

FAST FEMALE ON FOUR WHEELS

Thanks to V8 Racing, you no longer have to be a professional race car driver to feed your inner speed demon. I'm testing out the whole shebang – the John Bowe V8 Octane Dreams Race Day experience at Wakefield Park, just outside of Goulburn in NSW; an experience that any rev-head will admit is awesome! To get the blood pumping, you experience eight hair-raising laps behind the wheel of a gurgling V8 powered hunk of metal, and after having lunch with motorsport legend John Bowe, you get to scream through three hot laps at 200kph+ at his side.

Like most motorsports, the V8 Supercar circuit is male dominated, with only about one per cent of racing

licences being held by females. We tracked down Melburnian driver, Amber Anderson, who belongs to that exclusive one per cent. She may be only 27 years old, but with half a lifetime of racing experience behind her, she's been around a track or two. Amber started her career racing go-karts at the age of 13, but after a race accident left her parents terrified, her racing dream took a hiatus and she concentrated on her studies, which saw her gain a pilot's licence at the age of 16, and successfully complete a law degree.

The draw of the track proved too strong to resist, however, and before long Amber was back behind the wheel and getting her break with an all-girl team racing against the boys at the

gruelling 12-hour race at Bathurst's legendary Mt Panorama. 'We finished the race in fourth or fifth position, and I suppose it springboarded from there. People started saying "oh wow, there's a girl racing and she's pretty good", and all these offers started coming in,' says Amber.

In the days of women in boardrooms and stay-at-home dads, why shouldn't an attractive, vivacious, highly educated woman be taken seriously on the circuit? 'I'd love to say it [motorsports] has changed, but there are still grid girls and they still aren't wearing much. As long as they are there, portrayed in that way, it's having a damaging effect on girls and sponsors who want to get into the sport' Amber laments.



V8 SUPERCARS AT THE TOP LEVEL IS MALE DOMINATED AND DRIVEN BY SPONSORSHIP & MONEY.

“ I THINK IT [HAVING GRID GIRLS] JUST SENDS THE WRONG MESSAGE IN TERMS OF THAT YOU CAN ACTUALLY ACHIEVE THINGS WITHOUT HAVING TO GET NAKED.”

Last year, Women of Australian Motorsport, an organisation sanctioned by the motorsports governing body, was formed to encourage more females to get involved with the sport, not only as drivers but as mechanics and team managers, and in public relations and marketing roles. ‘We had a big launch at the Grand Prix recently with Michael Schumacher representing us, which was great,’ Amber says. For the very few Australian female race drivers, this was a big step in the right direction.

Across the Pacific, the story is a little different, with women being welcomed more openly into motorsports. For this reason, Amber took her dream to the US, where she worked closely with former Indy race car driver and mentor Lyn St James, in what turned out to be a short but invaluable experience of breaking down barriers and making contacts. Just as Amber was about to join a race team headed by actor Patrick Dempsey from *Grey’s Anatomy*, the Global Financial Crisis struck and the US closed its doors. ‘Some really good opportunities came my way just in time for the GFC to hit, so a lot got cancelled. But in terms of making connections it was really invaluable’ says Amber.

In the past year Amber has taken on the role of official safety car driver for all of the 18 Supercar events held worldwide. As well as being great for getting maximum exposure, it also gets her out in the field. Safety cars are high-powered vehicles that are first on the scene in emergencies, arriving even before the ambulance. As the safety driver, Amber gets among the action and is responsible for controlling the pace of the cars on the track when an incident occurs. ‘Since I’ve been in the driver’s seat it’s gone extremely well,

and the respect from the drivers and the teams is amazing,’ she says.

Although petite in stature, Amber is deceptively strong: ‘One thing people don’t realise about the sport is that to stop the car takes about 100kg of brake pressure with one foot – that’s like leg pressing 100kg!’ She says that her strength and endurance training differs to that done by her male peers, choosing to focus, as she does, on lots of compound exercises of heavy weights and plyometrics for explosive muscle power, in addition to core strength work combined with rowing, running and cycling for endurance.

‘Each gear change requires a 20kg pull or push with your left hand. It’s heavy work when you are shifting over 20 to 30 times a lap and you’re doing 70 laps,’ she admits.

If you’ve got a knack – and desire – for putting the pedal to the metal, a good way to explore your need for speed is to get behind the wheel of one of these beasts in a safe and controlled environment with your own coach by your side calling the shots through race day experiences held throughout the country. Amber says that it’s a great way to taste the raw power of V8 in a supportive non-threatening environment.

Amber says that the fastest time she has clocked on the odometer is about 300km per hour, so after registering my highest lap speed of a mere 160km per hour, I come to the conclusion that maybe I’m not a speed demon after all.

For those budding female race car drivers who do feel the need for speed, however, Amber advises getting in touch with Women of Australian Motorsport to discover what motorsport might suit them best.

RedBalloon.com.au pioneered experiential gifting in Australia and New Zealand and has delivered more than 1.5 million experiences to consumers and businesses since its inception in 2001.

RedBalloon was founded on the belief that there is too much ‘stuff’ in the world, and that more can be gained from sharing meaningful experiences with the people who matter most. Imagine watching the sun rise from a hot air balloon, learning to sail or feeling the adrenalin rush of a race car drive. With these and over 3,000 other unique experiences, RedBalloon provides the chance to give someone the ultimate gift – a wonderful memory.

The experience: There are three John Bowe V8 experiences available through RedBalloon:

- Back seat hot laps – \$199
- Front seat hot laps – \$399
- The ultimate, John Bowe’s V8 Octane Dreams Race Day – \$999.

They operate out of three locations in Australia – Wakefield Park (NSW), Sandown Raceway (VIC) and Barbagallo Raceway (WA). Spaces for this experience are very limited and exclusive, and you should contact RedBalloon.com.au directly to find out when the next experience is running.

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