

**Weekender**

Torque of the town

Molly Taylor has her sights on rally driving's top prize, writes **Liz Swanton**.

EVER SINCE MOLLY TAYLOR HAS BEEN old enough to tell a gear shift from a drive shaft, she's had a big thing for driving fast. We're talking dirt-flying vroom, taking hazardous curves and tearing through treacherous terrain at high speed. You can see it in this speed demon's sparkling blue eyes, which light up like a dashboard as she tries to explain the thrill of "rallying", a motor race contested against the clock on closed roads, usually through ever-winding, ever-undulating forested landscapes.

"I love the feeling of being able to control a car right on its limit of grip," enthuses this 56-kilo, 169-centimetre dynamo. "It's very addictive. I also love the changing nature of the conditions you're up against. Every minute is different."

Now the No. 1 female rally driver in Europe, after winning the inaugural FIA European Rally Championship Ladies' Trophy last year, this 25-year-old from Sydney, who is also a qualified personal trainer, is causing quite a buzz in European motor sport. To put her achievement into perspective, it's like winning the motoring equivalent of the women's singles at Wimbledon.

Then again, when you learn about Taylor's bloodline, it appears she was born to rule the rally track. She is the daughter of rally-driving royalty – her mother is four-time Australian champion co-driver Coral Taylor and her father Mark is also a successful former driver who ran a rally school at the time Molly took up the sport. And her grandfather is Norm Fritter, a former around-Australia trials driver.

Despite this impressive pedigree, the road to success for Molly Taylor hasn't been perfectly paved. After winning the NSW two-wheel-drive rally championship, Taylor decided, at the age of 20, to move to the UK to further her motoring career, but two days before she was due to leave, the company that had promised her sponsorship dollars pulled the pin. "I think I was still crying when I got on the plane. Then I got over there and I had to live as cheaply as possible because suddenly I was funding my rallies all by

myself. I was working about five different jobs."

Taylor spent her entire first year in the UK living in a barn, "breathing a constant cloud of grain dust and trying to sleep through the sound of the harvester". Her bathroom and kitchen, which amounted to a camping stove on a trestle table, were rudimentary.

There's an audible shudder at the memory of the first car she bought in Britain. "We probably paid about a thousand dollars for it, and as they say – you get what you pay for. It was my recce car when I went to rallies and had to check out the route, but it was also the car that was supposed to get me to work, and there were plenty of days when I wondered if I would get there."

Against the odds, Taylor triumphed. Two seasons in the fiercely contested British Rally Championship netted her a fifth and third in the points tally for her class, and she also took out the title as British Ladies Champion for two years. These results led to Taylor winning a scholarship for the World Rally Championship through the Pirelli Star Driver Shootout in

2010, and she eventually moved to Italy to work more closely with her manager, Pier Liberali, and BP Racing, which maintains her car, a Citroën DS3 R3T. For the last two years she competed in the Championship's European series, where her successes led to her becoming the world's top-ranked female rally driver. Her goal is now to step up and compete in the Junior World Rally Championship series.

"My family would say that I'm as stubborn as a mallee bull, and I suppose I am," admits Taylor. "But I prefer to think of myself as single-minded, dedicated, focused and competitive – it's more positive."

BEFORE HER LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE INTERNAL combustion engine, Taylor was fascinated with horsepower – the original form of it. When the family moved to Arcadia, on the north-western outskirts of Sydney, Taylor was able to take up horse riding, at which she excelled, taking part in cross-country eventing.

She believes the responsibility of looking after a horse while boarding at New England Girls School in Armidale taught her priceless lessons in self-discipline. "When you have a horse, you have to look after it every day," she says. "Starting at 6am in an Armidale winter when the water in the horse trough is frozen is a tough gig, and that was before I started my school work."

As she approached driving age, Taylor began working at her father's rally school. A friend offered her a car to compete in some local races and she finished first in class in her first event. "Suddenly I had two hobbies that both needed an enormous amount of time and effort," she recalls. "Mum and Dad made me realise one had to go. I chose rallying, but that meant selling my beautiful horse."

There's still a catch in the voice when she recalls this, but Taylor is nothing if not pragmatic. She used the funds from the sale to buy a Toyota Celica rally car and went on to win the NSW two-wheel-drive rally championship. She then did two seasons in the Australian Rally Championship, winning another championship, before moving to the UK.

When she's not competing, Taylor is in the workshop helping her team service her cars, boasting that she is as much a grease monkey as the men. "A big part of the appeal of rallying is the fact that it's a real team sport," she says.

Competing and travelling to events doesn't leave a lot of spare time, and there's also her fitness regimen – Taylor laughs that running and cycling at least allow her to do some sightseeing.

"Physically, a rally car isn't as demanding as a formula one car," she explains. "However, you are dealing with extreme heat, very long days and always being on the go. It's important to not get physically fatigued, because it will affect your ability to concentrate and make good decisions in the car. There isn't room for error."

She is now eyeing a world title. "Winning the European Ladies title is very valuable because it will help me continue up the ladder," Taylor says. "I have to be honest, though – I don't think I will ever be completely satisfied with a 'Ladies' title ... it has to be the main one for me." **GW**

as a mallee bull, but I prefer to think of myself as dedicated – it's more positive.

”

Motor head: (clockwise from above) Molly Taylor has motor racing in her blood; competing in the Sibiu Rally Romania; as the winner of the Barum Czech Rally Zlin 2013.



“

My family would say I'm as stubborn

