



Betty Skelton

June 28, 1926 - Present

Nationality: American

Set Records Between 1954-1970

Origins: A 1935 trip to Alabama started Betty Skelton's love affair with flying. While visiting relatives, Betty was allowed to ride in a small plane owned by a local man and was determined to become a pilot herself. After returning to their home in Florida, the entire Skelton family, Betty and her parents David and Myrtle, enrolled in flying lessons. At the age of 12, Betty soloed her first aircraft, although she now admits this might have been performed "illegally,"¹ as she was too young to legally fly alone. She "officially" soloed in 1942, at the age of 16, and earned her pilot's license. and two years later, she started competing in aerobatics.

Early Influences: Skelton quickly made a name for herself in aerobatics, claiming international championships in 1948, 1949, and 1950, as well as setting numerous air speed and altitude records. Skelton's automotive career didn't begin until she retired from aviation in 1951, looking for another challenge. In 1953 she was introduced to Bill France, Sr., the head of NASCAR and he asked if Skelton would be interested in challenging land speed records and possibly competing in auto racing. Weeks later, Skelton competed in her first Daytona Speed Week, setting a class record of 105.88 mph behind the wheel of a 1954 Dodge Red Ram sedan.

Racing Accomplishments:

- First woman to drive an Indy 500 race car when she drove Jack McGrath's #2 Indy roadster around the Chelsea, Michigan, Chrysler test track in 1954.

¹ "The First Lady of Firsts," *The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club Pit Report*.

- 1954 - Sets women's close course record twice (143.44 mph, then 144.02 mph) and Stock Car Flying Mile record (105.88 mph)
- Called the auto industry's first female test driver, being part of a team that set 395 speed records, including women's land speed record (145.044 mph) at the Bonneville Salt Flats in 1956.
- Set nine separate records for speed and acceleration during 1956 Daytona Speed Weeks.
- First technical narrator for General Motors, representing the company at many of the major auto shows.
- Official Spokeswoman of Chevrolet, appearing in national ads and television commercials while working for Campbell-Ewald (Chevrolet's advertising agency) from 1956 to 1970.
- Set transcontinental record, driving from New York to Los Angeles in 56 hours, 58 min. in 1956.
- In 1958, set South America transcontinental record with 41 hour, 14 min. drive.
- Part of a committee that launched *Corvette News* (Chevrolet's in-house magazine, now *Corvette Magazine*) and served as editor.
- In 1965, Skelton broke the women's land speed record again at the age of 40, with a speed of 315.6 mph at Bonneville Salt Flats.
- Becomes Vice President of newly-formed Women's Marketing and Advertising Division in 1969 at Campbell-Ewald.
- Inducted into the Florida Sports Hall of Fame (1977), NASCAR International Automotive Hall of Fame (1983- first woman to be honored), Florida Women's Hall of Fame (1993), Corvette Hall of Fame (2001- first woman to be honored), National Aviation Hall of Fame (2005), and Motorsports Hall of Fame (2008) for her contributions to the world of aeronautics and automobiles.
- In all, Skelton has held 17 land and air records and still holds more aircraft and automobile records than any individual in history.

Interesting Fact: Skelton's open-cockpit biplane, "Little Stinker," in which she won three International Feminine Aerobatics Championships, is part of the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum collection. It currently hangs in the entrance to the Stephen F. Udvar-Hazy Center in Dulles, VA.

Life off the Track: Skelton continued pushing the boundaries of what women could achieve, being the first woman to undergo the physical and psychological testing NASA used to select the original 7 *Mercury* astronauts in 1959. She returned to racing, continuing to set records and work in Chevrolet advertising until 1970, when she and husband Donald Frankman relocated to Florida to start a real estate office. Skelton still lives in Florida with her second husband, Dr. Allan Erde, and remains active in numerous Florida Corvette clubs, and retains her love of fast cars.

Sources Consulted

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*In 2002, Skelton donated a collection to the Smithsonian Institute. These items have been separated into three series: one about her personal life, one containing material focusing on her professional life, and the third composed of all oversized materials (scrapbooks, large format magazines).

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