



CHRIS CLARK PHOTO

Amy Ruman's Trans-Am Mission

By JOHN JEPPESEN

Amy Ruman is showing the world and other aspiring female racers that professional racing success is within reach.

With two races remaining in the Trans-Am season, Ruman held a skinny 11-point lead over Paul Fix in the battle for the series championship. Ruman and the McNichols team can make history if she hangs on to win the title. Ruman would join NHRA legend Shirley Muldowney and 2014 NHRA Pro Stock champion Erica Enders-Stevens as a top-tier professional racing champion.

Ruman, who is 41, has been around racing her entire life. The competitive fire was lit by her parents, Bob and Barb. They traveled all over the country with Amy and her sister, Niki.

"It was great," Ruman recalled. "We traveled all around the country and got to visit some really cool places. We were always getting into something at the track as kids, whether it was riding mini dirt bikes, go-karts or trying to get a ride in the 'Vette (both parents drove Corvettes in autocross competition) when they did hot pace laps."

It's no surprise Amy Ruman's competitive fire was ignited at an early age.

"I played a lot of sports growing up and always had that competitive edge to my personality," Ruman con-

fessed. "I knew I always had the need for speed and wanted to be a race car driver, so I started autocrossing when I was 18 (that was the minimum-age requirement at the time).

Ruman learned the art of going "slow fast" from her mom, who has coached her since the beginning of her racing career.

The Rumans decided to give their daughters a shot at road racing. They started in the SCCA Spec Racer class. Some have dissed the closed-wheel race cars, calling them "Sports Real Slow." Maybe so, but the class is a great way to learn race craft. All the cars are identical and tightly controlled to virtually eliminate cheating.

The class is very popular, placing a premium on driver skill. And because the cars are equal, drivers must be very smooth to prevent scrubbing speed. Several highly successful professional racers, such as Dorsey Schroeder, got their start in the class. Schroeder won the 1989 Trans-Am championship.

In another interesting twist to Amy Ruman's story, the family initially rented Spec Racers from Dave Skinner, a well-known racing mechanic before they bought their own cars. Skinner and Niki Ruman took a liking to each other and were later married. Skinner is now Amy's crew chief, keeping everything in the family.

Amy Ruman's quest for big-

ger and faster race cars escalated.

"I actually ran in a few other pro series before I started in Trans-Am, but always knew that's where I wanted to be," she said. "I ran Pro Spec Racer for years and also participated in the Women's Global GT Series for a couple of years after Lyn St. James invited my sister and me to run."

Ruman's determination and confidence grew as she showed all comers she was not the least bit intimidated by the big, fast and heavy race cars, frequently showing her taillights to the men she raced against. She credits her dad's wise counsel for her success.

"My dad consistently ran the Trans-Am Series from 1996-2004," Amy Ruman said. "He had some unexpected health issues in 2003 and was diagnosed with kidney cancer, but returned to racing that same year and is cancer free."

Amy Ruman moved up the ladder with a run for the SCCA national title.

"In 2002, I started racing SCCA national GT-1 events and attending the Runoffs, sharing the car with my dad who was still racing in Trans-Am," she explained. "In 2005, he decided to step away and focus on engineering and data for me and that's when I ran my first Trans-Am race at the Cleveland Grand Prix. From then on, I ran consistently in

GT-1 and Trans-Am."

Racing can be a cruel and demanding sport. It's a mix of exuberance offset with an equal measure of disappointments and circumstances often beyond one's control. Then there's the question that lingers hauntingly for many aspiring drivers: Am I good enough to do this professionally?

The answer came in 2011 for the now fully vetted Buckeye racer.

"I had many GT-1 wins and those were all great," Amy Ruman explained. "But the big win for me was winning the Trans-Am race in 2011 at Road Atlanta. That race was during the Petite Le Mans weekend and the crowd was huge and they were loving our race. I had a great restart and took the lead over Mike Lewis for the win. It was a long time coming for us as a team, so we were all really excited. I was proud to finally deliver that first TA win to my parents and the team."

Ruman has been gathering momentum ever since. It's a testament to her unflinching determination and the dedication of the entire McNichols team. The No. 23 Corvette has been a contender in every race. She ran the full 2012 Trans-Am season, finishing second in the standings with seven podium finishes. The Auto Racing Writers and Broadcasters Ass'n pegged Ruman for success with its Rising Star Award.

The following season fell into the "character builder" category with several circumstances beyond Ruman's control resulting in a fourth-place points finish.

The ersatz "Buckeye Express" got back on track in 2014. Ruman finished third in the standings on the strength of five podium finishes. She added a couple "firsts" along the way. She scored her first pole at New Jersey Motorsports Park en route to a flag-to-flag victory. Saving the best for the season finale, Ruman became the first female driver to score a solo victory at Florida's Daytona Int'l Speedway.

The Daytona triumph set the stage for a breakthrough this year. Ruman won the first three races of the season and after a third-place finish at Lime Rock Park in Connecticut, she added two more victories to her résumé. Challenging weekends at Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course and Road America put chinks in the plan. At Mid-Ohio race was the worst when Ruman tangled with Tommy Drisi.

The McNichols team was set to stoke the fire in the boiler for the rest of the season and one thing was certain — Amy Ruman would pull her belts a little tighter and get her elbows up for the final races of the season.

And if she finishes the year like she started it, Amy Ruman will have a new title — Trans-Am champion. ■