

Heiress taking unusual career path in NHRA



The daughter of billionaire John Paul DeJoria, Alexis could have had her choice of what to do with her life. (Mark J. Rebilas/US Presswire)

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Andro, a Texas A&M grad, spent nearly 12 years at the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, covering the Texas Rangers and Nascar. He has covered everything from the Daytona 500 to the Cotton Bowl. During the Texas Rangers auction, his updates helped constitute the No.1 trending topic on Twitter.

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(Mark J. Rebilas/US Presswire)

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DALLAS — Not many race car drivers celebrate victories with a trip to the south of France.

There probably aren't many who could even find the south of France on a map.

Then again, few — if any — have had the kind of upbringing Alexis DeJoria had.

The daughter of billionaire John Paul DeJoria, Alexis could have had her choice of what to do with her life. She could have done nothing at all.

That's not the kind of person Alexis is, though. She grew up with a love for speed, and she's now reached the top level of the NHRA. She's earned her stripes, too.

Instead of taking the path-easiest traveled, Alexis has worked her way up through the ranks in the NHRA. That climb continues this weekend at the Texas Motorplex in Ennis, where Alexis will make her debut in the NHRA Nitro Funny Car class piloting the Tequila Patron Toyota Camry for Kalitta Motorsports.

She'll do so with plenty of eyes on her, which aren't always associated with the NHRA. At her launch party Thursday night in Dallas, there were more than 30 media credentials issued for the cocktail-attire affair. Barbara Walters also has a camera crew tailing Alexis and her father for an upcoming television show.

All of the outside stuff is fine with Alexis, but she doesn't want it to keep her from his primary goal — getting in her Funny Car and winning races.

"It's just a fantastic sport to be involved in," said Alexis, who street raced with her friends as a teenager in California. "I love racing. I grew up around fast cars. It felt right. It felt natural to me. It's something I was passionate about."

Passionate enough that Alexis didn't take the easy way to the Funny Car series. She's been driving in the lower NHRA classes since 2005. Since 2009, she's co-owned and operated her own team and has had her ups and downs. She won an event in 2006, but didn't meet with immediate success when she moved up to the Top Alcohol Funny Car class in 2007. She had a big crash in 2009 and didn't win an event until a breakthrough victory at the Northwest Fall Nationals last month.

That victory made her just the second female to ever win a national Top Alcohol Funny Car race. That was the event she followed up with a trip to France, one she said was already planned.

Alexis' father has no problems about his daughter straying away from the glamorous for her passion. He's the founder of the John Mitchell Systems hair product line and is the owner of the company that produces Patron tequila, which was flowing at the Thursday party.

"She does this extremely well, and I'm 100 percent behind my daughter in whatever she does," said DeJoria, whose worth was estimated at \$4 billion by Forbes. "I'm very proud. She won a national event in a dragster. She won a national event in the alcohol Funny Car. This is just the beginning. She is going to be a champion."

Statements like that don't just boost the confidence of his daughter; it's also big to the

NHRA itself. Having DeJoria racing in the top division of the sport is huge. Not only does she bring a new sponsor to the sport in Patron, she also opens up the NHRA to an audience that might not have had any idea of what a drag strip looked like before DeJoria entered the picture.

"We've always said that at the NHRA the biggest problem we have is with awareness," NHRA president Tom Compton said. "When we bring people out to the racetrack and they see what we have to offer, it's like nothing they've ever seen and they're hooked. Any time you have a chance to bring a new audience in, it's huge. It is a different group with Paul Mitchell and Patron tequila and all the different entertainment people he (John Paul DeJoria) knows."

John Paul DeJoria has already introduced some of his friends to the world of the NHRA, and it hasn't been hard to make them fans.

"It's fun and it's exciting when people are exposed to it because they realize how fun and exciting it is," DeJoria said. "You'd be amazed how many people are at the race track who come up to me when I'm watching Alexis and say 'I love Patron.' We know this will also expand our marketing and our sales. We also profess about drinking and drinking responsibly."

Alexis doesn't try to hide her red-carpet past. All you have to do is look at her Web site to know she didn't have the kind of upbringing most other drag racers do.

There are plenty of photos of Alexis at the track, but there are also pictures of her with actor Peter Fonda, on the red carpet for a movie premiere with Adam Sandler and posing for Paul Mitchell ads.

"I've spent a lot of times on both sides of the track," said DeJoria, 33. "I've gotten my hands dirty and I've been on red carpets. It's been such a great balance. It's made for an interesting life. I know it's a little different. Racing is very prestigious and it's a great sport to get involved with.

The focus of her life now is winning, which she knows won't be easy. The Funny Car class is one of the deepest in the NHRA, led by 15-time champion John Force. Alexis has the benefit of racing for one of the greatest racers in the sport in Connie Kalitta. She also comes into the series prepared. She's been licensed to drive in the series since 2010, but has spent the last year testing her new car while racing in the Top Alcohol series.

Alexis knows it won't be easy to win in the series, but she's prepared to put in the work necessary to make it happen.

"I hope to qualify at every race," said DeJoria, who commutes back and forth from her home in California to the team's shop in Ypsilanti, Mich. "I want to go rounds.

Eventually I want to win. I definitely want to win a championship. I'm not here for the fame and fortune. I want to win."

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