



## **The next female F1 driver could arrive sooner than you think**

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With the recent retirement of Williams test driver Susie Wolff, many questions have been raised in connection to women within F1 and whether we are any closer to a female driver lining up on the grid. Susie has looked the most likely candidate for a number of years and with Carmen Jorda joining Renault Sport F1 as a development driver, it appears that teams are now more open to the idea than in previous decades. However, one of the reasons behind Wolff's retirement was that she believed she had hit the glass ceiling within F1, so are we truly any closer to seeing a woman line up on the grid?

One of the main and most evident problems faced by young girls trying to make a name for themselves is the lack of numbers. With them being outnumbered by the boys in karting, it can feel quite intimidating on and off the track but this problem is slowly being combatted as more girls are inspired by their heroes such as Susie to forge a career in motorsport. Unfortunately the reason why we aren't seeing as many women in the higher reaches of single seaters is due to the time spent in karting. The majority of boys who make it to F1, look to race in championships such as F4 at the age of 15 or 16 whereas girls generally spend a longer time in karting before moving up the ladder. This means that they fall behind in their progression due to them being several years behind the boys in terms of peak performance with top single-seater teams keener on signing a driver who is younger and has more experience in car racing compared to a more mature karter.

In other disciplines of motorsport, women have thrived in recent years and this gives huge promise to girls starting out their career. In America, Danica Patrick competed successfully in IndyCar and took her first victory at Motegi in 2008. Since then she has gone on to compete in over 100 races in the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series and has led laps in the Daytona 500. Patrick's success has been as a result of hard work and determination but also due to her early introduction into car racing. When she was just 16, Danica moved to the UK where she competed in British Formula Ford with a highlight being her second place finish at the Formula Ford Festival at Brands Hatch. Within GT racing, a number of women have proven their talent including Christina Nielsen who, at just 23 years of age, has progressed through the ranks and has just been crowned the Vice-Champion of the United Sports Car Championship where she will aim to

capture the overall honours next season. Jamie Chadwick has also done a fantastic job as she became the youngest British GT Champion when she took the honours alongside Ross Gunn with one round to spare and was rewarded with a World Endurance Championship test drive in the Aston Martin Vantage.

However, it has been a much more challenging task for women to break into F1 with Susie's retirement coming off the back of excellent free practice performances in difficult circumstances, most notably at the British Grand Prix. Simona De Silvestro looked to be a leading candidate for the Sauber F1 Team's driver position for the 2015 season after signing as an 'affiliated driver' at the start of 2014. In spite of the fact that De Silvestro competed in a number of test sessions for the Swiss based team, she was released by the team towards the end of year due to contractual difficulties. This was a big blow to Simona's chances but she has since gone on to race in the Indianapolis 500 and is currently driving for Amlin Andretti in the Formula E Championship. This was a blow to the chances of seeing a women driving in F1, but we could be closer to achieving this feat than many people believe.

The leading candidate for this position is widely considered to be German racer Sophia Floersch. After a successful career in karting, Sophia moved up to compete in the Ginetta Junior Championship this season, aged just 14. Despite her comparable lack of experience, Floersch showed maturity beyond her years and captured the hearts of many British motorsport fans with her stunning double victory at Thruxton. This performance earned her high praise from respected motorsport figures such as Jason Plato and Dario Franchitti who praised talent along with an ever-growing fan base. Sadly Sophia pulled out of the championship at the halfway stage having collected two victories, seven top-5's and nine top-10 finishes from her ten races. Floersch has been testing extensively ahead of the 2016 season where she will compete in the ADAC Formula 4 Championship in Germany, driving for experienced single-seater outfit Motopark. She will be hoping to challenge for the title before moving up the ranks each year in pursuit her dream ambition of racing in F1.

In addition to Sophia, there are a number of drivers competing in single-seaters who have a realistic chance of making it to F1. Beitske Visser has consistently been a leading light within women in motorsport and at just 20 years of age, she has time on her side as she aims to progress. Previously signed to the Red Bull Junior Team, Visser has two years of experience competing in the Formula Renault 3.5 series under her belt and may look to return to the series in 2016 with the aim of a top-10 overall finish. Tatiana Calderon is also vastly experienced with three years of Formula 3 racing to her name, in addition to being a multiple podium finisher in the Middle-Eastern single seater MRF Challenge series. One further candidate who has shown promise this year is young racer Carrie Schreiner. Still in her teens, Carrie competed in the ADAC Formula 4 Championship this year and showed huge improvements throughout the season to be a regular top-15 challenge in the 35 car field by the end of the campaign. Schreiner will look to return to the series next season with US Racing, in addition to select races in the MSA Formula Championship.

With a great number of young female racers making their mark in motorsport, it will only be a matter of time before one lines up on the F1 grid. This may set a precedent for other drivers rising up through the ranks, as well as giving girls a new role model to look up to. Susie Wolff has left a strong legacy which many women will aim to surpass and it wouldn't be a surprise, if within the next 10 years, we have a female driver competing for the F1 championship.