

Trackside Stories: Kathie J. Meredith's Motorsports Photographs, 1968-1972



Kathie J. Meredith photographed Austrian racer Jochen Rindt after he took the checkered flag at the 1969 United States Grand Prix in Watkins Glen behind the wheel of his red and gold Ford-Lotus, securing his first grand prix victory after a frustrating, five-year chase. The purse, the largest sum ever offered as prize money for a Formula One race, attracted top drivers from Europe. While Rindt nabbed the headlines, Meredith explored many stories about the race weekend – the rain, fog and cold wind; Bruce McLaren blowing his engine; the colorful tents dotting the landscape; the arrival of a reluctant poodle; young campers collecting firewood; and mechanics in the pits – using vignettes to capture “the mood of the Grand Prix.”

“Trackside Stories,” a new exhibition mounted by the International Motor Racing Research Center (IMRRC) in Watkins Glen in collaboration with the Arnot Art Museum in Elmira, features 30 motorsports photographs by local photojournalist Kathie Meredith. Meredith’s photographs tell a myriad of stories found trackside - of fans, track workers, and internationally-famous racecar drivers. Meredith, a newly-hired reporter, took her notebook and cameras to her first race at the local track, Watkins Glen International or “The Glen,” in the summer of 1968. A native of Indianapolis, home of the Indy 500-mile endurance race, Meredith knew racing and race drivers from days at the speedway with her mother Geneva Meredith. She continued to cover races at Watkins Glen during the most exciting era in the circuit’s history, when it hosted major national racing events as well as top-level international races in the prestigious Formula One series.

Meredith’s press pit pass gave her up-close access to stars of the motorsports world. Her intimate portraits capture the intense emotion of the drivers in the cockpit and pit row. In a letter to her mother about her first United States Grand Prix in 1968, Meredith wrote about the sport’s most-famous drivers, “Looking over their cars, talking to mechanics or just standing alone in their thoughts. I think I could watch them for days on end without getting bored.” Her early racing photographs reflect her watchful eye.

Meredith focused her lens on big stars and small occurrences. In addition to driver portraits, the exhibition’s trackside photographs depict timers and scorers recording lap times, a crew member

painting the number on a racecar, and a firefighter on the safety crew. They show fans lying the grass, bundled up against the October cold, drinking beer in a cargo bay of semi-trailer truck, and watching the races with binoculars. She visually recorded the latest innovation in the engineering and design of racecars and views of the new pit area.

Meredith reported on the residents of and visitors to the Finger Lakes in words and images during her 40-year career as a regional editor, writer and photographer at the *Daily Messenger* newspaper in Canandaigua, New York. She attended Franklin College in Indiana as an undergraduate and received her master's degree in journalism from West Virginia University. From her debut at the paper in 1968, Meredith focused her interest on people, covering significant issues facing everyday citizens - veterans confronting the lingering impact of the Vietnam War, poverty and political turmoil. A perfect fit at a locally-owned newspaper devoted to bringing community news to community people, Meredith served her community for four decades by hearing and sharing their stories. She reported on festivals, firemen's carnivals and community theater; promoted the work of artists and musicians; interviewed visiting celebrities; wrote about Jimmy Carter's presidential inauguration and the second moon launch; and captured portraits of local people selling grapes, protesting the war and watching the races. Reflecting on her career at her retirement in 2008, Meredith said, "I have been really, really fortunate just to be able to tell their stories."

The exhibition of Meredith's photographs is part of a larger project undertaken by the IMRRC in 2020 to celebrate of the contributions of women to motorsports. The display of her images reflects the theme of women "behind the lens" focusing attention on women photographers. Launched to coincide with the centennial of American women's suffrage, the broader project explores the experiences of pioneering and current women drivers "behind the wheel" as well as the role women have played "behind the scenes" in organizing races, overseeing timing and scoring, managing race tracks, owning teams, improving safety, and engineering racecars. Opening in May, the Center will present the primary exhibition "Women of Speed: Legacies in Motorsports" at its' visitors' center at 610 South Decatur in Watkins Glen with smaller complementary displays in satellite locations throughout the village. The theme of women in racing will also be reflected in IMRRC's regular lecture series "Center Conversations" with free public programs featuring prominent women in the industry. Visit the Center's upcoming event page for more information.

