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IndyCar racer Milka Duno talks about

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Milka Duno

Beauty *Brains* at 200 mph

INDYCAR RACE DRIVER MILKA DUNO IS
THE WHOLE PACKAGE.

By Jennifer Cho Salaff

Never in Milka Duno's wildest dreams did she expect to become one of the fastest female race car drivers in the world. As a child, she was more accustomed to losing herself in books than playing with Hot Wheels. Raised in a family that placed the utmost importance on education, Duno was groomed toward a straight and narrow path to academia, earning four masters degrees (three of them simultaneously) and eventually becoming a naval engineer. Then fate intervened one afternoon in 1999.

After her studies in Spain were completed, Duno returned to her native Venezuela to spend time with family. On a whim, she agreed to attend a driving clinic at the invitation of friends. "Why not?" she thought. "Sounds fun."

She will never forget that day. She climbed into a Porsche, fired up the ignition and marveled at the sound of the engine. She was impressed with the car's handling as she sped down the track. The speed. The precision. The mechanics. It was all too irresistible. She was in love.

"In that moment, I discovered I wanted to do something different with my life," Duno, says. "I realized it wasn't my destiny to be an engineer. It was my destiny to be a race car driver."

Of course, her lawyer mom and salesman dad weren't exactly pleased with the change of profession because of all the time she'd spent on education. And when their 24-year-old daughter finally broke the news, they were shocked. "They said, 'Are you crazy? All those years of studying!'" Duno recalls. "But when I want something, I do it."

It's that razor-sharp focus and love of a challenge that has always driven her. "It's just my personality, I like difficult things," she says.

Thus, a racing career was born. In 2000 – Duno's first year of professional racing – she scored two podium finishes and placed fourth overall in the Venezuelan Porsche Supercup Championship. The following year, she competed in the Women's Global



GT Series Championship, ranking an impressive 4th place at the end of the season. In 2000, she received “Venezuelan Driver of the Year” honors after winning both the Panoz GT Series Championship and the Ferrari Challenge (becoming the first woman to win a Ferrari Challenge race in the US).

It was clear to everyone, including Duno’s family, that she was built for speed. Racing was the one thing that quenched her innate competitive appetite. And the accolades kept coming: five wins in the American Le Mans Series - including the first woman to win the prestigious Petit Le Mans, a race that she has won twice; three wins in the Rolex Sports Car Series - becoming the first woman to win a major race in North America; and a 2nd-place finish in the legendary twice-around-the-clock 24 Hours of Daytona - earning the highest finish ever by a female driver in the 45-year history of the race. “That was the proudest moment (so far) in my career,” Duno says, referring to the Daytona race in 2007. “It made me feel real good. But I want more.”

As a woman, Duno has helped break down barriers in the male-dominated field of sports racing. When her career first got started, there was the normal resistance and scrutiny from her male counterparts. But her work ethic earned the respect of her peers and proved the disbelievers wrong. At the end of the day, Duno says it’s not being a man or woman that matters on the race track. It’s about what each athlete brings to the sport. “It’s why I don’t feel that different,” Duno says. “When you talk about profession, it doesn’t matter if you are a woman or man. It has to do with your abilities to do the job.”

In addition to talent and smarts, Duno allures fans with her unavoidable sex appeal. With full lips, long locks and voluptuous curves, she’s not your typical race car driver. Duno has graced the covers of numerous fashion magazines in Latin America and last year was named “Hottest IndyCar Driver” in a MetroMix.com poll of Indianapolis fans.

“It’s a part of our culture, it’s a part of me,” Duno says unapologetically of her sexy image, which she says is also part of being Latin American. “I am a woman. It’s my personality. It’s not a bad thing.”

Her background as an engineer has also given Duno a unique advantage over her fellow drivers. Long before she was revving engines, Duno designed oil recovery ships for a petroleum company. As a naval engineer, she worked long hours, often being the only female on the job. She has a broad range of knowledge and expertise on subjects like mechanics, electricity, calculus and hydrodynamics.

As a result, she has the uncanny ability to understand a car the way only an engineer would. She has a deep appreciation of the technical aspect of racing—the mechanics, the handling, why something is or isn’t working. She pays close attention. She takes meticulous notes.

“Milka wants to know the reason for everything,” says her race engineer Len Paskus. “Her organizational skills are superior and the way she approaches a problem makes her different (from other drivers). She’s very driven, very motivated. And she works very, very hard.”

It's hard for Duno to explain what compels her to the sport. There's the thrill. The sheer horsepower. The risk. One thing she knows: she comes alive when it's just her, the car and the open road.

"Race car driving is very complex, it's not an easy thing," she says. "You need a good trainer, a good car, a good crew and engineer. You have to be in top physical condition. You have to war with your concentration. You have to put all these things together to win races. People think you just put in the gas and go. But it's a little more than that."

In fact, only elite athletes can defeat rivals at triple-digit speeds. Consider this: race car drivers must train their hearts like a distance runner, build their muscles like an NFL-player, and condition their bodies to withstand 150-degree heat. Not to mention being strong enough to take inertial forces of up to 4 gs (a space shuttle launch is about 3 gs) while avoiding potentially-fatal collisions with other cars going 200 mph.

To prepare for races, Duno follows an intense training schedule. It's a constant process, both physically and mentally. She works out with

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a trainer at her home gym in Miami, one to two hours a day, four to five times a week. And, she trains with a trainer in Indianapolis. Duno lifts heavy weights, does a lot of cardiovascular exercise, spends hours in front of driving simulators and logs hundreds of hours on the track.

She's now one of only five women on the IndyCar circuit and in 2007 was the first Latina to race in the famed Indy 500. "I want to win an IndyCar race," she says. "That's next."

In the Latino community, Duno's something of a superstar. She's in the Latin American Sports Hall of Fame, she received a National Hispanic Woman of the Year award from the Los Angeles-based Mexican American Opportunity Foundation, and has been nominated for a Univision Youth Award. Last year, her autobiographical children's book, "Go Milka, Go!" won Best Young Adult/Sports Recreation Book at the International Latino Book Fair in New York. "I feel very happy with that, to give my contribution to the people," Duno says of being a role model in her community. "It's just part of the things that I am doing."

When she's not on the track, Duno squeezes in visits to

schools to spread her message about the importance of education. Founded in 2004, her Milka Way Program has reached students ranging from elementary to university levels in more than 10 countries around the world. Whether it's speaking to first graders or engineering students, Duno uses her celebrity status to inspire future generations. "It's the most powerful tool you can have," she says of education. "Kids come up to me and say, 'Milka, I want to be like you,' I tell them, 'Sports are great, but it's temporary. Education is forever.'"

Her life speeds ahead and the pace is often exhausting, but Duno would have it no other way. She makes it a goal to visit one or two schools (she's even been known to visit three schools in a day) in every town where she races. "I think that Milka Duno is inspirational in the way she takes



time to visit with young people," posted a blogger from the Christel House Academy in Indianapolis, where Duno visited before competing in the Indy 500 this past May. "Good luck to you Milka and your team at the race."

Harry Capehart, who works closely with Duno on her speaking engagements, book signings and public appearances, says Duno understands her role as an athlete/celebrity and takes advantage of every opportunity that comes her way. "One day, she was up at 3:30 a.m. to be on a TV segment, then visited two schools, did a book signing and got back to her hotel at midnight," Capehart says. "It's a grueling schedule, but she enjoys it. She likes challenges, I think she equates it to an interesting and fulfilling life."

For Milka Duno, the road to success never ends. Naval engineer. Race car driver. Children's book author. Motivational speaker. What's next? "You know what I say? I say I'm working on the present," she says. "What I'm doing now is going to give me a successful future." **MS&F**