

WOOD: A Sister's Rallying Cry

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Nathalie has worked out a methodology of letting her brother think he's in charge in the pair's Subaru. (Bill Wood photo)

with the U.S. and North American titles this year.

Nathalie Richard is easy to look at – that's critical in an era where marketing dweebs still objectify women in motorsports. In addition to her looks, though, Nathalie is a former collegiate athlete who maintains a level of athleticism at 31 to go along with her championship skills. I'd venture to believe that if she ever found herself in an argument in the back of an ambulance, and had to make a point with a male counterpart, she'd be the only one emerging from the ambulance under her own power.

Of course, in the pantheon of motorsports excellence, rally co-driver championships might fall a little below the standard of IndyCar, Toyota Atlantic and international sports car racing. Nathalie must also overcome the built-in myopia of a motorsports journalism community that finds Sport Compact racing somewhere on the market shelf with Hot Wheels and video games. But, a good-looking woman and championships are championships – and to ignore both is a dereliction, especially when it's done five times in a row!

Media idiots like me often find more appeal in drivers, so would she ever want to swap seats with her extremely talented big brother and drive the car?

"I've always said that I'll stick to what I do well and let Pat stick to what he does well. At the same time, I think it would be interesting to swap positions so I could understand what he needs from me and he would understand better how I give things to him. Other than that, it's never been an issue for me."

Pat Richard has told me more than once that he'd like to step up to the World Rally Championship, and former WRC champion Stig Blomquist told me earlier this year that the WRC spotlight has found interest in paying attention to Richard's North American talent. As an aside, that spotlight should be brighter now that the ruefully under-resourced Patrick outran Blomquist for this year's Rally America title, even beating Stig in one event with the Swede's hand-me-down tires!!

North American rally observers have noted that Nathalie's presence has focused Patrick, thus creating their championship strength.

"It would be great if we could rally at the WRC level," Nathalie said. "If that could happen that would be fantastic."

The level of confidence required for success at that level of rallying between driver and co-driver is unknown in any other form of motorsports. Nathalie's presence in the last two years has stabilized Patrick's right seat and allowed him to concentrate on becoming championship fast.

"Having the two of us together for the past 30 rallies has been good for both of us," he admitted.

Before Nathalie joined him, there was some concern about getting Patrick to the end of an event while still leading the field. Has she been able to pull his foot from the pedal these past 30 events?

"In a word, NO!," she declares. "He's told me flat out, 'Don't ever tell me to slow down!' I've never told him to ease up. The closest I've come to it was in the last event (the Lake Superior Rally in Houghton, Mich.) when I reminded him that we're going into the last stage with a 44-second lead and that it was

At the birth of a new age of women in motorsports, don't lose sight of possibly the only woman in North America who's won national level championships in two countries for two years running.

In fact, Canadian rally co-driver Nathalie Richard has won five championships in the past two years, directing her brother Pat through some of the roughest conditions in motor racing competition and she's received little or no attention for it. And that's a problem.

"You're right, it isn't a big deal," Nathalie told me. "It's unfortunate that we compete in a sport that isn't very well recognized."

Is it frustrating?

"Sometimes it is. I was coming home from the last rally and I had to go through four airports (She lives outside Halifax, Nova Scotia.) and I was carrying five trophies with me, three of which I could pack. But two I couldn't and I was traipsing through the airports and everyone was asking me what they were for. When I told them they were for rally car racing, most of the people had no idea what that was. It is a bit frustrating that (I'm) always having to explain it to people.

"But, at the same time, if I can open up a few more eyes to the sport, all the better."

Still...five championships in two years! Pat and Nathalie won the Canadian, U.S. and North American driver and co-driver championships in 2004 and followed that

extremely slippery. I've never been allowed to tell him to ease up and I've never attempted it. There's no question who's the boss in this team!"

She can say that with a laugh but, having five sisters, I know how a sister can maneuver a brother's method and way of thinking. Nathalie sits on the passenger's side of the car, but she's far more than a passenger in the championship ride.

"I don't say much about how he should attack a stage. We discuss it sometimes and when we do, I might remind him of where we stand in terms of our lead or something like that. But, when we go into a stage, we know when to push and when we might ease off a bit. When we talk about it, it's an easy conversation."

So, Nathalie knows how to be the boss and when to let Patrick be in charge. It's a skill the successful co-driver learns after many mountainside conversations at 4 a.m., when exhaustion pushes communication into the realm of impossible just before the stage marshal screams "GO!!"

When they were growing up, there was that "normal sibling rivalry that most brothers and sisters have. We were very close as little kids but we went our separate ways when we reached our teens." Nathalie was more into team sports like soccer, volleyball and basketball, and Patrick did more individual sports like snow and skate boarding.

She said their two personalities are "near polar opposites," but that might contribute to their success as a team. "I don't think a co-driver who has the mentality of a driver would, necessarily, excel," she muses.

That might be an overstatement. Doug Shepherd won many championships as John Buffum's co-driver. When he jumped into the driver's seat, he excelled with two-wheel-drive titles of his own. There are other exceptions, but it is a given co-drivers are co-drivers and it's their commitment to team (and, some would argue lawyering!) that often makes or breaks a rally team.

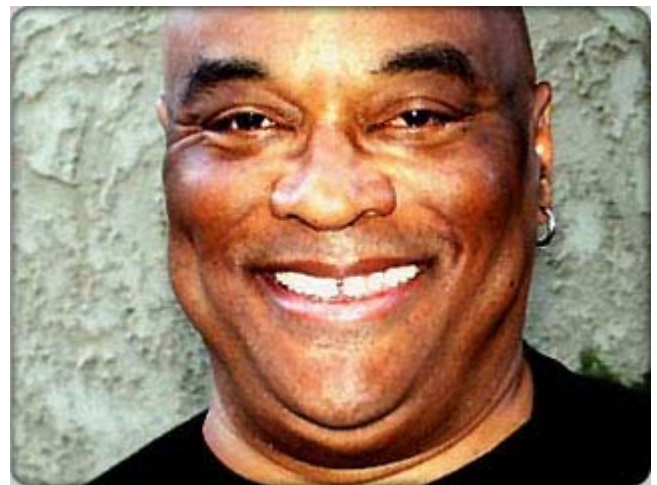
Certainly in this instance, Nathalie Richard has been the critical piece that's made Patrick's championship puzzle emerge. It would be frustrating for me that the credit for the success is far from enough. But people generally don't become co-drivers for the credit or the spotlight. Curiously, a rally team is the one place where an individual personality and a team-oriented commitment can both excel.

Big brother aside, reigning in a title-winning talent and giving it championship direction is a brilliance few achieve and, like most things in rallying, going fast is far from the end all in victory. In this case, it's a family affair that seals the deal.

*Automotive journalist Bill Wood covers the tuner/sport compact scene for **RACER** magazine. [Click here](#) for more information.*



Nathalie Richard (Bill Wood photo)



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