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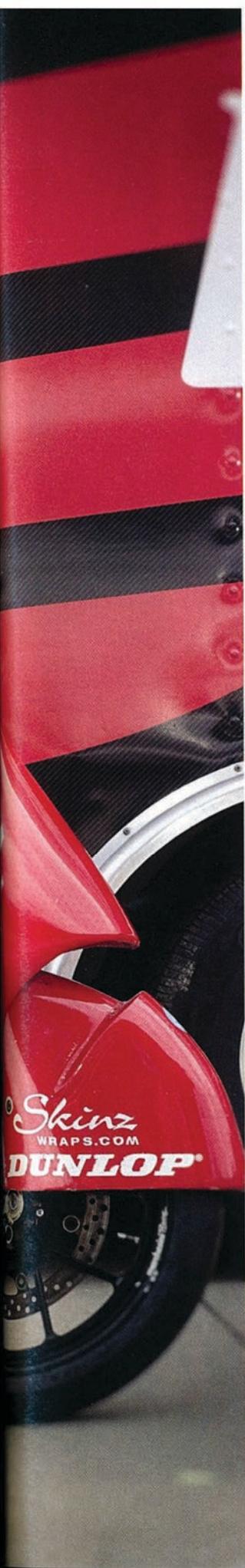
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MEET THE FASTEST WOMAN ON TWO WHEELS

LESLIE PORTERFIELD'S INSATIABLE NEED FOR SPEED KEEPS HER MOVING IN HIGH GEAR

BY MAYA GOLDEN | PHOTOS BY JOSHUA PAYNE

Few things in this world travel faster than 200 mph on land. The short list includes bullet trains in Japan, Bugatti racecars and a few fast-production motorcycles. Most of us will never know the sensation of traveling that fast.

Then, there is Leslie Porterfield.

She has reached speeds – her top speed is 246 mph – on two wheels that most never achieve on four.

“It’s an amazing rush going these speeds,” Leslie says. “It’s something just other worldly.”

Leslie holds the Guinness Book of World Records’ title of Fastest Woman in the World on a Motorcycle after setting the speed record in 2008 at Bonneville Speedway. She also juggles responsibilities as a businesswoman, mother of twins and designer of motorcycles built for speed.

LOVE OF MOTORCYCLES

Seated next to a motorcycle at a Dallas motor sports dealership, 37-year-old Leslie is at ease.

“I love motorcycles because I feel that element of freedom and connection with everything around me.”

She is wearing a Batgirl T-shirt, which seems appropriate. Her achievements on a motorcycle replicate those of speed-driven chase scenes in blockbuster superhero films. On a motorcycle, she can clear a mile in almost 15 seconds.

Her demeanor, however, is humble and friendly.

“I never had that mindset that I can’t do this because I’m a female,” she says.

At 16, an age when most teenagers are excited about getting their driver’s license and first car, Leslie had her eye on an old, broken down motorcycle her neighbor was selling.

She bought it and was determined to fix it.

“My parents thought I was absolutely crazy but I think they were probably betting that I would never get it running and ride it,” she says laughing.

But she did just that. She turned to instruction manuals and enlisted help to learn the ins and outs of motorcycles.

“When I was 16 or 17 years old, there weren’t as many females on a motorcycle on the road at all,” she says. “When I would stop at the gas stations and get gas, people would stop and talk to me. I was really, really shy when I was kid so that was one of the big things for me getting into motorcycles. People would always stop and talk to me and I got a little more comfortable with being more open. It really brought a whole new community to me.”

With new confidence and encouragement from a friend, she bought a racing motorcycle at 18.

“I got many speeding tickets as a teenager. When I got my first sports bike, it was a high-powered machine, so I had to practice my wheelies and I was just having a blast with it. But I got a lot of speeding tickets everywhere I went and a friend of mine said,

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"You know you really should try racing. You're a good rider and I think you'd have a blast on the track."

"That was a saving grace for me because being a hooligan on the streets is just really irresponsible especially as a teenager. So the race track was an outlet for that."

She competed in her first sanctioned race at 19.

"It was the biggest thrill," Leslie says. "I have been hooked ever since. I love it. I just loved suiting up, throwing on my helmet and getting out there racing with everyone else."

Reaction to a woman on the track was mixed.

"There was a lot of negativity that I had to ignore. I was fortunate enough to have the balance of a lot of people that supported me and encouraged me. But there were several times that I was told, 'You're such a pretty girl, you shouldn't be racing a motorcycle.' Or, 'You know you might get hurt, why don't you leave this to the men? You just have to ignore it and know what your passion is.'"

SPEED RECORDS

During the next decade, Leslie competed too many times to count and emerged as one of the fastest competitors on the racing circuit. In 2007, she and her race crew journeyed to the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah where Bonneville Speedway hosts Speed Week, World of Speed and World Finals. It is sacred ground for any racer hoping to set a land speed record.

Her attempt at a record delivered a crushing moment.

"I crashed my bike at over 100 mph," Leslie recalls. "I came off the bike, broke seven ribs, punctured a lung, and had a concussion. I was knocked out cold. They helicoptered me from the Bonneville Salt Flats to Salt Lake City to the hospital."

She worried they wouldn't let her compete there again.

"I went back the next year and I was surprised and grateful for all the encouragement. ... My love of the bike outweighed my fear."

This time the outcome was different. She set a record of 232 mph to become the first woman on a motorcycle to officially reach speeds in excess 200 mph – a milestone that allowed her to join the prestigious Bonneville 200 Club.

Since then, she has reached 246 mph.

She says familiarity with the mechanics and technology of motorcycles helps her reach incredible speeds.

As Leslie quickly accelerates, she watches the fuel pressure gauge, intake



COURTESY PHOTO





RICMOORE
PHOTOGRAPHY



PHOTO FROM LESLIEPORTERFIELD.COM

air temperature and oil pressure and makes adjustments in response to the track while monitoring her riding position. It is a very active 15 seconds.

"The slightest alteration or change in body position affects your time. I've just gotten better and more mindful of those things over time."

'JUST GO FOR IT'

Leslie is the female face of motorcycle speed sports. She graces the covers of motorcycle and racing magazines. She stars in a commercial for Walgreens pharmacy that was shot on the runway at Palestine Municipal Airport. There are discussions of featuring her in a television show.

Leslie is an owner of Hi-Five Cycles in Dallas, which is expanding to include the sale of race cars. Leslie says she is interested in competing on four wheels as well.

The businesswoman, racer and bike engineer is the mother to 3-year-old twins, a boy and a girl. She now limits her travel to better balance the demands of work and being with her children.

"I thought about retiring from racing and it just wasn't time for me to do so. I enjoy it and I think the best thing that I can do is set a good example for my kids in following your dreams and pursuing your passions because that's the one thing that I want for them as a mom."

She also is involved in engineering and designing new models of motorcycles.

"I really love perfecting my skills and engineering a vehicle to do something so specific. In racing, I have a lot of people that help me with everything from suspension, to aerodynamics, to different setups for cooling. There's so much going on with these machines."

She plans to return to Bonneville this year on a new motorcycle built by her racing team. She says this motorcycle can hit speeds of 270 mph.

She wants to continue to inspire others.

"The biggest honor that I've had in my racing is that, this was something that I did that was just deeply personal and became much more public. And so many people started contacting me since I started racing. There have been so many more women that have started racing for land speed records. I see this growth across all motor sports. I think it's wonderful. I think the more women in motor sports the better.

"I hope to inspire. I hope that is my message. No matter what you want to do, race bikes or cars, soccer, whatever it is, go for it. Just go for it." 