

Simona De Silvestro: at home on the road

18/02/2021 The fastest woman in the Porsche motorsports department finds tranquility on a camping trip in her Porsche Cayenne Turbo Coupé.

A Porsche Cayenne Turbo Coupé rounds a corner on the tight, winding mountain road. To the right is a dramatic drop and ahead? Ahead is a mail bus and it doesn't appear to be slowing down or giving way. Luckily, Simona De Silvestro is in the driving seat. She backs up her Cayenne, confidently edging close to the precipice until the yellow bus squeezes by, the driver offering a friendly wave in thanks. De Silvestro waves back and then continues apace, all the way to the top of the mountain from where she takes in a panoramic view of the Bernese Oberland.

Cows graze in verdant Alpine meadows below. High above them, the hulking rock and ice masses of the Wellhorn and Wetterhorn jut across the blue sky. “My homeland is a dream,” sighs the professional racing driver, extending her arms as if to gather it all in. After pausing to soak it all up, she points the car back down toward the valley: the destination is the Manor Farm 1 campground on the shores of picturesque Lake Thun, close to where De Silvestro was born in 1988.

Camping was a popular escape for De Silvestro during the COVID-19-impacted summer of 2020. “I’m a mountain kid and a very active person,” she says. Eight-hour hikes, gruelling mountain bike rides, or stand-up paddling to the point of exhaustion are part of the physical and mental training she undertakes to keep fit for her work. The Switzerland native is one of the best racing drivers in the world. She competed in the renowned Indianapolis 500 five times, gained Formula One experience with the Sauber team, drove regularly for the Formula E team of Andretti Autosport, and was the first full-time driver in the popular and demanding V8 Supercars Championship in Australia.

A Porsche factory driver since 2019

Since September 2019, De Silvestro has been a Porsche factory driver, working specifically as a test and development driver in the TAG Heuer Porsche Formula E team. As the first woman ever to take the role, she describes it as the high point of her career so far. Having been in the series since 2015, she is an experienced Formula E racer. In 2016 she became the first female to score points in the series and she was well positioned to help the young Porsche factory team in its 2019/2020 debut season, particularly as it prepared in the Weissach Development Centre racing simulator. Manoeuvring at the campsite is by no means a digital proposition, though. The Cayenne has to be parked perfectly level. “I don’t sleep well with a tilt,” laughs De Silvestro.

Ten years ago, the 32-year-old could not have imagined racing in an electric car. But times have changed. “The cars in Formula E are getting faster and faster and more efficient, the races are cool, the power density is high, and the wheel-to-wheel battles are always exhilarating.” She’s also enthusiastic about the series because her generation is fiercely concerned about the environment. “When I look back in 30 years, I want to be able to say: “I was there when it all began in Formula E.” With all-electric racing, we are also pointing the way to the future of mass mobility.” Alongside her Formula E job, De Silvestro also competes in the German GT Masters series on Timo Bernhard’s team, driving a Porsche 911 GT3 R. “No matter where, Porsche races to win – that’s the brand’s standard and mine as well,” she says.

No easy way to the top

De Silvestro’s racing career faced uncertainty more than once – but never because of a lack of talent, performance, passion, or assertiveness in what has long been a male-dominated sport. Sponsorship money was scarce. The Formula One project also failed for budgetary reasons. “But I’m determined, persistent and extremely averse to losing, so I never gave up,” explains De Silvestro as she expertly tends to the grill, having already put up her roof tent for a night beneath the stars.

Even as a little girl, she dreamed of a Formula One career. She watched grands prix on the couch beside her father – papa Pierluigi – and sat on his lap in the go-kart. At the age of seven, after much pleading, and with legs finally long enough to reach the pedals, she got her own kart and competed for ten years before getting her start in formula racing. De Silvestro, who, thanks to her father also holds an Italian

passport, began by competing in Italy's Formula Renault junior racing series in 2004.

Alone in the USA

Aged 17 she dropped out of school and moved – alone – to Indianapolis after finding a sponsor there. If she'd stayed in Europe, she would have had to give up, she says. Successes in the Atlantic Championship led her into the American counterpart to Formula One, the IndyCar series. De Silvestro was named rookie of the year in the Indy 500 in 2010, and in 2013 she made it to the podium as runner-up in the Houston race.

Between those two highlights was her most serious accident: on May 19, 2011, the rear suspension of her Dallara broke during training for the Indy 500. De Silvestro span out at almost 350 km/h, crashed into the wall, bounced off and the car burst into flames before coming to a halt after flipping. Despite the crash being in no part her fault, De Silvestro, who was left hanging upside down in her harness and suffered second-degree burns to her hand, admits it knocked her confidence. Her mother, who has learned to cope with fearing for her speed-obsessed daughter, became her greatest support. She advised De Silvestro to get back in the cockpit as quickly as possible and so she did – less than 48 hours after the crash. She made it into the qualifying and was quickly dubbed the Iron Maiden by motorsport fans. She likes the nickname, though she's less of a fan of the eponymous rock band.

In late 2019, after 10 years in the US and three years in Australia, De Silvestro returned home. Not to Lake Thun, where she was born, nor to Lake Geneva where she grew up from 1990 onwards and where her father still runs a car dealership. Now the globetrotting nature-lover lives a 10-minute walk from the shores of Lake Zurich. From there, she's quickly on the water with her stand-up paddleboard, a quick jaunt from the mountains for camping, hiking and skiing, and, of course, a short drive from Germany, Porsche and the race tracks. Her return to her home continent is associated with big goals. "I want to compete for wins and championships, and with Porsche it's possible," she says, before pausing. "And as a woman, I want to make history with Porsche."

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