

Every Two Weeks!

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# Trackside



## WOMEN IN RACING!

- \* *Cyndi French:  
Flagperson!*
- \* *17-Year-Old Racer  
Renee Dupuis!*
- \* *Julie Stefanik:  
Speed Shop Boss!*
- \* *PLUS: Chasing the  
World of Outlaws!*







# She Calls The Shots

*You can argue with Penn Can starter Cyndi French, but you'll lose!*

The office clock ran at half-speed, as timepieces often do on Fridays. And this one lumbered under the weight of an entire winter's worth of anticipation.

Finally, reluctantly, it struck five.

She wasted no time in putting distance between herself and the paperwork on her desk. More important matters were at hand; there was a stock car race to get dressed for.

At home, she touched up her makeup and reached for the outfit that was hanging in the closet. A smart pair of white pants and a black-and-white striped shirt would be her attire for the evening. It was a far cry from what she had worn to the track the previous two years.

On those nights, a bathing suit and skyscraper heels were *de rigueur*. It went with the territory, and as a trophy

girl there was no escape from being the center of attention.

Yet despite her conservative attire, she was unable to escape notice on this opening night. From the very minute she entered the track, she could sense that several hundred eyes were riveted on her every move, and an equal number of tongues were wagging.

She collected up the sticks that had the brightly colored cloths attached, and climbed the stairway. It was time to enter an entirely different world and assume her new title: Cyndi French, Chief Flagger at the Penn Can Speedway. The country's first female flagger at a weekly race track.

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*by Mike Marrer*

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*Mike Adaskaveg Photos*

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Four months later, when the final checkered flag fell for the season, those who had waited for her to fall on her face left the speedway grounds severely disappointed. The lady had proved once and for all that a person's sex has no bearing on the ability to control a race meet.

When Penn Can promoter Seward Rice first announced during the winter of 1988 that Cyndi French would be assuming the chief flagger's duties for the upcoming season, many observers didn't take it all that seriously. They dismissed it as a publicity stunt, one that would magically evaporate when the big boys first pulled out onto the track.

But it was far from a joke for track officials, and especially for Cyndi. She





*Sure she's cute, but what matters come Friday is flagging ability. Cyndi's got it!*

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had been looking for new opportunities in the sport, and Rice's offer was just what she needed.

"I seriously wanted to do something at a track," Cyndi said. "I wanted just to start out really as a corner flagger, but Ricey (as the boss is known) wanted to put me right up there on the flagger's stand. From the start, I took it very, very seriously."

But why, of all things, would a woman gravitate towards flagging?

"I don't know. It just always interested me, ever since I was a kid. I always found it a very fascinating part of the track, (working) as an official. Some kids say, 'God, I want to drive,' but I know I don't have what it takes to drive."

The roar of wide-open engines and clods of mud hurling into the air have been a part of Cyndi's life for as long as she can remember. As a child, she went along her father and brothers on their weekly pilgrimages to Penn Can in Susquehanna, PA, and Five Mile Point Speedway in Kirkwood, NY.

As brothers Dave and Emmanuel (known to most people as Frenchie) grew older, they worked on the pit crew of Chuck Akulis' Modified. Later, Dave ran a parts service, and Cyndi could be found at the rear of the truck every week, pumping and selling gas.

Soon, she was doing secretarial work for the RaceWorld organization, which then evolved into representing that car show promotion firm at parades. Cyndi began going to area tracks for them, and was chosen the first RaceWorld queen. She's helped coordinate every RaceWorld pageant since then.

Despite what the grandstand experts think, flagging is not a skill acquired overnight. It takes patience, practice, and a knowledgeable coach. Cyndi found her tutor in Art Darling, a fixture at Southern Tier ovals.

"Art is a tremendous person," said Penn Can PR director Steve Post. "Art not only can help you flag, but he can help you with the jitters. I think Art was the key to the thing working. Both the flagging skills and the personal skills, he's excellent in both categories."

At first, Cyndi and Art worked together as co-flaggers. As her experience grew, Art found his assistance was required less and less. In the final weeks of the season, Art stepped off the





*Cyndi and assistant flagger Jim Baker discuss the upcoming night's racing program as the sun sets over Penn Can Speedway.*

stand and let Cyndi run the program with help from assistant flagger Jim Baker.

As with any good flagger, safety is Cyndi's foremost concern. "Art always drilled that into me. He often told me, 'If you've got a guy who comes up and yells at you for the night, just think in the back of your mind, at least he's standing there yelling at you.'

"At some tracks, you can't go as fast as that motor can take you around a track. The tracks just aren't built for that. Sometimes, these guys will get so rambunctious that they'll go into the pits at race speed, and that's something I don't like to see. They don't know what's out there after they get off the track. I try to reiterate that many, many times.

"The red flag is always a big one for me," she continued. "I know that you cannot stop on a dime with a race car, and you want to be able to stop fully and know that the idiot behind you isn't going to ram into you, too. But there have been instances where I've had a car flip and I want the cars to stop, then and there.

"I've had to chase after cars because they're still moving, and you've got the

red flag in your hand and you're slamming it on their car and asking, 'Do you know what this means?'"

Which points out the main question that was on most minds when hearing of Cyndi's appointment: would a woman be able to maintain control? Would the drivers defer to her, or would they try to take advantage of the situation?

"At the many, many races that I've been at," she said, "I've seen drivers get out of the car right there in the middle of the track when the caution is thrown and go and argue with the flagger. I've never had that (problem), and except for one minor incident, no one has ever argued with me. They'll talk to me when the races are all over with in the pits, or at the beginning of the races the following week."

But the main reason she's been able to successfully do her job is because track management doesn't interfere and override her, something a good many facilities could learn from. Cyndi French's decisions are the final word at Penn Can.

"They know they're not going to get very far (arguing) with me. Ricey's made that very clear: 'What she calls is

what she calls, and don't bother arguing with her.'"

The boss has also offered some advice concerning her attire. The striped shirt on opening night was his idea.

"Ricey wanted to bring in the part of the old-time flaggers who used to wear the black-and-white official striped shirts. With him being around so long, running tracks since the late '50s, and then my being the first woman to come in, he was trying to combine the two eras."

As can be expected, the weather dictates her choice of clothing for the evening. "I wear what's comfortable but visible," she said. There is a white jumpsuit that is supplemented by long underwear on extra cold nights, as well as a mini-skirt that she's worn occasionally. However, that particular outfit did not go over very well with some of the women in the crowd. Rice heard complaints along the lines of "my husband was looking at her all night long instead of watching the races."

But those small pockets of resistance in the crowd were the only negative reactions she received last season. The drivers voted overwhelmingly at an off-season meeting for her return.





*The congratulatory shoulder slap from Cyndi to Modified winner Tom McGurrin.*

"She's been very good for the speedway," said Post as he assessed her work.

Now that Cyndi has that rookie year under her belt, both she and the track are looking to expand her involvement. Post would like to see a return to the era when the flagger provided as much entertainment as the drivers.

"I would like to start to build a little character into the position again," Post said. "The first year, we all wanted her to get the basic duties down. Now if we can tie a little flair in there with it, I think that would be dynamite. Tex Enright was the classic example of that, as flaggers go," he said.

As for Cyndi, well, her goals are a bit more humble.

"Right now I'm a flagger, but I'm not what you would consider one of the great flaggers. I'm always quoted as being the first woman flagger, but that says nothing about if I'm good or fair, and that's really what I want.

"Just the title of being an honest flagger is what I want right now."



*A glamorous late-night dinner after a hard night's work. Cyndi French dines on a leftover concession stand cheeseburger.*