

# FASTEST WOMAN IN THE WORLD

Racing drivers of both sexes eat dust when this Michigan grandmother gets behind the wheel

By HAL HIGDON



Vicki Wood races to achieve a record run over fast, two-and-a-half-mile Daytona Beach International Speedway.

A WHITE BLUE that was an automobile darted by to melt from sight down a ribbon-thin highway of rubber cone markers. The automobile's driver was Vicki Wood: Detroit racer, housewife, and 41-year-old grandmother. She had just driven her car 150.375 miles per hour, the fastest speed ever attained officially by a woman driver.

Vicki Wood is used to speed. She has competed successfully six years at Daytona Beach, Fla. She won consistently in Detroit stock-car races—first against other women and later against the men. Her living room contains 36 trophies.

In addition to racing, Vicki has found time to raise three children: Edward, 24, Donna, 23, and Wayne, 17. The two older are now married and Edward has a year-old son. Seeing Vicki Wood in a crowd you would never think of her as a hardened racing veteran. Blonde, blue-eyed, and with a schoolgirl figure, she seems more like the average American housewife who climbs behind the wheel of a car only to drive to the supermarket or take the kids to school.

Vicki drove only to supermarkets and schools herself until one evening in 1953 when her husband, Clarence "Skeeter" Wood, took her to the stock-car races. Vicki took one look at the girl drivers grinding around the track smashing into each other and snorted: "If I couldn't drive any better than that, I wouldn't get into a car."

The next week when they again visited the races, Skeeter told Vicki he had a surprise for her. "The surprise," she said later, "was that I would race that night!"

Driving at high speeds around a quarter-mile asphalt track proved more difficult than it seemed from the side lines, but Vicki managed to qualify for the main women's race. Skeeter, who 25 years before had raced cars himself before being sidelined by injuries, gave Vicki some advice: "You can crowd by a car as long as you can get your nose up as far as the driver's door. Once he sees you, he won't cut across."

Vicki tried it in the race. Going down one straightaway she spied an opening between two

cars. She sneaked into the gap, pushing her nose up to their doors, only to have the two cars close in on top of her. She finished out of the money.

"I forgot one thing," sighed Skeeter later. "She was racing against women drivers."

Women drivers or not, Vicki Wood was seldom outmaneuvered after that. In her first full season, she drove in 10 feature events for women, taking four firsts and three seconds. The following year she won four out of five championship races, losing the fifth only when her front tire went flat. She set a track record at the Flat Rock Speedway just outside Detroit, qualifying her car 2/100 of a second faster than any of the men. At the end of the season, the Detroit Sports Guild named her the No. 1 woman driver of the year.

After a hectic run, Vicki Wood smiles for photographers.



But Vicki didn't like driving against women. "They're unpredictable," she says. "You never know what they're going to do."

Her chance to compete against the men came in 1957 when the manager of the Flat Rock Speedway allowed the girls to qualify for the men's races one night. Only Vicki could turn in a time fast enough to make the main event. She finished 19th after her car blew a gasket. Most of the other girl drivers soon gave up trying to compete against the other sex, but Vicki, who soon began to hold her own, had no inclinations to return to women's racing.

VICKI USED to help her brothers tinker with cars and had driven more than 50 miles a day as a supervisor for a grocery chain, but she never dreamed she might become a racing driver. "Right now, Vicki's as good a driver as anybody in the country," says Andy Barto, Detroit promoter who used to manage the Flat Rock Speedway. "You can't go down to Daytona Beach year after year and do what she has without knowing plenty."

Vicki's record at Daytona has been nothing short of phenomenal. Each year since 1955 she has turned in the fastest time of all women drivers. Three years she recorded individual times faster than any men. In 1959 the only car that topped her speed blew up before the event was over.

Last Fourth of July, while watching but not competing in the Daytona Beach track races, she stopped at the pits to say hello to some of the drivers. Her way was barred by a guard. "Sorry, no women allowed," he said.

Vicki, who seldom argues with anybody, retired to her seat. When the drivers heard of this rebuff, they swarmed out of the pits to visit her in the grandstand. When the track owner learned of the incident, he grabbed the microphone and announced over the loudspeaker so everyone could hear it: "Attention, all gatenders. At this track Vicki Wood is the same as any man!"

Vicki wasn't sure just how to interpret this, but she smiled. It was part of the fame that goes with the title of the world's fastest woman.

## COVER:

Bob Taylor evokes fond childhood memories with his photo of youngsters in the act of apple-bobbing at Halloween time. For a provocative feature equally in the Halloween "spirit," see "Which Is Witch?" p. 12.

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