

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Pete and Ruth

When Danica Patrick quit the IRL, NASCAR, and the Indy 500, so she could spend more time hanging with her new boy friend, Aaron Rodgers, one of pro football's highest-paid QBs, her reign as the sport's fastest female racing driver ended.

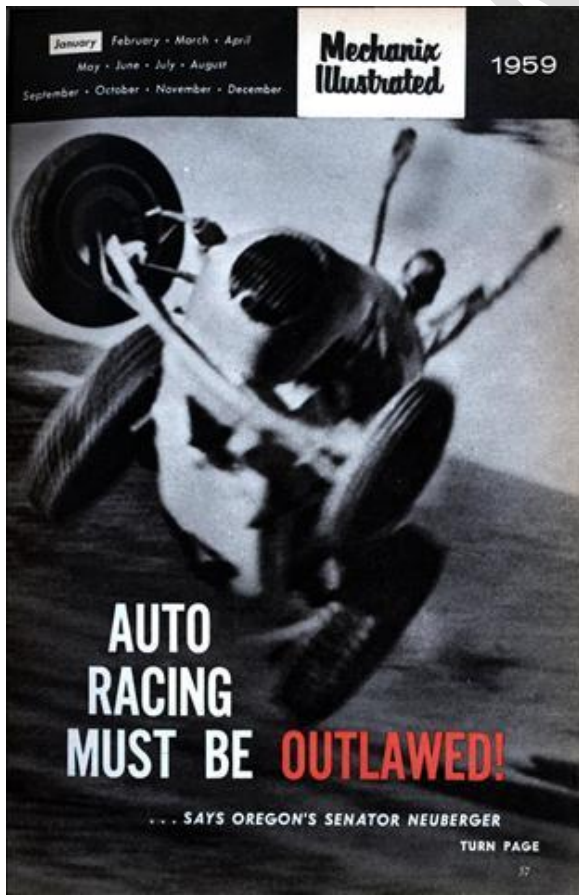


Her departure created a void, but no gal has stepped in to fill it. Patrick, however, wasn't the first fast femme, there've been lots of them, and one of the best was Margaret "Pete" Pritchard. But Pete didn't last as long as Patrick. During the late summer of 1955, down in

California's far south, among the kinks and curves of the Torrey Pines road course, Pete was hard on the button of a powerful backyard bomb named the Tractor - which in time became the first of eight or so Balchowsky Buick Old Yellers - when, without warning, the brute broke away from her, veered out of control, went upside-down, and that was the end of Pete.



Her unexpected demise caused all of the Los Angeles sports car set, of which she was a prominent member, to collapse into deep mourning because 1); she was a hot and well-liked personality; 2) she was by far the fastest femme racing driver that the Sports Car Club of America and the Cal Club had going for it; and 3) in what was by far the worst insult of all, her death became a weapon employed by a shameless politico to flog American motorsports out of existence. He was Neuberger (D-Oregon), and he was just putting the finishing touches on a proclamation demanding the outright banishment of racing.



Racing was precariously vulnerable. This was season of the Vukovich crash in the Indy 500, and the near-Armageddon at Le Mans. So, a florid hack like Neuberger could use Pete's Torrey Pines accident as additional grist for his sensationalist mill. And he knew how to work the White House and Ike Eisenhower.

“Mr. President,” he bawled from the senate floor, “I think the time has come to forbid automobile racing and similar carnages in the United States - now even women racing drivers are getting killed in fiery and dreadful wrecks!” Soon enough Neuberger dried up and blew

away, but he was the worst ban-racing monger since Hearst, the crackpot newspaper publisher.

Living in Los Angeles at the time of Pete's passing was another fast lady, Ruth Levy. Ruthie was a wild free spirit whose shapely bones convinced her racing was an activity mastered by getting out there and doing it, not by going to some driving school. So she showed up on the Beverly Hills doorstep of the millionaire John Edgar, who lived in a Grecian manse comparable to the Parthenon, but right in upscale Beverly Hills, and whose high-visibility Ferraris and Maseratis and Porsches built and destroyed reputations.

Edgar acted in a seigneurial role. To Ruth he bestowed the use of the silver-and-red Porsche RS already made famous on the continent by Taffy von Trips.



Now that Pete was missing, Ruth's fiercest competition came from the Ferrari Mondial of Josie von Neuman and the Aston Martin of Mary Davis, Ruth's great enemy. Blond Davis was the inamorata and supposedly secret spouse of the celebrity chauffeur Birdcage Bob Drake, with whom she co-owned the Grand Prix, everybody's favorite restaurant and gin mill.

One night at the Grand Prix, Ruth and Mary famously squared off. The spat consisted of - depending upon whose story is believed - Ruth's jumping on Davis's back after Davis made an insulting remark or Davis asking

Ruth what she wanted to drink and being attacked and having her blond tresses pulled out by the roots for her trouble. Finally Ruth went too far. She and her good mate off the east coast, Denise McLuggage, shipped the Von Trips Porsche to Venezuela for a world championship Grand Prix. They did poorly. Afterward, although it was against Ruth's will, she agreed to be taken out of the Porsche and strapped inside and made to race Edgar's fiercest machine, a massive Ferrari 4.9. And, just like Pete, she tipped over; had she not been so tiny and the cockpit of the 4.9 so large, she might well have suffered Pete's fate.



The roll-over that made Ruth give up racing occurred not in the 4.9 but another big car; and this time she was scuffed up. To convalesce, she enrolled at Gold's Gym, where she fanatically pumped iron, not stopping until she was all buffed-out and looking stunning in a microscopic bikini.

She started consorting with L.A.'s exotics and werewolves, of which she properly considered herself one. Out in the northern San Fernando Valley dwelled the rogue painter Von Dutch, and, bearing a supply of rot-gut vivo, the artist's beverage of choice, Ruth took instructions on how to pin-stripe while she and Von Dutch got bombed out of their minds on cheap Thunderbird fumes.

Then the 1960s and acid art engaged her, and she did some surrealistic oils good enough to hang at a La Cienega gallery. Sometime later, bored with hippie culture, she grew her hair to her posterior and took up with a tribe of outlaw bikers.

Ruth blew off several engagements, plus three or four marriages. In time Los Angeles itself started boring her, so she went bucolic. Throwing three pairs of jeans and a big white dog into an old bus, she roared off to rural Colorado for a decade in Pagosa Springs, raising goats and chasing maverick horses. The last time I talked to Ruth, she was living in the vastness of Texas.

Ya-Hoo!! Ride 'em cowgirl!