



Drivers

The crew preps the No. 57 Acura NSX GT3 during a pit stop at the 2018 Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring.

Acura is making noise in endurance racing
with an all-female driving team

In the Seat

When Jackie Heinricher strode into pit lane at the 24 Hours of Daytona earlier this year, she wasn't thinking about striking a blow for gender equality.

She was thinking about winning.

Heinricher is the driving force behind the all-female No. 57 Acura NSX GT3 Evo team, which competes in the IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship. The five-woman driving crew is widely believed to have a real shot at winning a championship.

As she hunkered down with her team ahead of Daytona, dubbed the "Super Bowl" of endurance racing, Heinricher wasn't worried about being a pioneer or demolishing old stereotypes. She was too preoccupied with getting her car across the finish line first.

"For me, this team is really about putting together a bunch of pro athletes who happen to be women," says Heinricher, the team's principal owner. "We have all worked really hard to get where we are today. If we end up being an inspiration or role models, that would be an honor."

The team would finish 13th at Daytona and follow that up with an eighth-place finish at the 12 Hours of Sebring; both times, racing incidents kept them from placing higher. It was a tough start to a season with sky-high expectations. →



**POLE
POSITION**

The No. 57 team is a partnership between Heinricher and Meyer Shank Racing, one of IMSA's most successful outfits. (The combined squad is officially called the No. 57 Caterpillar Acura NSX GT3 Evo of Heinricher Racing with Meyer Shank Racing.) It runs the NSX GT3 Evo, a racing-optimized version of the street-going NSX.

Driving the car are Katherine Legge, who finished second in IMSA's GTD class last year, and Christina Nielsen, who took the GTD title in 2016 and 2017, making her the first woman to win a championship in the history of North American motorsports. For longer races, they've been joined by Bia Figueiredo and Simona De Silvestro, both IndyCar veterans. Heinricher, who brought the team's drivers, crew and sponsors together, had been planning to drive, but a back injury put her out of commission.

"There have been other partnerships with female racers; we're not the first," said Michael Shank, owner of Meyer Shank Racing. "But from a lot of standpoints—from the marketing side, from the team side, from the car side—I think we've got the strongest potential."

ACURA DOMINATES AT ICONIC RACE

ONE OF AMERICA'S most venerable road races entered a new era in April, when Acura debuted as the title sponsor of the Grand Prix of Long Beach.

"Long Beach is an iconic race," said Jon Ikeda, Acura brand officer. "Sponsoring this event is a natural extension of where we're going with our brand. The race is exciting, it's steeped in history, and it's all about performance."

The 45th Acura Grand Prix of Long Beach wasn't only about marketing, though. It was a chance for Acura to show off its racing bona fides—and did it ever. Acura Team Penske cars finished second and third in the elite prototype class at the Bubba Burger Sports Car Grand Prix, one of six races held over the weekend.

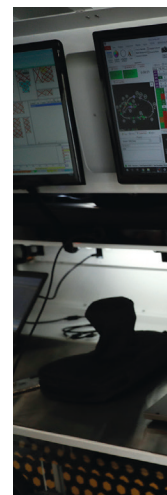


That promise was on display in early May during the third race of the season. Nielsen was in fourth at the Acura SportsCar Challenge at Mid-Ohio before being bumped and forced off the track. The squad wound up in 10th.

The result was emblematic of the tough luck the team experienced early in the year. At Daytona, the No. 57 was running as high as third before tagging the wall in torrential rain.

"We ran a lot better than our results actually show," said Shank. "We had a couple of mistakes here and there that kept us from hitting the podium, but we led a bunch of laps."

Heinricher, the founder of Booshoot, an Idaho-based biotech company, says she was "excited" by the team's start. "These are battles, these are endurance races. But we have some of the top drivers in the world. We will win. It's just a matter of time."



CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT:
No. 57 at the IMSA
WeatherTech Series testing
at Daytona International
Speedway in January;
driver Ricky Taylor of Acura
Team Penske with Acura
brand officer Jon Ikeda
at the Acura Grand Prix
of Long Beach; Jackie
Heinricher behind the
scenes at the 24 Hours of
Daytona; competing in the
Acura SportsCar Challenge
at Mid-Ohio.

Much of that confidence comes from the car the team is driving. The NSX GT3 Evo, unveiled last year, is the second generation of Acura's landmark racer. With Meyer Shank Racing assisting in on-track testing, it features several upgrades, including a new aerodynamic kit that improved the car's driveability. Those modifications, combined with what Shank called class-leading traction control, create a track demon.

"You wouldn't think there's much we could have done to improve the original race car, but the changes would just blow your mind."

Heinricher, who's raced Lamborghinis and Ferraris, was indeed blown away the first time she strapped into the car. "What makes this car so impressive is the speed and the downforce with the new Evo aerodynamics kit. We have a really fast Acura."

While Heinricher says she's focused on the future, there's no denying the weight of the past. The No. 57 car was the first all-female entry to compete at the 24 Hours of Daytona in 25 years.

Still, Heinricher says she doesn't feel any additional pressure to show the racing world what an all-female team can do. "I never worried that it wouldn't go well," she says. "I know we have the right building blocks and the right team of women." ⚙️

TAKING THE WHEEL

Here's a look at the five women who make up the No. 57 Caterpillar team

JACKIE HEINRICHER

Driver and Principal, Heinricher Racing

BIRTHPLACE: Seattle, Washington

BACKGROUND: An entrepreneur and former Air Force medic, she's raced sports cars and rally cars across North America.



KATHERINE LEGGE

Driver

BIRTHPLACE: Guildford, England

BACKGROUND: One of the most decorated female drivers of all time, she's had 15 podium finishes and six race wins during a two-decade career. She is a four-time winner in the NSX GT3 and finished second in the 2018 IMSA WeatherTech GTD championship standings.

CHRISTINA NIELSEN

Driver

BIRTHPLACE: Hoersholm, Denmark

BACKGROUND: She was the first woman to win a full-season championship in North America, taking the GTD class of the IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship in 2016. (She repeated the feat in 2017.) Over the last three IMSA seasons, she's had 19 podium finishes, including wins at Sebring, Laguna Seca and Watkins Glen.



BIA FIGUEIREDO

Driver

BIRTHPLACE: São Paulo, Brazil

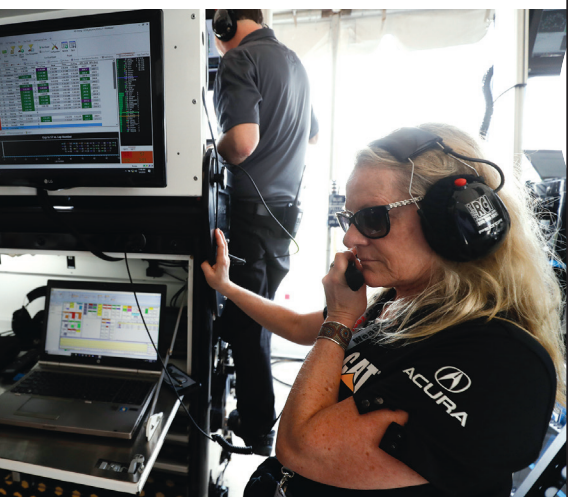
BACKGROUND: She spent four years with IndyCar and was the first Brazilian woman to compete in the series, finishing 15th at the 2013 Indianapolis 500. Most recently she competed in Brazil's top stock car series against F1 greats like Rubens Barrichello.

SIMONA DE SILVESTRO

Driver

BIRTHPLACE: Thun, Switzerland

BACKGROUND: The first woman to ever score points in Formula E (the electric road-racing series), she's also a former IndyCar driver, where she has a podium finish under her belt.



Photography, clockwise from top left: Brian Cleary; Michael L. Levitt; Scott R. LePage. Driver portraits: Brian Cleary