

She sees green, goes ... 195 mph

Over lunch at a Tampa restaurant, none of the diners sneak glances at Karen Stoffer, even though she's wearing a leather jacket and a shirt bearing the requisite sponsor logos. No one approaches for an autograph. No



**Peter
COUTURE**
tbt*
COLUMNIST

doubt, she'd gladly sign.

That's because Stoffer, who is at once engaging and down to earth, upholds a drag racer's reputation for being approachable. And she's not shy about tweaking her interviewer. "Good thing we're not writing an article about you!" Stoffer laughs when a reporter loses his train of thought.

Stoffer, 44, competes in Pro Stock Motorcycle, one of the NHRA's four professional classes. She was in town Thursday to make appearances for her sponsor, insurer Geico Powersports, on the eve of the Gatornationals. The Gainesville event opens her season.

Why,

she is asked, does drag racing seem to attract more female and minority competitors?

Maybe, Stoffer says, because it's a concept we all experience in our daily driving. "You see a light, you go, you drive, you stop."

But it's not that easy.

Stoffer has to leave the starting line without fouling and drawing a red light. She must be "dead-on accurate," hitting her five shift points in fewer than seven seconds down the quarter-mile.

"People ask me what it feels like," she says. "It's very much like sitting on top of an

NHRA Gatornationals

Today, qualifying, 11:30 a.m. (on tape, ESPN2, 2 a.m. Saturday); Saturday, qualifying, 11:30 a.m.; Sunday, eliminations, 11 a.m. (ESPN, 3 p.m., tape), at Gainesville Raceway.

arrow being shot by a bow. You're launched at first and then it's very smooth and then it feels just like you're floating."

Floating at almost 200 mph. And there's no harness, no roll cage.

"We have no straps, nothing holding us back," Stoffer says.

"You have to be physically strong ... enough to hold on to that bike," the svelte, 5-foot-6 Stoffer says. "You need to be strong in the

upper body the first half of the race and strong in the lower body for the second half."

That's because if the motorcycle were to drift, it's likely to happen later in the run. You have to put your weight down on the

foot pegs — hard — to help correct the bike.

That brings up the ever-present question in motorsports: the risk.

Stoffer, who has five career victories, suffered a serious injury in 2005. And here's the odd thing: It happened in the pits.

"We were done racing, were loading up and a faulty, little 98-cent part (failed). The (hauler) door came down on top of me and pinned me underneath it."

Stoffer's pelvis was broken, she had internal bleeding and several other injuries.

On the track, Stoffer trusts her crew chief and husband, Gary, to keep her Suzuki in top condition.

Stoffer, a native of Southern California, grew up a block away from Gary. But they didn't start dating until she was out of high school. The couple married while in their 20s and have even competed against each other on the track. They now live in Nevada, where, when she's at home, Stoffer can hop on her four-wheeler and be off-road immediately.

So, you ask one last question: Does she ride a motorcycle on the street?

"Out on the street there's so many variables," she says.

"It's a little too dangerous."



Stoffer says it's like "being shot by a bow."



GEICO Powersports Motorcycle Racing