

By Godwin Kelly



## Blond Ambition

There's More to the "Suicide Blonde" Than Her Role at NASCAR

**IT'S PUZZLING.** How would a petite, mild-mannered 32-year-old woman working among NASCAR's top brass acquire the nickname "Suicide Blonde"?

Is it her fearlessness presenting proposals before NASCAR's Board of Directors? Is she the one who bravely cleans the fridge in the break room once a year?

Nope. Nothing Nicole Hoffman does at her job in NASCAR's Daytona Beach, Fla., headquarters earned her the colorful nickname. It's what she does on weekends that led the likes of NASCAR Vice Chairman Jim France and NASCAR President Mike Helton to bestow upon her such a ferocious moniker.

When she's at the office, Hoffman manages a Web site that NASCAR maintains for its corporate partners. But on Saturdays and Sundays, she can be found twisting the throttle of her racing motorcycle — dragging a knee as she powers through a corner, blond hair streaming from beneath her helmet.

In an office where everyone loves racing, Hoffman's motorcycling exploits have earned her a sizable cheering section — including France and Helton.

On Mondays, her fans in NASCAR's Building 5 — the sport's nerve center — anxiously await details from their resident racer's adventure-filled weekend. And on Fridays, because Hoffman's racing efforts are largely funded out of pocket, co-workers have been known to pass the hat to help support a weekend of racing.

France has even wrenched on Hoffman's bikes, while Helton is always available to lend advice.

"Jim has raced motorcycles, and I've asked Mike about managing a race team," Hoffman says. "They have been very good to me and are supportive in every sense of the word."

To memorialize their contributions, Hoffman competes with the names "Jim" and "Mike" prominently stenciled on her tricked-out Suzuki SV 650 and sexy Aprilia RS 250.

Photo: Wayne Ebinger



Photo: Courtesy of Nicole Hoffman

Growing up in Buffalo, N.Y., among a family of racers, (both her father and brother have been involved in motorsports) Hoffman came to racing later in life.

"I never had aspirations for racing," she says. "I was more concerned about getting an education and going to graduate school."

After earning a bachelor's degree in business administration from Buffalo State, and an MBA from Florida's Stetson University, Hoffman purchased her first bike in 1994. Then, after years of riding and some coaxing from her husband, Jeff, Hoffman entered her first race in 2001.

"I was so nervous because it was all so new to me," Hoffman recalls. "I remember thinking, 'What am I doing?'"

"I don't even remember how I finished. I was just glad to finish and have my first race under my belt."

With the jitters out of the way, Hoffman continued to compete in the novice ranks of a regional motorcycle series, and she honed her skills during test sessions at various circuits in the Southeast.

Just three years after her first start, Hoffman elevated her standing in the sport by earning the 2004 Amateur Ultra

Lightweight Superbike title.

"Winning that championship was extremely satisfying, and it helped me develop a racing résumé," she says. "Sponsors want somebody who is marketable, but they also want somebody who has results. That was very important."

Now racing in the Expert division, Hoffman has been impressive, but she harbors no grand illusions of heading to Europe for a stint on the grand prix circuit. She's content learning and gradually climbing up the racing ranks — enjoying the ride along the way.

Though menacing behind her darkened visor, believe it or not, Nicole Hoffman (aka "Suicide Blonde") is a treasure around NASCAR headquarters.

She's also found that what she does on the track crosses over with her duties at NASCAR.

"Doing one helps the other. I learned so much about racing by racing — things I can take back to my job at NASCAR," she says. "And by working at NASCAR, I have a better idea of what sponsors are looking for."

For the last year, Hoffman has worked on the development of a new Web site that services NASCAR's commercial relationships. The primary focus of the site is to explain marketing campaigns and encourage companies in the NASCAR family to foster business-to-business connections.

"It was a lot of work," Hoffman says. "We had to outline and design everything. Everyday we asked the questions: 'What will it say? What will it look like?' And we're constantly updating the site."

For her efforts, Hoffman gets kudos from NASCAR's upper echelon of officers.

"Nicole is hard working, talented and has done a fantastic job with our site," NASCAR's no-nonsense communications guru Jim Hunter says. "We're also very proud of what Nicole has accomplished as a racer."

Can't help but dig NASCAR's Suicide Blonde. **Ni**



Photo: Wayne Ebinger