



FEATURE

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THIS SPORTING LIFE

A theatrical background, a clever buy and a chance meeting led **Lara Platman** to her own unique style of motor racing photography. She talks to Elizabeth Roberts about her love of the excitement, and danger, of the sport.

For Lara Platman, the adventure began 17-odd years ago when she was working for *Country Life* as a photographer and picture editor. She was sent on assignment to Goodwood Revival, a three-day motor racing event for vintage racing cars of the type that would have been raced during the circuit's original period from 1948-1966. 'I realised that motor racing wasn't just fast and furious,' Lara explains. 'And it wasn't just about modern cars – there were the most amazing old ones that were beautiful.' It was also the first time she was aware that women drivers participated in racing.

It was the beginning of a love affair with the sport. 'I went back again and again and again,' she says. She began to get invited to photograph different races. 'I was invited to Le Mans and Monaco – to go to Monaco with my camera! Amazing,' she says. And then she photographed the Monte Carlo Rally. 'It was then that I realised I wanted to drive a racing car,' she says.

In conversation with Lara you begin to see that this is not an outlandish ambition for her – she exudes a confidence and a *joie de vivre* that is not only infectious but seems to allow her to achieve anything she turns her hand to. It wasn't long before she got her licence. >



In motor racing there are a number of different types of races – trials, sprinting, rallying, hill climbing and endurance. It is the last of these that Lara is most attracted to. 'I love it because it is like theatre,' she says. 'You never know which team is going to win – there are, of course, good teams and not so good teams, but the really good team could have a breakdown and be held up for four hours. But then another team could be held up for six hours, and you think things are equal again. And yet another team could lose just two hours and you think they will win, but they are the slowest team and the one that lost four hours is the fastest – and it wins! It's so exciting.'

Lara's reference to the theatre is no passing comment. She comes from a theatrical background and spent years photographing theatrical productions and dance. And, in a rather curious and round about way, it is through this that she came to develop the photographic style that she uses today. 'Years ago I had a stall on Portobello Road market with my dad,' she explains. My parents had had a theatrical

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shop and when they sold it, they had stock left over so we started the stall. We also bought stock from pawn shops and antique markets. One day I came across two Leica M6 cameras with a whole pack of lenses in a pawn shop in Hatton Garden – and bought them.' She decided to give them a go and shot a roll of film, quickly getting used to the rangefinder system. When she got the results she was impressed. 'I was flabbergasted,' she says. 'It was just amazing.' She couldn't keep both of the M6s because she needed the money so she sold one and kept the other, along with several of the lenses. But it was at the time when clients were just beginning to demand digital files and she knew she would have to provide them if she was to stay in work. 'I went to my lab, Rapid Eye in Shoreditch, and discovered that they could process and scan my negs in a day. It wasn't an ideal

solution but what the Leica produced was so good that the scans were easily as good as any digital camera at that time.'

She continued to work in this way until a chance encounter changed her photographic life forever. 'I was at Goodwood Revival and I bumped into this man and he had two M8.2s round his neck, and I went up to him and said, "What the hell are those?" The man explained that they were the first Leica digital cameras in the rangefinder M series. And that he had them because he was the owner of the company. 'He was Dr Kaufmann! I told him how much I loved my M6, and how great it was. We made friends. When we parted we hugged and we both dropped all our papers and programmes trying not to clash our cameras!'

They had exchanged cards and about six months later, with Dr Kaufmann's card burning a hole in her pocket, and an invitation to photograph at the Monte Carlo rally, Lara picked up the phone and dialled his number. 'I told him that I was going to this rally and asked him if I could borrow >



one of his M8.2s. He asked when the event was and, when I said it was in January, he said, "No, that won't be possible." I quickly said thank you and so sorry for asking, and then he said: "That's because, by then we will have brought out the M9 and I will send you one."

When the camera, and a 24mm lens arrived from Germany, Lara was thrilled. 'Just opening a Leica box was a treat and a half – my M6 had come wrapped in bubblewrap!' Since then Lara has been a dedicated user of Leica and is now a Leica ambassador.

The pictures shown here are from the Nürburgring 24-hour race in Germany – one of the endurance races that Lara loves. The race starts around two in the afternoon and continues through the night until the same time the next day. But, surrounding the race track, is a forest and it is here that visitors gather for what is effectively a two week festival. 'It's incredibly popular,' she explains. 'For many, it's their annual holiday. They set up little villages with shops and communities,

and people buy things from one another – they set up bathrooms, hot tubs and showers. This year the World Cup was on so everyone had television screens set up.'

Lara's approach to photographing the event is very different from most sports photographers. Using now a Leica M she took only two lenses, a 50mm Noctilux and a 24mm for wider shots. 'It's very dusty and I didn't want to be changing lenses a lot,' she explains.

Before the race started she spent time searching out good vantage points and generally looking around, conversing with other photographers and meeting people in the forest. But the place where she always finds her greatest excitement is in the pit lane. 'It can be really dangerous,' she explains. 'You have to know the rules and stick to them. You can't look down at your

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screen because you've got to be aware of what's going on or you could get killed – or get someone else killed. You have to shoot and then go to the wall – and only then, with your back against the wall can you check your screen. If you're seen breaking the rules you get barred.'

Becoming very much part of a larger team, wearing the same boiler suit as everyone else, Lara focuses on the job. 'You don't speak to anyone, even when you're hanging around waiting, you have to mind your own business and not get in the way. A siren goes off when a car is about to come in and you've got to be ready. The driver that comes in will be buzzing but the driver about to go out will be totally focused and you can't distract him. You really have to know what you are doing.'

Lara was invited by Falken Tyres to Nürburgring and they suggested to her that she should do a 'lifestyle' piece on the race – a style that she is getting well known for in the motor racing photography world. So, at around four in the morning, she set out to the forest to see what was going on. 'That can also be dangerous,' she explains. >





◀ ‘There will have been a lot of drinking and you have to be careful – you always tell another member of the team where you are going and you check in by text every hour.’

Lara had decided from the outset that she would make the project entirely black & white. ‘That cancels out all the other stuff – and if it’s raining that’s fine,’ she says. ‘I just look for the shapes and the facts in front of me – it gets you right back to the basics of photography and of what you are documenting.’

With the race still going on in the background, Lara continued to shoot in the forest. ‘By the time the light came up, there was this crazy scene in front of me – people sleeping and all this detritus. No-one took any notice of me taking pictures – they just wanted to enjoy themselves and let themselves go.’

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By the end of the race, exhausted, but pleased with the 200 odd pictures that she had taken (‘I still shoot as though I was using film and think about every shot’), Lara turns her attention to the future – a book on women racing drivers, racing her own (shared) car and, of course, more photography. ‘I sometimes ask myself if being a photographer is a real existence – and yes, it is!’ she says. And, having met her, I don’t think there can be any doubt about it.

