



the
**Henry
Ford**®



Paula Murphy

1928-Present

Nationality: American

Raced between 1956-1976

Origins: An Ohio native, Murphy was born in Ohio and attended Bowling Green University before completing her bachelor's degree in physical education at University of Cincinnati. She married and in 1953, had her son Danny. In 1956, Murphy moved her young family to California, where she accepted a secretarial position with Marquardt, an aerospace engineering firm located in North Hollywood.

Early Influences: Murphy claims to always have had an interest in driving, first learning how as a teen when she “kinda stole my mother’s car- and off I went,”¹ but her first exposure to auto racing occurred after her move to California. Co-worker Jean Calvin, an automotive journalist and driver, invited Murphy to attend the 1956 Santa Barbara Memorial Day Race. Although Murphy assumed any woman competing in auto racing couldn’t be feminine, she joined the Women’s Sports Car Club, an organization that encouraged women to participate in administrative tasks associated with racing.² After becoming well-versed with the less-glamorous side of racing, Murphy purchased her first car, a 1954 MG-TF, in 1956 and began competing in ladies’ races. In 1963, Murphy decided to devote herself entirely to racing and quit her desk job. This was also the year she decided to compete in men’s races, as ladies’ races were being increasingly phased out of competitions.

¹ Strawbridge, “From the Feminine Perspective...”, 1989.

² Nelson, “Personality Profile”

Racing Accomplishments:

- Set border-to-border records in 1963 cross-country drive. Murphy and 2 co-drivers set the east-west record, driving from Los Angeles to New York in 49 hours, 37 minutes. After a few days of rest, the team drove to Mexico and broke the north-south record while driving a Tijuana-Vancouver-Tijuana course.
- Part of a crew sponsored by Studebaker that set 370 new speed records at Bonneville Salt Flats during one week of Oct. 1963. This included the women's land speed record with an internal combustible engine. Murphy averaged 161.29 mph.
- First woman to drive alone at high speeds on Indianapolis Speedway track during a 1963 test drive.
- In November 1964, she became first woman to drive a jet-powered car, The Avenger, (10,000 horse power J-46). Murphy was able to reset her own land speed record at Bonneville with a two-way average of 226.37 mph and reaching a top speed of 243 mph.
- First woman to obtain fuel Funny Car license from the UDRA and NHRA, when 1966 after initially being turned down by both organizations.
- Set records in Formula 4 and Formula 6 class of NHRA in 1966 while competing against men.
- Twice set NASCAR women speed record.
- Participated in a "drive around the world" to celebrate America's bicentennial in 1976, completing the trip in 104 days.

Life off the Track: Murphy's marriage didn't last long, but her father agreed to move out to California and help take care of Danny, allowing her to continue following her racing dream. Danny and Murphy's father became part of Murphy's pit crew during the later years of her racing career. She was employed by STP, one of her sponsors, in public relations during the late 1960s. She met with quite a bit of resistance from men in drag-racing while racing funny cars, but proved to be a successful driver and continued to set speed records throughout her career. Although she originally planned to quit drag racing after she surpassed the 200 mph mark on the drag strip, she continued to race well after she broke that barrier in 1969. After returning from her 1976 world drive, Murphy decided to leave the track, taking a job as a buyer at the California corporation Rocketdyne, although she never ruled out a future return to racing to defend her title as "fastest woman on wheels."³⁴

Sources Consulted

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³ Strawbridge, "From the Feminine Perspective..."

⁴ Nelson, "Personality Profile..."