

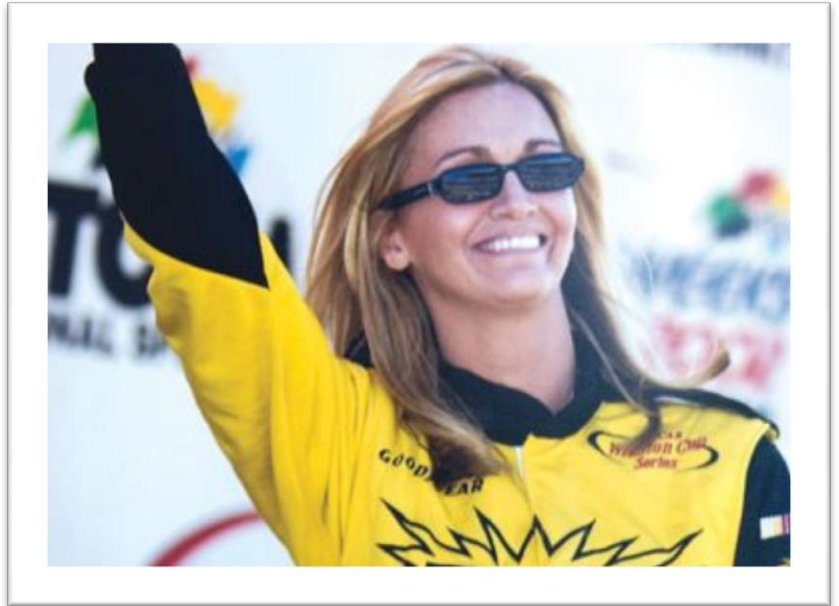
# Shawna Robinson – The First Lady of Nascar

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Shawna Robinson was trapped in a Los Angeles hotel room.

“Quarantined” is how she described it. She hadn’t been kidnapped. Quite the opposite. Robinson actually had placed herself in this confining situation.

Late in 2009, the Charlottean whom countless gearheads know for her accomplishments on NASCAR’s top race tracks had applied to be a contestant on the popular CBS reality television competition “The Amazing Race.” Together with her potential “Race” teammate, Jennifer Jo Cobb, Robinson had flown to Hollywood to participate in a weeklong series of interviews. Though they’d been recruited for the show, Robinson and Cobb still had to make a pitch to the show’s hosts, producers and directors.



Until that meeting, they were under lock and key. They had designated pool and gym opportunities, as well as windows of time during which they could eat. Otherwise, they were confined to their rooms.

“It was so weird,” said Robinson, 45. “You could not talk to any of the other people. You obviously knew the other (contestants). Like the two cowboys. ... You knew they were cowboys because they even wore cowboy hats with their bathing suits on. And then there were two cops from (New England). I don’t know if you saw the latest season (of the show), but that was the one that we would have been on.”

Amazing as this sounds, Robinson’s mind wasn’t focused on “The Amazing Race,” despite the cramped living conditions. Her thoughts had drifted more than 3,000 miles away to her hometown of Charlotte, where NASCAR’s dignitaries were preparing to cut the ribbon on the sport’s anticipated Hall of Fame.



A stock car pioneer who had blazed a trail for female drivers, Robinson had been invited by Hall of Fame marketers to donate memorabilia to display in the hall. Yet she had neglected to send the materials to NASCAR's marketing team before embarking on her California trip, and her ongoing participation in the "Race" audition meant she'd missed her window of opportunity to be part of the pomp and circumstance.

The hall opened to the public on May 11, 2010. Robinson's memorabilia remains in her garage.

### **Family circus**

Before Danica, there was Shawna.

Danica Patrick, the pretty brunette sitting behind the wheel of the No. 7 GoDaddy.com car, receives more than enough ink by competing in the IndyCar, ARCA and NASCAR racing series. But 20 years before Patrick became the first woman to win an IndyCar race in 2008, redheaded Robinson was burning rubber on top NASCAR tracks like Talladega, Darlington, and the Daytona International Speedway.

"In Daytona, during my first time racing that track, I finished third," Robinson exclaimed. "In my sixth race (the AC Delco 100 in Asheville), I became the first woman ever to win a race in a stock car."

You could argue that racing is in Robinson's blood. Born in Des Moines, Iowa, as the youngest of five

children, she always was around automobiles. Her father, who raced late-model cars, made sure the Robinson clan spent their weekends at Midwestern racetracks.

"I was the little girl playing in the infield with my sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins. It truly was a family ordeal," Robinson said. "I knew how to ride a motorcycle at age 4. That's just what we did."

The Robinson family wasn't wealthy. But they were known for inventing automotive routines to entertain crowds at stock car shows. Some of their creations even scored them national acclaim. One of Shawna's brothers jumped so many trucks during a live race event in the early 1980s that the television variety program "That's Incredible!" featured him in a segment.

"We always called my father the circus leader, because we were the circus, and he was our leader," Robinson said. "It was very strange. But that was just my dad. He was so full of life."

And full of ideas. Robinson said it was her father who first put her behind the wheel of a truck so she could warm up the track and introduce racers. He believed that truck racing – and the site of a female, teenage driver – would only increase fan appeal at stock car events.

Two days after graduating high school in 1983, 18-year-old Robinson drove her first truck around a short track in Toledo, Ohio. The love affair that would span three decades had begun.

### **A steady climb**

One year later, Robinson launched her official racing career when she joined the GATR Truck Series.

“That’s when I came to realize that I was going to be a racer – when I came to terms with the fact that this is what I was going to be,” she recalled.

Not that her truck-driving competition wanted her there. “They hated me,” she said of the other racers. “They thought that a woman’s place was in the kitchen, not on the race track. ... It was nasty, but it was fun. It was competitive. They didn’t intimidate me.”

On the racetrack is where Robinson consistently proved herself. Pocono, Atlanta and Bristol were just a few of the big-league tracks Robinson conquered in her debut year. She earned Rookie of the Year honors in 1984, moving from Iowa to Pennsylvania so she could continue to market her talents on Northeast truck tracks, in trade shows and at racing exhibits. Her owners also tolerated Robinson’s presence because a female driver in a male-dominated sport scored valuable media attention.

It only took four years for NASCAR to notice. Robinson made her stock car debut in 1988, racing in the now-defunct NASCAR Dash Series. She competed at the Daytona International Speedway that year with the Daytona Dash Cars, a series that previously had hosted Michael Waltrip and Kyle Petty, to name a few.

If there were obstacles to overcome in transitioning from trucks to stock cars, Robinson didn’t notice. She’d already familiarized herself with dirt and asphalt racing on short and long tracks in the truck series. Once she learned how to properly draft – or ride behind other vehicles – in her car, the difference in weight (trucks, obviously, are much heavier than cars) was negotiable. In her first two years on the NASCAR circuit, Robinson earned Most Popular Driver honors.

With each passing year came another climb up the NASCAR ladder. Robinson moved into the Busch Series in 1991. Highlights of her tenure included a second-place qualifying at Rockingham in 1994 and, two races later, her first career pole at Atlanta Motor Speedway.

“My butt was always in a seat,” she said. “It was always driving, and always on a different type of race track. ... I wasn’t consistently a frontrunner, but I was always near the Top 10.”

Her run, however, was short-lived.

### **Stock car mom**

Ownership conflicts, a marriage, and the births of her son Tanner (in 1996) and daughter Samantha (in ‘97) led to Robinson’s semi-retirement from racing.

She still remembers the day she had to turn down an opportunity to test cars at Daytona because she’d recently found out she was pregnant.

“I told the team owner, ‘God, you know how bad I want this, but I guess with the timing, this is where I am right now,’” Robinson said with a hesitant chuckle. “And he replied, ‘Well, I have to tell you, that’s the first time I’ve ever gotten that excuse from a driver.’”

Her hiatus from the track, thankfully, was temporary. She returned to racing in 1999, climbing behind the wheel of the No. 8 Kmart Ford Taurus for former NASCAR team owner Michael Kranefuss as part of the ARCA RE/MAX Series. Rust hadn’t formed on Team Robinson, and she went right back to her winning ways. That year, she set a track record during a pole-winning qualifying run at Michigan International Speedway. She also finished sixth in points, becoming the first female to finish in the Top 10 for ARCA.

“When I came back, I felt like I was stronger than when I left,” Robinson said. “I had a different mentality.”

And people had a different mentality about putting a mom behind the wheel of a race car.

“I did get questions, like, ‘Now that you are a mom, how can you do this?’ And, ‘Don’t you feel now that you shouldn’t be putting yourself at risk?’ (But) I looked at it this way. If a woman succeeds at climbing a mountain, and she breaks records, and then she has children, does that mean she’s not going to climb mountains anymore? No,” Robinson said. “This was what I knew. I felt safer on the race track than I was on the street. And I wanted to teach my kids that you always should go for your dreams. You go after whatever your passion is in life. And if you are lucky enough to find that passion, then do whatever you can do to become the best that you can be.”

The next few years were a series of highs and lows for Robinson’s racing career. She joined the Winston Cup in 2001, competing in races for Kranefuss and Michael Waltrip Racing. BAM Racing accepted her in 2002, then released her shortly after. She left racing in 2003, only to return to the Busch Series two years later. She competed for Keith Coleman Racing but was released after six races.

These memories leave a bitter taste in Robinson’s mouth. As she tells it, biased crew chiefs and team owners who didn’t want her around conspired to prevent her from succeeding on the track. When she fought back against perceived sexism, she was labeled “emotionally unstable.”

“Remember back in the day when Tony Stewart had anger issues because of the way he treated the media?” Robinson asks. “Basically, if I was a guy, and I walked in there and just busted (someone’s) nose or punched a hole in their wall, I would be a cool bad-ass. But because I yelled and screamed and showed emotions, because I was angry ... then I became emotionally unstable. That’s where the end started.”

After a series of escalating mishaps, Robinson left stock car racing in 2005.

“I just was at a point in my life where this was not how I wanted to race,” she said. She had grown exhausted from the sexism and NASCAR politics. Her kids were getting older. Her passion for racing was fading.

“I was tired. I was tired of beating down doors. I had been beating down doors since I was 18. I think I was just exhausted. If I was going to race, I was going to race for somebody good,” Robinson said. “And so I walked away from it.”

She admits she has missed racing every day since.

### **Female racers, past and present**

It has crossed Robinson's mind more than a few times that had she been able to tough it out a few more years, she might have become the "face" of women's NASCAR racing instead of Patrick.

"If I could have just gotten a second wind and continued a couple of more years, boy, I would have been it," she says. "Maybe it just makes me feel good to know that. But it really wasn't the time, within NASCAR, where things were going to be made easier (for women). There are things they can do to make your road a little better. You can see that now with Danica, where they are being very positive in the media. If you go in with a top-rate owner, and the spin is very positive toward the media, it helps. It really helps."

Lack of support, in Robinson's opinion, goes a long way in explaining why a woman hasn't broken through to officially become "the one" in NASCAR.

"Why would a woman succeed with lesser opportunities? I don't think Jimmie Johnson would have succeeded if he didn't have the opportunities that he had with Jeff Gordon and Busch cars," she said. "(Johnson) wasn't that great in the Busch series. He was learning and building. He was winning occasionally before he came in. But he really needed help."

Patrick is getting that help. And because of it, Robinson believes Patrick will be "the one" to finally kick the door hard enough to keep it open. She's marketable, and conducts herself with class on and off the track. But Robinson places one condition on Patrick's success. She needs to choose to race NASCAR full time, and not divide her attentions between open-wheel IndyCar racing or other competitive series.

"She doesn't have to race full time," Robinson said, explaining that Patrick is paid handsomely for the part-time racing she does do. "But I think the racer in her will want to."

You get the sense Robinson sees a bit of herself in Patrick. She might even envision herself in the spotlight Patrick now holds. When it comes down to it, Robinson missed her window of opportunity.

Unfortunately for her, it wouldn't be the last time.

### **The not-so-amazing Race**

Before the hotel confinement, the trip to California, and "The Amazing Race" audition, Robinson had received a letter. Aware of her accomplishments, the marketing team for the yet-to-open NASCAR Hall of Fame wanted her to



donate items from her racing days for inclusion in the racing museum.

Needless to say, Robinson was thrilled. They asked her for a helmet and a suit. They sent her the paperwork needed to facilitate the donation.

“You are basically loaning them the items, and they return them back to you when they are done with them,” she said. “I was going to give them the Daytona suit for display.”

Those papers, Robinson, got filed away someplace. Lost in stacks of others papers, perhaps. She left town for her “Amazing Race” audition without completing the task.

“It’s just such a disappointment on my end. I basically just didn’t get my stuff to them quick enough. I think I just got wrapped up in another opportunity, an adventure that I went and tried to do. It’s my fault,” she said.

The mistake has gone noticed. Robinson said people who attended opening events at the hall have contacted her, asking why her stuff isn’t prominently displayed along fellow racing pioneers Janet Guthrie and Patty Moise. She can only sigh, explaining the gaffe again and again.

“They are going to add me eventually,” she said. “But how sad is this? The stuff is sitting in my garage in a container. I lost my window.”

That’s not all she lost.

Out of 15 pairs that auditioned for “The Amazing Race,” the producers selected 11 Robinson and Cobb didn’t make it to Victory Lane. The producers passed on the duo, and they were cut from the show. No “Race.” No memorabilia in the NASCAR Hall of Fame. For Robinson, it’s the equivalent of a Daytona wreck, a “Did Not Finish” in the standings. It couldn’t be more disappointing.

### **C’m on, get Happy**

Robinson isn’t sad, though. She’s convinced the hall will let her in during the next inclusion window. And she’s far too busy running the next chapter in her career: Happy Chairs.

Racing wasn’t Robinson’s sole passion. “I have always been artistic,” she said, linking her creative traits back to her mother.

Her outlet, when she wasn’t on the track, was furniture decorating and room design. During her extended breaks from NASCAR, she’d decompress by painting nurseries for close friends. Disney characters like Tigger and Pooh were her specialty. Recommendations would circulate among her NASCAR colleagues. Robinson ended up painting the Waltrips’ home, Martin Truex’s race shop and home, and Kasey Kahne’s race shop.

“Through word-of-mouth, it just turned into a business,” Robinson said.

That business is called Happy Chair. Through it, Robinson restores worn and weathered chairs and gives them new life.

“I love big, bold crazy color. I love art,” she says on her website, [ShawnaRobinson.com](http://ShawnaRobinson.com). “As is evident from my past as a race car driver, I love the thrill of taking risks. I’ve combined these

loves to create Happy Chair; a unique, soul stirring, heartwarming furniture company designed to create happiness!”

The vibrant chairs convey a mantra Robinson has lived by her entire life.

“If you don’t love something, then you shouldn’t do it,” she said.

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