

# STAR-STUDDED FRONT PORCH

BY LARRY EDSALL

American racing specials, those home-built, V8-powered sports racers that challenged the likes of Jaguar, Ferrari, Aston Martin and Porsche on race tracks in the late 1950s and early 1960s, were the featured cars at the fourth annual Wheels of Wellness historic race car show that kicks off Arizona classic car auction week each January. But the stars of the show were the race car drivers who came to see those cars and to talk about their lives and their racing.

Each year, The Wellness Community of Phoenix, a center which provides free support for people suffering from cancer and for those who care for those people, hosts the Wheels of Wellness as a fund-raiser that helps pay for some of those programs. Each year, a few drivers are invited to sit for a panel discussion about historic and contemporary auto racing.

The drivers are not paid, but they like the event so much that this year so many of them showed up they had to have two panel discussions to fit them all in.

The first panel featured two-time Indianapolis 500 winners Arie Luyendyk and Dario Franchitti, two-time 24 Hours of Daytona winner Didier Theys and world GT2 and Le Mans 24-hours winner Justin Bell, with former racing team owner Harley Cluxton III as moderator.

The second panel included Franchitti; Indy winner

Bobby Rahal; Danica Patrick; the only woman to win an Indy car race; Desire Wilson, the only woman to win a Formula One race; and Denise McCluggage, who raced sports and rally cars in the 1960s against the likes of Carroll Shelby, Stirling Moss, Phil Hill and others, and who won her class in the 1964 Monte Carlo Rally. Moderator for that panel was former Indy 500 rookie-of-the-year Lyn St. James.

But even then, there wasn't enough room on the front porch of the Wellness Center for all the celebrities in attendance. Drivers Billy Boat (Indy cars) and Darren Law (sports cars) and author and car collector Clive Cussler also were on hand.

One driver who had planned to attend was missing. Three-time Indy 500 pole winner Tom Sneva serves as crew chief for his grandson's quarter-midget racing pro-

gram. Since his grandson had a race to run at the South Mountain quartermidget track, Sneva has to bow out of Wheels of Wellness.

After the contemporary drivers talked about the importance of racing teams, McCluggage mesmerized the audience with her story about the 1961 24-hour race at Sebring. She owned a Ferrari 250GT that she drove both on the track and on the streets of New York City, where she lived and worked as a journalist.

She drove the Ferrari to Florida, raced it for 12 hours at Sebring—she and her codriver finished 10th overall and first in their class—and then she drove the Ferrari to Chicago for another race before driving it back to New York.

While McCluggage raced before the advent of major racing teams as we know them, Wilson raced during the

transition from cars raced by private sportsmen to cars raced with corporate sponsorship, or sometimes by drivers who secured financial backing and bought their rides.

Wilson, who earned her rides solely on her driving skill, told of being promised a spot on the Brabham Formula One team as teammate to Nelson Piquet, who would go on to win the 1981 World Championship. However, just as the season was beginning, Wilson discovered that her car would be driven instead by Hector Rebaque.

She approached team owner Bernie Ecclestone and asked why the change had been made.

"He has really good hands," Ecclestone told her.

Wilson looked at her own hands and asked what was wrong with them.

"His write really big checks," Ecclestone responded. ■



**PANEL ONE:** Justin Bell, Didier Theys, Harley Cluxton III, Arie Luyendyk, Dario Franchitti.



**PANEL TWO:** Lyn St. James, Dario Franchitti, Desire Wilson, Bobby Rahal, Denise McCluggage, Danica Patrick.

