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WINTER 2005 \$4.00



The Need for S

For Venezuela's Milka Duno, it's all about the t

BY JOHN DOMINGUES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JUHA LIEVONEN



Speed

thrill of the race.

In a sport whose slogan might as well be “Good ole boys and their hotrods,” Milka Duno is that rarest of rarities: a Latina whose stunning good looks belie all that she has accomplished both on and off the racetrack.

A naval engineer by training with four master’s degrees to her name, the former model has managed to become a top-flight Le Mans driver in the span of a few years.

Having begun club racing in her native Venezuela in 1997, Ms. Duno turned professional the next year, scoring a pair of podium finishes and placing fourth overall in the Venezuelan Porsche Supercup Championship.

Two years later, she earned “Venezuelan Auto Racing Driver of the Year” honors and scored a top podium finish at Road Atlanta in a Ferrari F-355 to become the first woman to win a Ferrari Challenge race in the United States.

In 2001, as the only regular female driver in the American Le Mans Series (ALMS) Championship, she won four races, including the 1,000 Miles of Petit Le Mans at Road Atlanta, and ended the season as the ALMS 2001 vice champion driver in the Le Mans Prototype (LMP) 675 class.

That and other successes led to an invitation to participate in Open Telefonica, Europe’s most important single-seat racing series after Formula One. Driving a Coloni Nissan CN1/C with the Vergani Racing team, she went on to become the first woman to score points in the prestigious European series.

The following year, Ms. Duno was the only woman among 149 drivers in the 24 Hours of Le Mans in France—the second consecutive year she competed in the famous race—and became the first woman in history to pilot the fearsome LMP 900, sports car racing’s fastest machine, in the 2002 ALMS. She also became the first woman to race in Open Telefonica’s World Series category.

After a 2003 season that saw her become the first Latina invited to compete as a VIP driver in the Porsche Supercup race as part of the Formula One Grand Prix of Spain, and to compete in the 27th annual Toyota pro/celebrity race as part of the Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach, Ms. Duno had a breakout 2004.

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Left: Ms. Duno's #2 CITGO Pontiac Crawford. Above: Ms. Duno and co-driver Andy Wallace celebrate their win of the Miami 250 in Homestead, Florida last September 19—their second win at Homestead in 2004.

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In February of last year, she became the first woman to win a major sports car race in North America when she and co-driver Andy Wallace took first place in the Grand Prix of Miami. And in September, the Duno-Wallace team won the Miami 250 at Homestead-Miami Speedway in Homestead, Florida.

Not surprisingly, her racing exploits have garnered Ms. Duno the attention of big-name sponsors, including Pontiac, which is featuring her in broadcast, print, and web advertising for its new G6 model. It's Pontiac's largest Hispanic marketing campaign to date.

Ms. Duno slowed down just long enough recently to grant us an interview.

Latin Business: What led you to take up auto racing?

Milka Duno: A friend of mine invited me to take part in a Porsche driving clinic in Venezuela. I ended up really enjoying the experience. And I guess I did well because the instructor suggested that I pursue a career in racing. I guess

you could say the thrill of driving a car at top speed on a challenging course got in my blood!

How did the sponsorship deal with Pontiac come about?

My PR firm [RacePR] had been lobbying General Motors for a marketing/racing relationship for some time. I attended an event in Miami with my PR man and we had the great fortune to be seated at a table with a prominent Latino GM dealership owner named Lomberto Perez. As the night went along, we let him know that we had been actively campaigning for a relationship with General Motors. He seemed to know all the people at Pontiac that worked on Hispanic marketing and he arranged for us to meet with the advertising agency in Miami [Accent Marketing] that handles Pontiac's Hispanic PR. From there the ball really started rolling. I can't begin to tell you how proud and excited I am to be the centerpiece of Pontiac's largest-ever Hispanic marketing campaign. It's exciting to see such a huge company recognize the power and loyalty

of Latin and Hispanic consumers in the U.S.

Do you view yourself as a role model for women generally and for women in racing specifically?

I didn't pursue a racing career as a way to become a role model, but it does seem to offer a positive message to women, namely that they can achieve anything they want as long as it is their passion and they work hard. Being a woman in a traditionally male-dominated sport, I've had the good fortune to achieve many history-making firsts, but that was never really my goal. My goal is to work as hard and as smart as I can, and to achieve to the best of my ability. If by doing that I inspire other women to do the same, all the better.

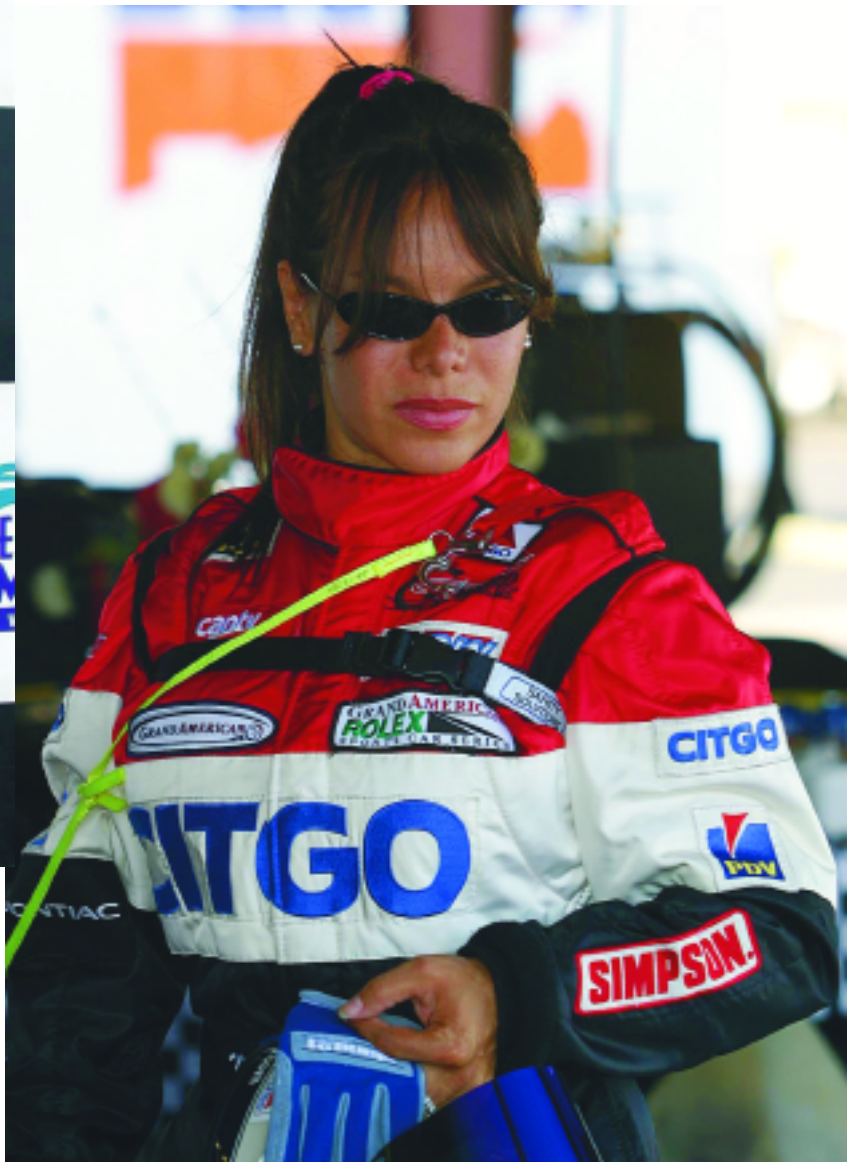
Would you like to see more women racecar drivers?

My opinion is that once a driver suits up, puts on a helmet, gets

in the racecar and onto the track there is no such thing as female and male racecar drivers—everyone's just a racecar driver. It doesn't matter to me if the driver in the racecar in front of me is male or female. I view everyone as a competitor and will do everything I can to beat them! It would be wonderful to see more women racecar drivers, but the bigger issue is to see more women striving to reach their goals, whatever they may be. I challenge any and all women to pursue their passion and their goals, and as long as they are doing that I don't care if it's as a stay-at-home mother, a firefighter or a racecar driver.

Have the male drivers welcomed you as an equal?

In general, I believe they have. The best evidence I have of this



Ms. Duno suited up for the April 10 race in Phoenix.

is that they offer absolutely no special treatment or consideration if someone is a female driver. When we're on the track racing, the biggest compliment I can get from them is that I am just another competitor. That's when I know they consider me an equal.

What do you hope to achieve as an auto racer?

I hope to continue learning and challenging myself and advancing. It would be incredible to one day race in the Indy 500 or in Formula 1. Those are goals of mine, but as long as I continue to grow and learn I'll be happy!

Which accomplishment(s) are you most proud of and why?

The things I am most proud of are the sponsorship/endorsement support of Pontiac, CITGO, PDVSA, CANTV, and MRW. These

are very big companies that are supporting me in my career and believe in me. Racing at this level is quite involved and very expensive. The fact that these companies have honored me with their support is very humbling. I am also very proud of all my racing achievements, particularly this season. I have an incredible team, Howard-Boss Motorsports, and an extremely talented co-driver in Andy Wallace.

Are you surprised by your racing success?

I wouldn't necessarily say surprised, because a tremendous

amount of dedication and hard work go into racing success. But no matter how hard you work, you always need a little bit of luck.

Do you miss naval engineering?

I enjoyed every minute while pursuing my education and training, and it gave me an excellent platform to launch into racing. So much of racing now involves engineering. The studying habits and discipline I had to develop to become an engineer prepared me well for the demands of a racing career, and while I don't necessarily

miss naval engineering, I do miss all the people I went to school with and worked with, as there was a tremendous sense of camaraderie and esprit de corps. But now I have the same with my racing team and co-driver!

What do you see yourself doing once your racing career ends?

One day I would like to start a family and have children. Perhaps if I were to continue to be involved in racing I could continue as a race engineer, or maybe even a driving coach!