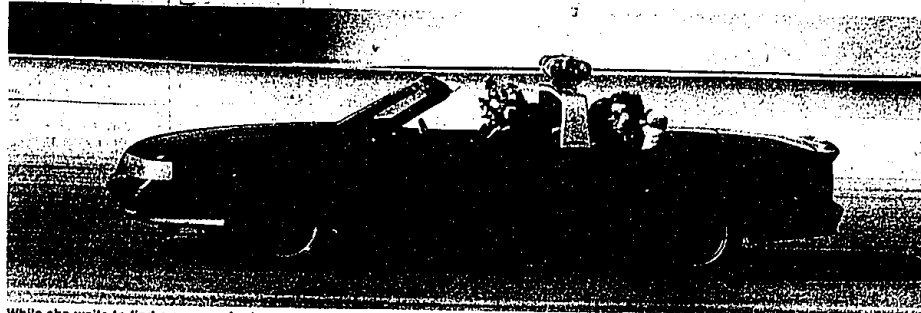




While she waits to find a sponsor for her own Opel 1900 Manta, the Farmington Hills resident frequently treats guests of sponsoring companies to rides in a pace car before the start of the race.

# She's some kinda driver

## Behind the wheel setting the pace

By Ellen Mason  
special writer

**T**HE 120 mph speed she reached over the weekend while racing around the Michigan International Speedway's track prevented thousands of spectators from realizing that Roberta Foss has the knockout good looks of a movie star. That doesn't bother Foss at all. She wants them to think this Bloomfield Hills woman is "some kinda" driver.

Off the track, Foss' good looks are so striking they tempt fans to conclude she's too gorgeous to know anything about cars let alone be competent enough to be one of seven drivers chosen to pace this year's "Indy" car races.

"It's a Catch 22 situation until people see what you can do," the green-eyed woman acknowledged with a toss of hair the color of orange-marmalade.

Foss said she has been "on the brink of going from amateur racing to professional for three years now," and is one of the original members of the PPG Pace Car Team. The elite group executes precision drills before each Indy car race, leads the parade lap and paces the start of each race.

Foss, a Farmington native, is the only Michigan member of the team.

"PPG was looking for women race car drivers who would also be good representatives to drive their fleet of pace cars," she said. "I applied because I don't have a sponsor for my own car right now, and to prove yourself you have to have a competitive car."

The owner of an Opel 1900 Manta, Foss said she reasoned that being a member of the "Blue Angels on Wheels" would give her credibility even if she wasn't in competition. Since joining the group, she said, driving the pace car means being at CART races all over the country about two long weekends per month from May through October.

"It doesn't leave much time in Bloomfield Hills," she said.

THIS IS especially true since her "regular job" as the first woman sales executive for Illinois Tool Works, a Fortune 500 Company, takes her on the road a couple of days a week to call on automotive customers in Ohio, Illinois and New York. Since becoming a sales executive at the Troy firm a year and a half ago, she said she has increased her territory by \$1.5 million.

"They're kind of surprised to see a woman at first," she said of her customers. "But, when they see you know your job, they respect you."

Foss said she has had a longtime interest in cars.

"When I had my first Mustang and couldn't afford to have the transmission fixed I was out in the driveway with my boyfriend working on the car."

"And I've always been athletic, too," she said. "But I guess everyone's been surprised that the baby girl in a family with three boys is the one driving a race car."

Her interest in cars and athletics has also merged with her savvy business sense. Pragmatic phrases such as "I play racquetball and softball for fun, but playing golf with clients is good for business," pepper her conversation.

Regarding the business of cars and their promotional value to sponsors she is enthusiastic, stating, "Some companies don't realize the tremendous advantages for them in sponsoring race cars. Besides getting the public to recognize the company's name, and that's good for business, it's a nice way to entertain clients."

"After all, it's a little different than taking them out to dinner," she said. "Often, after someone's seen one or two races, they're hooked."

SOME VIP spectators at CART races, who are frequently the guests of sponsoring companies, are treated to rides in a pace car prior to the start of a race. A few, select VIPs ride in the actual pace lap, just a few car lengths ahead of some of the highest powered, most sophisticated racing machines in the world.

Foss is often the driver they choose to ride with.

"Every time I take someone on a pace lap and feel their excitement and the excitement of the crowd, it's all new again," she said.

"Most often the passengers concentrate on the cars, not the drivers, once they start around the track," she explained.

"Each car is worth, in research and development, about a quarter of a million dollars," she said. Her expression reveals that she is still staggered by the thought.

Foss said, the cars start out as production model vehicles built by one of the four major United States automotive manufacturers.

"They are then refined and built into high-tech, high-performance cars to dramatize the quality and performance capabilities of American-made automobiles," said James P. Chapman, a Birmingham public relations consultant, who directs PPG's race program.

"They're really show-pieces," Foss emphasized.

Each car has a distinctive look and personality, too, Foss said. For example, one Chevrolet Camaro Z-28 interior is upholstered with leather which required 27 separate, matching skins. A Buick Skyhawk features a mini-TV. Mechanically, too, each car has its own quirks and charms and has to be tuned accordingly, she said.

"EACH CAR has its own individual personality," she said. In addition to the Camaro and the Skyhawk the pace-car fleet includes a four-cylinder turbocharged AMC Renault, a turbocharged Chrysler G-24, a 400 hp V-8 Ford Thunderbird and an open-air concept V-6, one-of-a-kind Oldsmobile Ciera.

She said at first many of the Indy race car crews were hesitant about her competence to drive such powerful cars. "But the more the Indy crews see that you mean business, the more they come to respect that you have a purpose, too," she said.

"We're not race bunnies or pit bunnies," she said. "We're there to do a job and do it well. I deal with this as a business."

"When you enjoy racing like I do, it's hard to decide whether you want to be behind the wheel doing it yourself or whether you want to be a Roger Penske," she said, referring to the former Bloomfield Hills auto executive who turned race driver, then became an owner and active pit chief of the

Penske racing team. Today, Penske is one of the most respected teams in auto racing.

"And even though I'm driving now, I'd like to set my goals that high — to be a Roger Penske."

"And," she added, "I keep thinking how this is going to look on my resume, working for two Fortune 500 companies at the same time."



With two successful careers in hand, Roberta Foss has set her sights on one day becoming as well known as Roger Penske, another local resident, who started as a race driver.



Many Indy race car crews, hesitant about her competence, have come to see that Foss means business and that she means to do it well.

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Roberta Foss is one of an elite group of seven drivers selected to pace this year's "Indy." When she reaches speeds of 120

m.p.h., few spectators know there's a beautiful woman at the wheel.

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