

Female Drivers Hit the Field at ATA's Super Bowl of Safety

What better place for the American Trucking Associations' (ATA) to hold their Super Bowl of Safety but the City of Champions, Pittsburgh, PA. The 72nd Annual ATA National Truck Driving Championships and 1st Annual National Step Van Driving Championships kicked off on August 18-22, 2009 at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center. This is the trucking industry's premier safety event which showcases the extraordinary achievements of professional men and women truck drivers nationwide.

These programs inspire tens of thousands of professional drivers to study intensely, practice continually, and operate 12 months accident-free for the privilege of competing. This year, despite the difficult economy, there was a record number of competitors and attendees in Pittsburgh, home to the award winning Pittsburgh Steelers and Pittsburgh Penguins, a city that was truly the perfect venue for this large gathering of drivers, judges, family and friends.

Professional drivers will tell you that they are drawn to the Championships by the spirit of competition and by the prestige of being named the "best of the best." Many drivers compare the National Competitions to the Olympics or the Super Bowl, where they come not only to win but revel in the camaraderie with their fellow drivers and the excitement of the competitions. In addition to First, Second and Third Place titles, drivers vie for the Professional Excellence Award, the Vehicle Condition Award, the Rookie of the Year Award and the ultimate designation—The Grand Champion Award.

There were 415 competing drivers from all 50 states who qualified as State Champions and advanced to the Nationals. Among these MVPs were seven women Champions who competed in this highly stressful, predominantly male competition that included eight categories of trucks and step van, a new competition this year.

ATA's Safety Management Council Executive Director, Susan Chandler, remarked why the National Step Van Driving Championships was added this year "The Committee recognized that competition inspires safety. Creating Step Van Championships promised to influence a whole new group of professional drivers to strive for excellence and operate accident free. It currently is a two-year trial to determine if there is sufficient interest within the industry to support it, although with this year's successful kick off, we are confident participation will grow significantly next year." Two women drivers competed in this new competition—Danielle Carbonneau of FedEx Ground, Vermont and Theresa Spencer of A & A Express, Inc., South Dakota.



PITT OHIO EXPRESS, a long-time member of the American Trucking Associations and headquartered in Pittsburgh, PA, was proud to be one of the corporate and equipment sponsors. PITT OHIO also had judges at the Super Bowl of Safety to referee the State Champions competing at Nationals. One of the PITT OHIO judges, Ron Uriah, Vice President of Safety and Risk Management, had this to say about the female contestants who participated this year: "It was great to see so many women qualify at this level. They are an inspiration for future women to join the trucking industry."

Susan Chandler proudly commented on the seven women drivers who took the field at ATA's Super Bowl of Safety. "We are always thrilled to see women competing at the State and National level. Trucking is a demanding career and not often chosen by women. To have seven who not only selected professional truck driving as a career but who committed to being so exceptional in their field that they qualified to come and compete at the Super Bowl of Safety – wow – that's an accomplishment. We hope these talented ladies will inspire a whole generation of female competitors."

All contestants participated in three challenging tests, trying to earn the highest number of points for their respective classes of competition. The demanding tests included a written exam, pre-trip inspection, and driving skills test. The drivers had to watch out for many obstacles, particularly the rubber ducks. They skillfully maneuvered up to 75 foot long trucks through a secret driving test with an obstacle course filled with strategically placed gates, cones, and rubber ducks, carefully driving their trucks as closely as possible without contact.



Two of the seven women competing in the flatbed category were Rookies from two states that have the least amount in common when driving on America's highways. Leah M. Thiele from Carlile Transportation Systems, Inc., Alaska and Jettylynn (Jetty) K. Rose from Hawaii Legislative State Services, Hawaii, were strangers until they met in the Flatbed bullpen at the Championships. Each of them expressed a great camaraderie among their peers and a respect for one another. They did their best as each got experience under their belts.

Leah and Jetty's career paths were as different as their home states. Leah started her career by going to hair school to become a hair stylist and then ended up moving into operating heavy equipment where she received her commercial driver's license (CDL). "It was the middle of winter and I couldn't find a job in the heavy equipment industry so I took a job driving a truck. I just fell in love with it," said Leah. Jetty on the other hand grew up with her family already in the trucking industry but she did not start out driving. "A lot of my family opened the door to introduce me to trucking but I started out as a vault manager at a bank. Then I decided that I wanted to drive a truck and I love it!" said Jetty.

Leah and Jetty enjoy the fact that as a driver they are able to visit different places, meet different people, and just the overall experience. Jetty said "Plus, you can't get lost if you are a truck driver." Leah adds, "The money you earn and the fun you have cannot be beat."



Jettylynn (Jetty) K. Rose, Hawaii



Leah M. Thiele, Alaska

Both ladies placed in their State Championships which earned them the right to compete at the National Competition, as Rookies. In fact, this trip to Nationals was very exciting for Jetty as she is the first female driver from Hawaii to compete at this level. Jetty said, "I practiced a lot on the weekends and after work. I wasn't sure what to expect."

Competing at the National level there are many skill tests they must complete and the first one for everyone is the Pre-Trip Inspection. "I was nervous," said Leah, "It was a little frustrating because you only get eight minutes. You need to find five major defects and then up to ten minor defects."

As Rookies to the competition, neither of them had been driving very long for either of their companies. They both remember their first day when they got behind the wheel as being a little nerve racking. Leah said, "I was really nervous going down to the port to get freight off of the barge. You had to back the trailers in and I remember some of the drivers around me getting frustrated but I did it and didn't allow them to make me too nervous. It takes time but was a good experience." Jetty had the same type of experience with some veteran drivers being a little impatient, "You just need to gain that experience," she said, "it just doesn't come to you."

Their biggest frustration as a driver really comes from other smaller cars on the road. Jetty said, "The small cars don't know we can't see them and they will try to go around you." "Yes," adds Leah, "they come up right next to you so they can try to sneak past you."

Leah and Jetty both encourage women to go out there and become a truck driver. "There are so many different driving jobs," says Leah, "You can haul dirt, drive over the road, or drive buses. The pay is good and you meet interesting, different people on the road." Jetty added "Set high standards and goals for yourself. Just go for it! There are good opportunities when you become a truck driver." "If you become a truck driver and you do that, it proves that you can do anything, so it opens a lot of doors," said Leah.

Since this was both Leah and Jetty's first trip to Nationals, they were fascinated by how many people collected pins from all the 50 states. "It is a huge thing here," said Leah, "People have books and they try to collect all 50 states."

“Yeah, everyone is coming up to both of us and asking for pins of our states since we are the most difficult state pins to get. We didn’t know about it so we did not have any pins for them,” said Jetty.

Overall they both had a great experience at the Championships. “It was overwhelming but getting to meet everyone was so fun. Pittsburgh has been a great city and everyone has been so welcoming from the ATA staff to all the competitors,” said Jetty. Leah adds, “It has been so much fun! We are all playing Monopoly in the bullpen while we wait. Even though we are all competing against one another, we get along like one big happy flatbed family.”

Their final thoughts on being two of the seven women competing at The National Truck Driving Championships are that women can really do anything. “Go all the way and do as much as you can and go as far as you can. A year ago I started as a straight truck driver and now I drive a tractor trailer,” said Leah. Jetty adds, “Men, you better watch out! We are going to do everything!”

A more seasoned veteran to the Straight Truck class was Karen Roderick from FedEx Ground, Connecticut. This was Karen’s 4th year competing at the State level and her 2nd year to qualify for the Nationals. She placed 22nd of 49 (score of 251 versus high semi-final score of 370).



Karen explained to us that she was “tricked” into competing at the State levels four years ago which eventually led her here to the Super Bowl of Safety. “My Safety Director had asked me to participate but I never thought I would be able to do it. One day he had me sign some paperwork and the next thing I knew I was going to States to compete. It was the best thing I ever did. The first year I did the State competition I placed third, the second year I took first place that is when I had my first trip to Nationals, then last year I took second and now this year I am here again competing in my second National Championship. This has given me so much confidence.” Even though this is Karen’s fourth year competing and second at Nationals, she is always nervous. “You always feel there is a lot to prove here. It is wonderful to see more female drivers competing.”

Karen has been driving for about 20 years and has logged about 1.3 million miles. She started out driving school buses and then set out to drive tractor trailers. “It was a personal challenge that I set for myself to see if I could do it and here I am,” said Karen. “My biggest accomplishment has been pulling doubles and then when someone passes me and gives me a thumb’s up, it is very rewarding,” she adds.

If any female has an interest in driving a truck, Karen thinks they should just go for it. “Don’t let someone talk you down. I love it, being out there, being in control, doing my job, I know what I want to do, it’s me and I am the boss.” Karen’s advice for all of those women drivers who may be afraid to compete, just go for it...you can do it. “Once you do it, it is in your blood, it is in mine. I have two daughters and they like the fact that their mom is a truck driver and competing at this National level. In fact, they bought me a bumper sticker which reads ‘My Mom Beat Your Dad’. I think that says it all,” Karen said.

The other two lady contenders who competed with Karen were Darlene Baal of South Dakota (4-Axle) and Nikole Barnum of Lynden Transport, Inc., Arkansas (5-Axle - Rookie).

A recent ATA study indicates that there is an estimated 3.4 million truck drivers on the road. At present, women make up only 5% of truck drivers, but that number is growing at a steady pace. This is a great industry where we need to encourage more women to become involved. These seven women are all an inspiration to many of our young women to pursue a career in trucking. Thank for doing the industry proud and good luck next year!

The National Truck Driving Championships are an excellent way to encourage safe driving habits, instill professional pride, and increase commitment and retention. If you are interested in competing in the National Truck Driving Championships or would like additional information, we suggest you check out ATA’s website: <http://www.truckline.com/Federation/Councils/slpmc/NTDC/Pages/Default.aspx>, call 703.838.1919 or e-mail smc@trucking.org.

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