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## Shirley Muldowney

Nationality: American

June 19, 1940 -

Raced 1965 - 2003

**Background:** Shirley Roque was born in 1940 and spent her youth growing up in Schenectady, NY. She was a rebellious teenager with a sense of adventure and she eventually dropped out of high school. She worked at a carhop fast food restaurant and it was there that she met Jack Muldowney. Jack helped introduce her to the world of motor sports. They began street racing together, but it was only the beginning for the couple. The two married when Shirley was sixteen and she gave birth to their son John a few years later. She made her first trip down a drag strip at the Fonda Speedway in New York in 1958, driving a '58 Chevy. Throughout the 1960s, she and Jack competed wherever they could. Jack headed the pit crew and Shirley was behind the wheel. In 1965, she became the first woman licensed by the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) to drive a gasoline-powered dragster in a professional category. She moved to Michigan in 1971 to become more involved in the racing scene and she and Jack divorced the following year. Shirley spent the early years of the 1970s racing Funny Cars with drag racer Connie Kalitta and the two became very close. After surviving a number of fires in Funny Cars, she switched to top fuel dragsters in 1974. She found success and continued to set new records in spite of the obstacles she encountered as a result of her gender. Her relationship with Connie ended in 1977, but it did not stop her from competing. In 1984, she suffered a terrible accident in a qualifying race at the NHRA Grandnational at Sanair International Drag Strip in Montreal, Canada. Shirley underwent numerous operations, but she was back in her race car a few years later. She married her crew chief Rahn Tobler in 1988 and the two were together until 2006. Shirley continued to perform well throughout the 1990s despite not having enough sponsorship. She retired from racing in 2003, but her legacy lives on. She was the winner of 3 NHRA Top Fuel World Championships and had 18 national event victories throughout her career.

**Early Influences:** Shirley's interest in drag racing can be attributed to Jack Muldowney. It was his love of the sport that got her involved in it. After the two met, Shirley started accompanying him to many street races and eventually she began competing in them. Jack taught her how to race and built her first dragster. She caught on quickly. Shirley's will and determination helped her succeed in an arena that was dominated by men. She overcame all odds and proved that gender

would not prevent her from becoming one of the best drag racers of all time. Even today though, she continues to recognize that she would not have achieved what she did if it had not been for Jack's help.

### **Racing Accomplishments:**

- Became the first woman licensed to drive a gasoline-powered dragster in an NHRA professional category (1965).
- Won the International Hot Rod Association (IHRA) Southern Nationals in Rockingham, N.C. in a nitro Funny Car class in 1971.
- Became the first woman to advance to the finals of an NHRA national event in a professional category when she was runner-up at the NHRA Spring Nationals in Columbus, Ohio (June 15, 1975).
- Became the first woman to break the 6.00 second barrier (she got 5.98 sec.) at the Popular Hot Rodding Championships at Martin, Michigan (Aug. 24, 1975).
- Became the first woman voted to the 10-member Auto Racing All-America Team by AARWBA, 1975.
  - Voted to the team again in 1976, 1978, 1981, and 1982.
- Became the first woman to win a professional title in a national event competition (at the NHRA Spring Nationals in Columbus, Ohio - June 13, 1976).
  - She had a time of 6.03 seconds and a top speed of 249.30 mph
- Won the NHRA Winston World Finals in Ontario, California (Oct. 10, 1976).
  - She had a time of 5.77 seconds and a top speed of 249.30 mph (it was the best elapsed time and top speed of the NHRA season).
- Became the first woman to win the Winston World Points Championship (1977).
  - She won it again in 1980 and in 1982, becoming the first person in history to win the title three times.
- Was one of four members voted into the 250 Mile Per Hour Club in 1979.
- Won the NHRA Fall Nationals in Phoenix, Arizona in 1989.
- Joined the four-second club, posting a 4.974 elapsed time at the NHRA Keystone Nationals (1989).
- Set a track record at the Fuji International Speedway in Fuji, Japan with an elapsed time of 5.30 seconds at 285 mph (1993).
- Set IHRA speed records in 1996 (294.98 mph), 1997 (303.71 mph), and 2000 (310 mph).
- Beat Don Garlits in the Autofest 2000 New Year's Eve race.
- Recorded her career-best elapsed time of 4.579 at 327 mph in 2003, at Chicago's Fall Event.

### **Awards and Recognition**

- Named Drag News Top Fuel Driver of the Year in 1976.
- Received the "Outstanding Achievement Award" from the U.S. House of Representatives, Oct. 14, 1977.
- Named "Person of the Year" by Car Craft Magazine in 1977.
- Voted Car Craft Magazine All Star Team, Top Fuel Driver of the year in 1981 and 1982.
- Won the Jerry Titus Memorial Award in 1982 after receiving the greatest number of votes from the AARWBA membership.
- Received the AARWBA "Comeback Driver of the Year" Award, 1986.
- Inducted into the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America in 1990 (Novi, MI).
- Received the United States Sports Academy, Mildred "Babe" Didrikson Zaharias Courage Award (1992).
- Voted to the United States Sports Academy's list of Top 25 professional female athletes from the period 1972-1997 (1997).
- The New York State Senate named her one of thirty "Women of Distinction" during the Women's History Month Exhibit in 1998.
- Named 5<sup>th</sup> on the NHRA Top 50 Drivers list in 2001.
- Inducted into the Michigan Sports Hall of Fame in 2003.
- Inducted into the International Motor Sports Hall of Fame in 2004 (Talladega, AL).
- Inducted into the International Drag Racing Hall of Fame in 2006 (Ocala, FL).
- Ranked 21<sup>st</sup> on ESPN's list of top drivers of all-time (2008).

**Life off the Track:** Shirley Muldowney spent the better part of forty years racing. It is her lifelong passion and she said that retiring in 2003 was one of the most difficult decisions she ever made. Outside of the racing arena, Muldowney spent her time raising her son, John, who became actively involved in his mother's racing career. She also is an animal lover. She has two Chihuahuas, Peanut and Midnight, and helps feed and care for a number of cats. Muldowney is very close to her pets and has said that if she did not compete in motor sports she might have created a home for abused animals. She continues to follow racing. Well aware of the dangers associated with the sport, she spent a good deal of time stressing the importance of safety while competing. She also co-authored a book with Bill Stephens in 2005 entitled, Shirley Muldowney's Tales from the Track.

**Interesting Facts:** Following Shirley's success in the 1970s and early 1980s, Hollywood released a film about her life entitled, "Heart Like a Wheel" in 1983, starring Bonnie Bedelia. The film helped highlight some of Shirley's many achievements and depicted the adversity she overcame in what was previously a male-dominated field.

Shirley's nickname throughout the 1970s was Cha-Cha. Announcers frequently used the name when speaking about her, but she tried to discourage its use, preferring to be referenced by her first name.

Shirley's trademark was her hot pink dragster. Even her racing suit and helmet were hot pink.

**Personal Website:**

"Shirley Muldowney – First Lady of Drag Racing" <<http://www.muldowney.com/>>.

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- "Michigan Sports Hall of Fame Past Inductees," Michigan Sports Hall of Fame. <<http://www.michigansportshof.org/inductees/archive.html>>.
- "Shirley Muldowney" search. NHRA. <<http://search.nhra.com/default.aspx?keywords=shirley+muldowney>>. -This site provided quite a few articles regarding Muldowney's life as released by the NHRA.
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