a naval engineer. As if that weren't enough, she also speaks three languages: Spanish, English and Italian.

Duno caught the racing bug quite accidentally, after a friend invited her to attend a Porsche driving clinic back in Venezuela. She found the combination of technology and speed irresistible. She wanted to be a race car driver.

Her parents weren't exactly thrilled with the new career choice.

"What? Are you crazy! Why do you want to drive a race car?" she recalls of an early conversation. "It was totally tough for them after I'd studied so much to become a naval engineer."

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"I had to explain that this was what I wanted to do," she continues. "I have a lot of determination and I want to be one of the best."

Duno is well on her way. She is the first woman to race in the Daytona Prototype class, the top level of sports car racing. Last February, she scored an eighth-place overall finish at the Daytona 24-hour race. She is one of only five women to finish in the top-ten overall in the competition's 44-year history.

Surprisingly, Duno says she has met little resistance in the male-dominated world of sports racing. "It was very normal for me," she explains. "I work, train and practice all the time. I'm just another driver."

If anything, her presence has attracted a whole new audience. Duno is approached by a significant number of fathers and their daughters after big races. "They come up all the time and say 'Milka, my daughter is going to grow up to be a race car driver just like you!'" she exclaims. "That's great but I also remind them that education is very important. It's for all of your life—education is forever."

Having both the smarts and the skills helps Duno to leave the competition in the dust. "I understand what engineers say and I can give them the right information so that they can make the correct changes during a race."

What is it like driving a race car at such incredible speeds? "You need to concentrate and focus," she says. "You don't feel you are going so fast because you have all these other things going on as a driver."

Um, little things like traffic?
"Yes, like the cars you have to pass and ones who are trying to pass. You need to be very alert to everything around you." I tell her that it sounds like commuting or navigating across town during rush hour.

She laughs: "On the street everything is more relaxed." Duno is currently driving Number 11, a CITGO/SAMAX Pontiac-powered Riley Mk X1 with her teammate Marno Franchitti (who is married to Ashley Judd). As a spokesperson for Pontiac, she also drives them when she's not on the track.

"I have a Pontiac Solstice now and it's a very beautiful car—it's a convertible and I just relax and enjoy it." That's not to say she's never gotten a speeding ticket either.

"I have too many tickets that I'm trying to take care of now," she confesses. "My mind doesn't control my feet some times."

Sports car fans can catch her racing at Limerock Park in Lakeview, Connecticut on May 29 and upstate at Watkins Glen, New York on June 3. **vny**

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