

Changing gears

Motorsports drivers are some of the fittest athletes around. Meet the women behind the bodies of our most elite sportspeople. By Hanna Marton.

I've never felt singled out for being female," remarks Tegan Scott, team secretary for Melbourne-based motorsport team Walkinshaw Andretti United (WAU). "You are not one of the boys, you're just one of the team," she adds. As one of the support crew helping drivers make it to the podium, Scott books travel for up to 35 people for 12 events a year, liaises with WAU's sponsors including Optus, and does a zillion other things. According to a colleague, Scott is "the heart and soul of the team".

If Scott is the heart, Nicole Bryant is the lungs of WAU. A physiotherapist with almost 20 years' experience, Bryant advises celebrated Australian V8 Supercars drivers such as Chaz Mostert and Nick Percat how to eat, sleep, exercise and yes, breathe. She even tells them how to sit. And they usually do what they're told.

Sure, Formula 1 champion Lewis Hamilton had New Zealand-born Angela Cullen as his physio for years, whom he once described as "one of the greatest things that's happened to me", but as a woman in a male-dominated world, Bryant must have copped *some* opposition when she started working in motorsport about eight years ago, right? A little, she admits. Not because she's a woman, but because she's a physio. "There are some [drivers] who have come from that school of 'harden up, toughen up,'" she explains. "They would be like, 'I feel fine, I don't need anything.'"

Physiotherapy is rather new to racing and Bryant fell into it by chance. "I was at a Supercars

event watching Mark Winterbottom race," she recalls. "One of his teammates, Andre Heimgartner, was experiencing leg numbness in the car. They asked me what I thought, I treated him that weekend and it just went from there."

Most of the hard work is done off the track, often in the gym. Bryant manages drivers' strength and conditioning, injury prevention, recovery, nutrition and hydration. "It takes a lot of force to wrangle the car around a track for two hours and cabin temperatures might be 60 degrees," she says. "A driver's heart rate can be 180 for the whole race" Applying the brakes feels like an 80-kilogram leg press in the gym. "So, they've got to be pretty strong and healthy just to tolerate the conditions in the car."

Gym sessions can pivot into counselling sessions. "It's a privilege to be trusted with what's really going on in their head," she says. "They need to focus for long periods of time and if something goes wrong, move on from it."

Motorsport organisations across the world have been concertedly recruiting women and undoing the pervasive narrative that it's

a boys' club. In 2021, more than 30 per cent of the Formula 1 (F1) workforce was female, up by 2.4 per cent since 2018. It reduced the mean gender pay gap from 51.9 per cent to 19.1 per cent in two years. F1 also banned "grid girls" in 2018 – women who hold up race signage and interact with fans – saying it no longer resonated with its brand values.

"Widening the pipeline at junior levels and tertiary training is the key to bringing more females into our sport," says WAU team principal, Bruce Stewart. In terms of driving, most professionals start out in go-karting as kids, so getting girls behind the wheel early is paramount. "There is no reason why a young girl can't beat a young boy in junior karting, and then in Supercars or F1." The WAU Foundation Academy provides pathways for young Australians of any gender to careers in motorsport, from driving to mechanics and engineers to commercial staff.

"We feel part of the WAU family and Nicole is certainly a key part of that," shares Daniel Lacaze, senior director of sponsorship and channel marketing at Optus. "She is a critical member of the team in supporting Chaz with his race preparation and her role has recently expanded to supporting the whole pit crew – an absolutely huge and important task."

Scott's first "hot lap" – riding shotgun while a pro takes you for a spin – was with Swiss-Italian driver Simona de Silvestro. In 2017, de Silvestro became the first full-time female Supercars driver. Scott remembers the beloved gearhead laughing as they hit speeds of 270 kilometres per hour. "The acceleration out of pit lane blew my mind," Scott recalls. "I look like a goof because I have this painted-on smile. It's so much fun."

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Nicole Bryant.