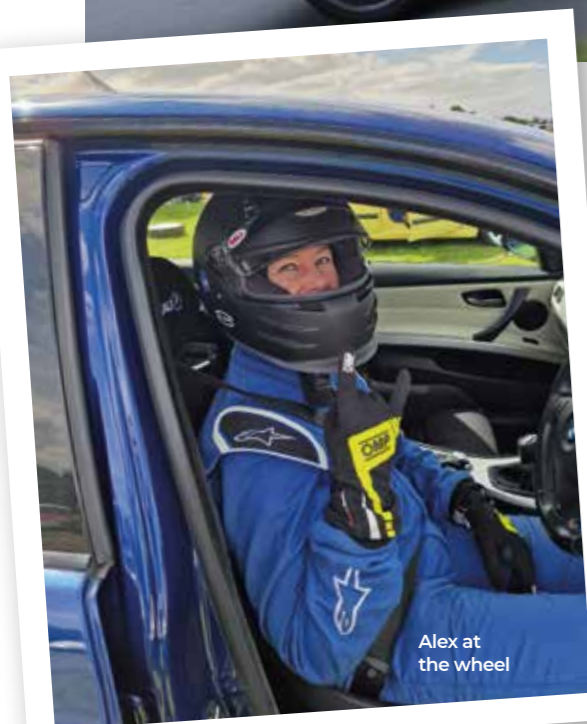


Women in the fast lane

Motorsport may be overwhelmingly dominated by men, but these two women have been getting a taste for speed through a special new programme. By **Jane Yettram**



Alex feeling the need for speed in her BMW



Alex at the wheel

When 66-year-old Hazel Petite pulled up in the car park of the hill-climb race track, she looked around and thought, 'Oh my God, why am I doing this?' Everyone else arriving seemed to be young enough to be her daughter. But then she started chatting to the person who'd parked next to her – and it turned out to be Helen Allen, chair of the British Women Racing Drivers Club (BWRDC), organiser of the new women-only programme. 'I said to her, "I'm so worried. What if I make a fool of myself?" But Helen was lovely and welcoming, instantly putting me at my ease.'

Hazel, who describes herself as always having been a bit of a car nut, had never tried motorsport before. But when she heard about the opportunity at Harewood Hillclimb, she couldn't turn it down.

For Alex Moore, 48, getting behind the wheel of a racing car had been a childhood dream. 'I've never known a time when I didn't want to be a driver,' she says. 'The very first letter I ever wrote asking for work experience was to Williams-Renault – and I got a very nice, very short letter back saying no! I'm of the generation that was told girls can't do that. So *this* girl didn't do that for a long time.'

A few years ago, however, Alex discovered that some racing venues hold track days where you can try it out. With some trepidation, she went a few times. 'I wanted to try hill climbing too, but

didn't have anyone to go with. So my ambition ended up stalling for eight years.'

Then Alex spotted a Facebook post about the BWRDC taster day at Harewood. 'I wasn't sure whether to go. Then I said to myself, "Listen, this is your opportunity. If you don't do this now, you never will."' And Alex, like Hazel, is very glad she took the plunge.

SOUL SISTERS

Alex's nerves started to fade as soon as she arrived. 'The BWRDC members did a sterling job of making sure that the minute we walked in we were embraced by this community of awesome women,' says Alex. 'I've always wanted to make contact with other women with a similar interest, so it was lovely to walk into a room of others interested in motorsport. It was like a cold drink on a hot day. They also made sure we had lots of coffee and cake – just the things you need to feel even more comfortable. And then they began with a really informative briefing.'

After the briefing, women were put into small groups and allocated an instructor. 'Each group walked the course with their instructor,' says Hazel. 'Ours, Sarah Bosworth, was wonderful. She was funny and interesting and had actually won events on the Harewood course. She pointed out all the corners, the brake points, the clipping points – the part of a turn when you're closest to the kerb. She answered all our questions and I soon found out that everybody felt nervous just like me. We were all in the same boat.'

IN THE DRIVING SEAT

The next step was putting on helmets and getting out on the hill climb. 'Being me, the first thing I did when I got into the car was hit my head on the door as I wasn't used to having a helmet on,' laughs Hazel. 'The first few times, the instructor came in the car too, giving advice about how to drive the

course. When I got to the end, I was just so excited!'

It was the same for Alex. 'For our first couple of runs, Tracey Wise, my group instructor, came with us. As the day went on, we had more and more runs on our own, but with Tracey looking from the top of the hill and encouraging, controlling and instructing as necessary.'

'It's an amazing feeling going alone for the first time. We were told to follow the lines we'd been taught and to perfect that before trying to go any faster. By concentrating on the smoothness and the lines and the technique run after run, you naturally go a bit faster each time. But you're not trying to go all out, you're just learning the craft. It sounds fanciful, but for me the experience turns into shapes and colours and movements. It's a really peaceful feeling.'

Hazel agrees. 'They don't expect you to go at speed. The whole point of the day is to learn how to race a car, how to take the neatest lines, not to accelerate if your wheels aren't straight, how to use the gears, when you should brake, when you shouldn't brake...'

GIRLS ON SCREEN

Participants were also videoed to help them polish their skills – and the encouragement between the women was wonderful to see. 'Afterwards, we were able to look at clips of us all going round the course,' says Alex. 'When we saw someone else do well, all heads swivelled towards her and people said, "Oh that's so good – I'm going to try that next time!''

For BWRDC, making Into Speed women-only was important. 'We aimed to create a safe environment for women to build their confidence and enable them to ask the questions they may not have the courage to do in a mixed environment,' explains Helen Allen.

For Hazel – who says many people have shown surprise at a woman in her 60s taking up motorsport – this was a big selling point. 'My husband, though, has been really encouraging, and my son thinks it's great. He keeps saying to people, "Do you know what my mum's doing?" They're both chuffed about it.' Plus, adds Hazel, grinning, 'I also like the fact that it's been a bit like cocking a snook at the blokes!' ▶

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Cohort of 2024 at the taster day, including Hazel (front row far left) and Alex (back row third left)

Jeff Bloxham; Lizzie Dudley; Danny Walton



BWRDC's Helen Allen and Vice Chair Caroline Ryder