

THE ALPINE LADIES

BY JEAN-LUC FOURNIER

FOREWORD

With Biche as maraine of the event, women are honored during the great Alpine gathering of Dieppe 2023. They are many; women associated with the Alpine brand in one form or another, and their roles have been quite diverse.

FIRST ON BOARD RENAULT SPORTS CARS

Without going back in time too far, let us remember that Renault had trusted several women during the 4 CV 1063, Dauphine Gordini and R8 Gordini eras. Although the performances of Madeleine Pochon, Simone des Forets (and the famous "en voiture Simone!" expression) and Gabrielle Renault (daughter of the Renault dealer in Aix en Provence) are worthy of mention, it is worthwhile dwelling on those of Gilberte Thirion.

After World War II, the first woman of note to drive for Renault hailed from Belgium. Her name is Gilberte Thirion. She was fast, beautiful, friendly, cheerful and knew how to make a name for herself in the car world. She got her start with a 4CV 1063, in which she finished 7th in the Tour of Belgium with co-driver Lise Renaud. Her father, Max Thirion, an influential importer of Champion spark plugs in Benelux, introduced her to Renault Racing Director François Landon. To launch the Dauphine, he entered five cars in the Mille Miglia for Maurice Trintignant, Paul Frère, Louis Rosier, Jean Rédélé and Gilberte Thirion. Satisfied with her performance, François Landon asked her to race in the 1st Tour de Corse Automobile in 1956, and with co-driver Nadège Ferrier, she won overall! After competing in the 12 Hours of Sebring in 1957, still in a Dauphine, she retired from competition.

After the Dauphine Gordini came the Renault 8 Gordini, with excellent drivers. Among them was Cathy Pitt, brilliant in the Paris-St Raphael women's race. Christiane Petit (Biche's sister) excelled in the Tour de France and Tour de Corse in 1967, not to forget Scandinavian Sylvia Osterberg, competing in the 1967 Tour de Corse (10th overall) and the Monte Carlo Rally (25th overall) with an R8 Gordini from the Régie.

THE BERLINETTE

In the 1970s, several women asserted themselves and fought heroic battles to win the "Ladies' Cup" and more behind the wheel of the Alpine Berlinette. Among them was Dorothee Lebeau, wife of Jean-Marie Jacquemin, Renault Belgium official driver, but also "Natacha", a physiotherapist from the Côte d'Azur who competed in several Tour de France's between 1974 and 1977 under this pseudonym. There was also Annie Soisbault, who, after a brilliant career and several French Champion titles in Triumphs and Jaguars, announced that she would hang up her helmet for good after competing in the 1969 Mont Ventoux Hill Climb in an Alpine A110 1300 S.

Like Marie-Claude "Beaumont", the Italian Lella Lombardi did not race an Alpine Berlinette but did drive an Alpine Renault A442 prototype in 1975. She also raced in Formula 1 that year and remains to date the only woman to have scored points in the World Drivers' Championship with her sixth place in the 1975 Spanish Grand Prix.

"Charlotte" also gained notoriety under this pseudonym, perhaps easier to bear than her real name, Cécile de Mongolfier. Born in Ardèche, raised in a bourgeois environment, she purchased an A110 Group 3 and finished second in the Critérium National des Rallyes behind M.O. Desvignes from the "Ecurie Aseptogyl". She regularly excelled in the Paris-St Raphael Rally for women but, unfortunately, passed away aged 29 in 1975.

Based on the idea of Bob Neyret - a dentist from Grenoble, an excellent driver in his own right in a Citroën DS and then an Alpine Berlinette - an all-female racing team was launched with the support of Alpine. The idea was to have pink Berlinettes race in the colours of Aseptogyl toothpaste and to display them in shopping malls before the events. It was a win-win marketing operation for Alpine, the shops distributing the toothpaste and the product itself. Bob Neyret entrusted the drivers and codrivers recruitment to Claudine Trautmann, an excellent rally driver. Thus, Annick Girard, Marie-Odile Desvignes and her sister Nanou, Christine Dacremont, Marie-Pierre Palayer, Christine Rouff, Marianne Hoepfner and Pat Moss Carlsson successfully raced in the pink berlinettes, which became a fixture in the French car racing scene.

Marie-Odile Desvignes was a hostess in Alpe d'Huez and an Ellesse model. She was Claudine Trautmann's teammate, and her talent as a driver was proven when she won the Critérium National Féminin des Rallyes in her 1600 S Group 4.

Christine Dacremont was born in the Ardennes. She was a natural-born athlete. Her height helped her to play top-level basketball, but not so much for motor racing. She was nevertheless an excellent driver and twice won the French Women's Rally Championship in an Alpine before becoming European Champion in a Lancia Stratos in 1977.

Marianne Hoepfner got her start in an R8 Gordini before moving on to the Alpine A110 Group 4 and finishing runner-up in the Critérium National des Rallyes. She went on to compete in an A310 Group 4 and then in an Alpine A364 single seater in Hill Climb racing before marrying French actor Jean-Louis Trintignant.

Pat Moss Carlsson was five years younger than her brother, the legendary British driver Sir Stirling Moss. She was an accomplished horsewoman and a factory driver for Austin Healey, BMC and Saab. She married iconic Swedish driver Erik Carlsson and ended her successful career at the 1972 Monte-Carlo Rally, where, codriven by Liz Crellin, she won the Ladies Cup in an A110 boasting the Aseptogyl livery.

Michelle Mouton was twenty years old when her father, a horticulturist in Grasse, bought her an A110 "to prevent her from racing with people who drove dangerously". She finished second in the 1973 Critérium Féminin des Rallyes and then won the 1974 French Women's Championship with Françoise Conconi. She won her second national title in 1975 and was crowned Women's European Champion. In 1976, still in her privateer A110, she finished eleventh overall in the Monte-Carlo Rally. She then switched to the A310 before becoming a factory driver for Fiat France (131 Abarth), Audi (Quattro) and Peugeot (205 T16).

THE CO-DRIVERS

It is important not to forget the key role of co-drivers. They work on the reces and improving pace notes. They support their driver in every sense of the word and know how to boost, reason with and reassure them whilst remaining in the background. It is impossible to name them all. Some are well-known, others are not. Those mentioned below all competed in Alpines: Marie-Ange Venturini (Tour de Corse), Catherine Piot (1966 Critérium des Cévennes), Paulette Darets (Rallye des Routes du Nord with Raymond Hibon), Françoise Conconi (with Michèle Mouton), Michèle Dubosc (with José Rosinski), Michèle Picoreau (with Maurice Nussbaumer), "Biche" Petit (with Jean-Claude Andruet), etc.

TODAY

Several initiatives are underway to develop women's participation in motorsport. Some teams are even exclusively female, such as Iron Dames while Alpine is at the forefront of this movement with the RAC(H)ER programme. Its mission is to ensure diversity and equal opportunities, regardless of gender, at all levels of competition.

The flag bearer is Sophia Flörsch, a 22-year-old German racing in FIA F3 this year. Abbi Pulling (20 years old, UK) is also a member of the Alpine Academy.

In addition to the many women who work on the new Alpines at the Manufacture Alpine Dieppe Jean Rédélé located Avenue de Bréauté, some appointments to prominent responsibility and decision-making roles should be noted. Among them are Sovany Ang, Alpine Cars VP Product Performance; Marine le Bihan, Alpine VP Quality; Bénédicte Lenguin, Alpine General Counsel, Claire Mesnier, VP Human Resources and Aude le Stunff, Purchasing Director. Lastly, Anne-Catherine Basset (Supelec engineer) is the Alpine Industrial Director and Manufacture Alpine Dieppe Jean Rédélé Director.

Was it Jean Ferrat (who lived in Entraigues, the site of the Monte Carlo Rally!) singing "Woman is the future of man"?

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ABOUT ALPINE

Founded in 1955 by Jean Rédélé, the brand has set itself apart with its French-style sports cars. In 2018, the brand presented the new A110, a sports car faithful to Alpine's timeless principles of compactness, lightness, agility and driving pleasure. The Alpine Business Unit was created in 2021 and thus became the brand dedicated to innovative, authentic, exclusive sportscars of the Renault Group, benefiting from the heritage and craftsmanship of its historic plant in Dieppe and the Alpine Racing and Alpine Cars teams engineering mastery.