



RECORD-SETTING PILOT, DRIVER **BETTY (SKELTON) ERDE** OF THE VILLAGES TO BE INDUCTED INTO HER 10TH HALL OF FAME



Above left: Betty Erde still loves to drive her Corvette.

Bill Mitchell
Daily Sun file photo

Right: Erde holds a photograph of herself that was made when she set a world land speed record for women on the Bonneville Salt Flats in 1965, when she drove 315.2 mph.

Peter Travers
Daily Sun



A GREAT RIDE

Villager will join Michael Andretti, Buddy Baker and John Force at the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America in Detroit

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By Theresa Campbell

Betty (Skelton) Erde will be among a class of seven racing greats when she is inducted into the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America in Detroit next month with Michael Andretti, Buddy Baker, John Force, Richie Ginther, Wayne Rainey and Paul Goldsmith.

"I feel like I'm probably one of the most fortunate people in the world," said the 82-year-old Village of Amelia resident, hailed as a female pioneer in aviation and automotive sports. "I have loved every minute of it."

She was encouraged by the late Bill France Sr., founder of NASCAR, to get into auto racing after he saw her win championships as an aerobatic pilot in a biplane in 1948-50. He felt that since she loved going fast and could do amazing feats in the air, that she would enjoy the same behind the wheel of a race car.

"Betty is one of the most dynamic women I have ever known," France said in a 1975 tribute. "I have watched Betty fly airplanes as only a champion could. I have seen her drive racing machines to new records time after time with the coolness of the best automotive racing champions. I personally officiated when she became the first woman in the world to drive racing cars to new records through the NASCAR measured mile on the sands of Daytona Beach."

He added, "She made automotive history when she drove a jet car on the Bonneville Salt Flats of Utah to become the first woman in the world to officially drive a vehicle over 300 miles an hour."

The Villager's world land speed record for women on the Bonneville Salt Flats was set in 1965, when she drove 315.2 mph in a jet-powered open-cockpit dragster named "Cyclops," a car owned by Art Arfons.

"It was a wonderful experience, and Bonneville was a very exciting place," Erde said, showing a black-and-white photograph from the day. "I was the first woman to run there, and the other two times were with male drivers in record runs for speed."

Her love of racing began at an early age, when she and her father attended local races and traveled to the Indianapolis 500.

France personally invited Erde to participate in his 1954 Speedweek events on the sands of Daytona. With no previous experience driving in competitive events, she put the pedal to the metal, driving a Dodge sedan, and established a new class record.

First woman test driver

Her beach record led her to join the Dodge Division of Chrysler Corp., where she became the first woman test driver in the auto industry.

She went on to become the first woman to establish transcontinental auto records across the South American Andes mountain ranges, and from New York to California. She also broke records driving a Corvette on Daytona Beach, and to this day, Erde still loves driving her red Corvette.

The Villager also is noted for being among the first women to take astronaut testing in 1959.

"I just like going fast," Erde said, smiling. "I enjoy it, I really do."

If she could, she would get behind the wheel of a race car again and speed.

There are moments when Erde wishes she could live her life all over again, and there are times when she feels she was born too soon.

"Like about 100 years," she said.

Erde enjoys watching today's race car drivers and is thrilled to see more women behind the wheel.

"I watch racing quite a lot, and I'm following Danica Patrick," Erde said. "I think she is terrific. She's done quite well, and she has won one race in the IndyCar Series that she drives in. She has done quite well and I hope she'll start winning some more races."

Her advice to Danica is simple.

"Do it your way. Don't let other people tell you what to do," Erde said. "Probably if I let other people tell me what to do and not do, I would not have participated in any of these things. Unfortunately, they are somewhat dangerous, and people look at it that way."

Erde remembers that, in her early years, some people frowned upon the sight of a woman racing.

She didn't let it bother her.

"It's a matter of the fact that you simply have to do what you like to do and desire to do," Erde said. "Not many people get to do what they dearly love."

A love for flying

Born in Pensacola, Erde was the only child of David and Myrtle Skelton. As a little girl, she played with model planes instead of dolls. She loved watching Navy cadets from the nearby Naval Air Station fly maneuvers in biplanes.

She told her parents she wanted to learn to fly. She began taking lessons at 10, and was joined by her parents doing the same.

"I soloed at 12," Erde said, recalling that she soloed legally on her 16th birthday.



Bill Mitchell / Daily Sun file photo
Betty Erde stands next to photographs of her past at her home, including her aerobatics airplane which hangs in the Smithsonian.

She went on to become a champion professional aerobatic aviatrix, headlining major air shows in the 1940s and '50s, including the famous Cleveland Air Races and Miami Maneuvers. Among thrilling moments was when her small aircraft went with her onboard the original Queen Mary in 1949 to represent the United States at the International Air Pageant in London and the RAF Air Show in Belfast, Ireland.

During this era of aviation history, women pilots were not accepted by airlines or the military service. Erde also was too young for the WASPS, the civilian women who ferried pilots during the war.

Once France inspired her to race cars, she found her new love.

"She's amazing," Allan Erde, a retired Navy surgeon, said about his wife, whom he married in 2005. "She has done things that normal people wouldn't do."

Ron Watson, president of Motorsports Hall of Fame of America, praised the seven race car drivers who will be inducted at the Fillmore Detroit, joining 167 other racers already enshrined.

"On land and in the sky, the Class of 2008 represents race wins and championships in every series in America and beyond," Watson said.

Erde's latest award marks the 10th time the Villager will be inducted into a Hall of Fame. She was inducted into the national Aviation Hall of Fame in 2005; International Air Show Hall of Fame in 2003; National Corvette Hall of Fame in 2001; Florida Sports Hall of Fame in 1997; International Women in Aviation Pioneer Hall of Fame in 1997; Florida Womens's Hall of Fame in 1994; Tampa Sports Hall of Fame in 1994; Tampa Bay Walk of Fame in 1991; and International Aerobatic Hall of Fame in 1988.

“I was really quite surprised when the contacted me,” Erde said of the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America. “This is exciting, naturally.”

As she reflected on her life, she smiled once more.

“It has been great fun,” she said, “and, of course, a great ride.”