



GENDERHOPES
WORKING TO END GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Interview of the Month Susie Wolff, Founder of “Dare to Be Different” April 2016

- 1. GenderHopes: You are the founder of “Dare To Be Different”, a campaign aimed at increasing female participation in motorsports. Can you tell us more about this initiative?**

Susie Wolff: The idea followed a request from Harper’s Bazar to participate in a feature about sportspeople who dared to be different. That’s where the name came from, although I never thought of myself as daring to be different, I simply followed my passion for motorsports and racing.

There is a preconception that motorsport is for boys, however, it’s not always the case and many women are successful in this field as well: not only as drivers but also behind the scenes, from mechanical engineers to journalists. The aim of Dare to be Different is to create a community to showcase that it’s possible for women to be successful in the industry, to create role models for young girls and to show them that they can also choose a career in this industry.

Dare to be Different also aims to connect women and girls with each other, and functions in a similar way to a mentoring program. We have planned five headline events in the coming year in conjunction with the MSA. For each event, we are inviting schoolgirls to racetracks in the hope of exposing them to all aspects of the sport. These events will be open to 100 to 120 girls, who will try karting, be introduced to F1 and sports journalism as well as to the mechanical and engineering aspects of the industry. The event will also focus on being fit and eating healthy. There are no specific targets to increase participation but rather an initiative to encourage girls and their families to think outside the box and open up every aspect of this industry to girls. Dare to be Different will also feature two networking events with two key female speakers, to inspire young girls and women.

- 2. As one of a few women in the motorsport industry, how did you find the culture and press coverage towards women?**

Actually, there are many women in the motorsports industry but they are simply not in the spotlight. The conception that it’s a man’s world is only a

perception, the marketing department is equally filled with competent men and women and there are numerous women working as engineers and sports journalists.

In terms of the culture towards women, I received more press coverage than I probably should have got. At some points in my career, there was too much media interest in comparison to what I had achieved. For example, a German newspaper covered one of my testings for Mercedes in Barcelona, during which I did a faster time than Sebastian Vettel. The newspaper chose to cover it in a humiliating way for Vettel, stating that a woman had just beaten him!

A downside is that it is harder to earn the respect. Women have to work harder to begin with, but once you've shown you are capable, gender becomes irrelevant. I am lucky that I was doing my dream job, but I did receive my fair share of criticism and negativity, either because of my husband's position or simply because I am a woman.

3. Did you personally receive any negative comments about being female from people in the industry and if so, how did you handle these? Were you sexualised, and how did you avoid this?

I was occasionally approached to do pictures or to be portrayed in a way that I was not comfortable with. In such cases, I would flatly deny such offers, but I was also part of a team that survived on sponsorship money so, as a driver, male or female, you occasionally have to make compromises. It's a fine line and it's based on individual choices.

Some athletes, male or female, have accepted to do nude or sexualised pictures. That is their choice and there is no reason why they should be ridiculed for making such choices.

4. Has there been an improvement in gender equality within the motorsport industry since you first started?

Yes, there has definitely been an improvement. I believe my path and career have inspired others. I often receive letters from little girls who write that they want to be like Susie Wolff! It's important that girls see role models in the industry, so they know and understand that it is possible for women to choose this career. Many people were also energized and inspired by seeing a woman on the grid and wanted to see more.

Society in general is changing and motorsports is changing with it. Also, women are supporting each other more, they are uniting more than they used to. So yes, there are more women and there is more acceptance of women in the sport, but there is still a lot of work to be done.

5. Do you think a woman can participate and possibly win a F1 Grand Prix, on the same terms as a man?

Yes, 100%! A woman can drive and win a F1 race on the same terms as a man. It is very hard physically but with enough physical training, it's a challenge that can be overcome. I had to do a lot of work on my neck and shoulder area to cope with the G force, but it's entirely doable.

6. What advice would you give an aspiring female driver?

I would say "Go for it, don't give up!" It's a brutal sport, at the end of the day, there is only one winner and there are days where you simply want to give up, but push through those days, you can succeed.

I was fortunate that I received a lot of support from my parents who drove me all over Europe to participate in races and championships. I also have a strong mother, who runs her own business. She has always been a fantastic role model. My husband is also proud and supportive, he pushes me to do my best and supports my dreams. A strong support network is essential.

7. You have just retired from your racing career. Can you tell us what is in the pipeline for the future?

I look forward to doing some races with the Channel 4 F1 team as an analyst and have another exciting project to start soon.

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***Susie Wolff** is a retired British racing driver from Scotland. She progressed through the ranks of motorsport, starting off in karting, then moving up to Formula Renault and Formula 3 before moving to the DTM to compete for Mercedes-Benz. In 2012, she was the first woman to be signed by a Formula 1 team to work as a development driver. In November 2015, Susie Wolff announced her retirement from F1 and from all motorsport after the end of season Race of Champions. In 2014, Wolff was the first woman to take part in a Formula 1 race weekend in 22 years, at the British Grand Prix, at Silverstone. In 2016, she founded Dare to be Different, a campaign aimed at increasing female participation in motorsport.*