Sera Trimble: in pursuit of perfection

21/11/2019 When stunt driver Sera Trimble is performing on a Hollywood set, nothing less than perfection will do – an attribute she also looks for in her cars.

Sera Trimble might just be the living embodiment of 'the American dream'. From starting off as a valet at a local hotel in her hometown of Seattle, to becoming one of Hollywood's most sought after stunt drivers, all in less than a decade, Trimble's rise to the top of her profession has been nothing short of stratospheric.

In this exclusive interview, Trimble explains her route to the top, why she likes to under-promise and over-deliver and why her constant quest for perfection has left her with a strong affinity for a German brand that shares an equally focused mindset ...

Were you always interested in driving cars for a living?

My interest in driving cars for a living was a natural progression. In high school my job was delivering Pizzas, which was a male-dominated driving job. Then when I moved to Seattle to go to art school, I worked at a Blockbuster video store, which involved a lot of chatting to guys about movies. From there I transitioned to working as a valet at a hotel, which also involved a lot of chatting with guys, but this time about cars. And then somehow, I ended up combining both by driving cars and working on movies. A natural progression.

Not every valet goes on to be a stunt driver. How did you make it happen?

When I was working at the hotel in Seattle a film crew from LA was staying there. After watching me whip cars around the front of the hotel, the Director on the shoot came up to me and asked if I'd ever thought of driving for a living? My response was "well, look at these cars that I'm driving right here". But he pressed on: "No, I mean on commercials and TV". I didn't even know that was a thing at that point.

He then invited me down to the shoot as a Production Assistant (PA) so that I could see the camera crane, picture car and the precision driver. I jumped at the chance and I paid a fellow valet $40 to cover my morning shift so I could go and hang out with the film crew.

I really enjoyed working at the hotel because I loved who I worked with and it was very hard for me to think about getting a different career outside of the hotel industry. But I met this film crew, and everyone was really nice, and I thought, you know what, this is something that maybe I could go and do. I like all these people.

Then four months later I flew to LA.

And is that when you started your driver training?

Yeah. I took the Rick Seaman stunt driving school, which the driver from the prior shoot referred me to in LA. He said it would be better if people knew that I had a decent amount of experience with certain manoeuvres like 90-degree slides and 180s.

It was a three-day school and internally I kept thinking, "I don't want to move to LA if I'm bad at this". Thankfully at the end of the three days the instructors at the school said, "You should move here and do this". And I did.

However, the first three years in LA were spent being a PA on commercials to learn what everyone does and the set etiquette, and I spent every extra ounce of money on doing some sort of driving training, because I never wanted to get hired to be a driver and not be able to do what they wanted.

Because if you say you're a professional at something, you should be a professional. Getting there and saying, "I don't know how to do that", that's unacceptable to me.

Would you say you're on a constant quest for perfection?

Yes. Because I want to be a good driver, not a good female driver.

I'm consistently trying to improve my skill. I'm always trying not to suck. That's basically my job. My whole life is trying not to be a YouTube fail video that goes viral.

Did you ever experience a big break moment?

One of the first big jobs my mentor, Brent Fletcher, put me in for was a Domino's commercial, where the delivery driver is delivering pizzas in what looks like Gotham City — it was around the time The Dark Knight came out — and she's getting chased and rammed by the Joker's car.

I had worked on commercials for years before that with average budgets. But when I showed up to this commercial it was huge — two giant camera packages, trailers — it looked like we were on a movie.

To this day it is still one of the most intense shoots I've done for all sorts of reasons. Lots of variables.

Is that the job you're most proud of?

No. That would be a commercial where I had to do a reverse 180-degree slide into a parking space.

The premise was that a young girl was taking her driving test at the DMV (Department of Motor Vehicles) and her mom tells her to do it 'just like we practiced'. Then the young girl goes ripping around the driver's-ed course, slides through the slaloms and then does a reverse 180 into a parallel parking spot in front of the DMV.

What made the manoeuvre particularly difficult was that it was supposed to be a forward 180 into the

space, which I had rehearsed. But the car wouldn't allow me to perform the manuever as the electronics just shut everything down as soon as they sensed the rear wheels had locked up. So, I couldn't power slide into it, and I couldn't use the hand brake.

Then the stunt coordinator (Brent Fletcher) pitches the idea that we could do a reverse 180 to a stop, although he admits that the difficulty level is way harder. I tried to downplay my nerves but if I got one element wrong, between lifting off the throttle, flicking the wheel and transferring the weight, the car would just walk backwards into the curb. And it was around this point I was also told that this particular car was handmade because it wasn't a factory vehicle yet, and the wheels were the only set in America.

We decided to work on the manoeuvre out in a parking lot to the side. At one point I even had to ask my mentor for a moment, and he laughed at me because I was pacing around and hyperventilating – I'm a very under-sell, over-deliver person, but I'm not a 'keep my cool person'.

In the end we went for it. The speed had to be very specific so that the car didn't over rotate and hit the kerb. Thankfully I had a passenger in the car, who was stunt doubling the driving instructor, and he acted as my speedometer as I was looking out the rear window. So he'd call out, "18, 20, 22" and then "hold, hold, hold". And then I'd listen for the verbal cue on the radio to whip the car around.

It was so technical and precise, but we did it three times and I didn't hit the curb once.

You get to drive all manner of cars for your day job, but what do you have in your own garage?

Well, I have a pretty filthy G-body 1986 911 Carrera with IROC bumpers. It looks a bit like a 964 — I don't really like the look of the impact bumpers, I prefer a streamlined look. And then I have a Macan on the driveway, because the streets around here are pretty poor quality and it soaks up the bumps brilliantly.

Why Porsche?

Because they're great. I got interested in trying a different platform after having a number of rear-wheel drive, front-engined sports cars. So, I went mid-engine, rear-wheel drive with a Cayman GTS, which was my introduction to the Porsche brand.

Ironically, though, I'm not the kind of woman who likes to be seen in a new car, so I had it for four months and drove it only on Saturdays and Sundays at 6am up Angeles crest Canyon driving with friends. And then I would park it by 9am to avoid attention.

In the end I decided to swap it for a Macan, which has a lot of the characteristics of the Cayman but is a little more understated. I use it mostly to commute and for road trips, but it's surprisingly fun to canyon carve in.

But your old 911 is your true love?

Yes. Although it was a bit of a love/hate relationship at first, because when I got it the whole transmission needed to be rebuilt. But when it was fixed, I went on a 1,000-mile drive with my friends up to Big Sur to go camping. It was 1,000 miles in three days, avoiding highways and just using backroads.

I have never experienced a car you can drive so hard, sitting at 4,500-5,000 rpm for hours on end while it's 110 degrees outside. The temp gauge never went higher than halfway. It was the most impressive beating of a machine I've ever seen. And it happens every year with 20 of us, with a big majority of the group being in old 911s, 356s or 912s. I love seeing everyone's modifications to a car that looks so similar to the untrained eye — everyone's little personal details. I can certainly appreciate that now.

How much tinkering have you done to the 911?

A lot. The first thing I changed was the differential. I love a limited slip diff, because I like how the car responds to it; on track, the way that it responds when you lift off the throttle is amazing. The whole suspension has also been reworked — there are dropped spindles in the front, which allows it to sit lower but it makes it challenging to get out the driveway. And it used to have a splitter which I've cut back a bit to make it more useable.

There are also all-new motor mounts, a new exhaust to replace an aftermarket item that droned at a cruise and flat black Fifteen52 wheels. I love that the car has no chrome.

What's next for you?

In my profession I could be perpetually jobless for the rest of my life or someone could call me tonight and make me work tomorrow. Oh actually, I did get called earlier today and I have to work tomorrow! I better put that in the calendar ...

In terms of cars? The Macan is great for the rough streets in my neighbourhood and the '86 Carrera is just me — it's loud, it smells of exhaust fumes, and it sounds and looks like a rough and tough race car. I'm not a new Porsche girl, I like the super-rough old Porsche.

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