

Dress, **Sau Lee**, sau-lee.com; earrings, **Birks**,
maisonbirks.com; shoes, **Christian Louboutin**,
christianlouboutin.com

Wardrobe styling by Amber Watkins / Makeup by Leandro Avanco
Hairstyling by Janet Jackson / Nails by Naomi Misu



Grace and Grit

BY SYDNEY LONEY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LUIS MORA

Asian Canadian Samantha Tan is changing the face of sports car racing—and paving the way for the next generation of women drivers

Racing suit, helmet and shoes, Tan's own;
earrings, Birks, maisonbirks.com



As soon as Samantha Tan puts on her helmet and gets into her carbon-fibre-clad BMW M4 GT3 race car, there is quiet

She likes to get behind the wheel 10 minutes before she's signalled out onto the track. She closes her eyes and listens to her heartbeat; she feels the five-point seatbelt hug her body; she reminds herself of all the times she has succeeded, that she has what it takes. And then, in a blurred burst of speed and sound, she's off, roaring around the track, racing for first.

At 28, Tan has already made a name for herself as both a driver of the GT World Challenge racing series and team owner of Samantha Tan Racing. For her, it all comes back to the thrill of putting the pedal to the metal. "The experience of speed in a car makes me feel the most like me, the most free," she says. "It's a feeling that I can't replicate anywhere else, and it's what got me into racing."

Unlike Formula 1 racing, which uses open-wheel single-seater cars, and NASCAR, which uses custom-built stock cars, the GT World Challenge involves sports cars that have been specially designed for the track. Tan is renowned in GT World Challenge racing circles for being the first Asian woman to win a major international endurance racing championship—including the 2021 Dubai 24H race—and she disrupts the white-male-dominated circuit every time she slides into the driver's seat. In October of this year, she won her first GT3 championship title, and had eight wins and four podiums in her debut 2025 International Motor Sports Association season. She's also the global ambassador for BMW M Motorsport. All of this despite the naysayers.

Tan was born in Gormley, Canada, to Asian immigrant parents—her mother, Sarah Khoo, is Malaysian Chinese, and her father, Kenneth, is Filipino Chinese. Tan went from being the only Asian kid in her class to the only Asian woman in the paddock at the racetrack. She's heard all the stereotypes, from other drivers and race fans alike: Asians can't drive. Women can't drive. Asian women can't drive. If she made a mistake on the track, it was because she was a woman and didn't belong there in the first place. Small wonder the tagline on her website is "Keep pushing." Says Tan, "Living between different intersections of race, culture and gender has given me this incredible opportunity to define myself and success on my own terms. And that's really how I forged, I think, my own path in motorsport and in life."

Tan has also been attacked on social media, where she's been accused of being more of a model than a race car driver. It's a common (and tiresome) refrain reserved for women athletes who excel in male-dominated sports while simultaneously embracing fashion and beauty. But whether she's in her race suit or on the red carpet, Tan's posts are carefully calculated to show the world that you can be pretty and feminine and still drive a race car at 290 kilometres an hour. She's learned how to handle the haters. "I've gotten to a point where I can use my social platform to prove people wrong. And nothing feels better than proving your haters wrong and challenging the stereotypes that are out there," she says. She admits, though, "there are still days when [the comments] hurt more than others."

This page: Tan, inside her 2016 BMW M4 GTS, a rare model that is one of only 828 units produced in the world. Right: The exterior of the M4 GTS



This page: Pants and top, **Wynn**, wearwynn.com; earrings and bracelet, **Fendi**, fendi.com; boots, **Christian Louboutin**, christianlouboutin.com. Right: Jacket and pants, Ernest W. Baker, ernest-w-baker.com; corset, **Wynn**, wearwynn.com; earrings, **Biko**, ilovebiko.com; rings and bracelet, **Birks**, maisonbirks.com

In 2024, when TikTokker Lily Kate posted a now-deleted video of herself holding a plate of pasta up to the camera while smugly declaring, “I’m not a feminist. I can actually cook,” Tan responded on her own feed. She posted a stitch of Kate’s video with clips of herself going from miniskirt to race suit to racetrack to podium, announcing: “I’m a feminist. Watch me cook.” It made a lot of people mad, she says, mostly men. “But building my social platform has been my way of giving myself a voice and creating a space where I can speak out and change the perception of women racers.”

Tan hopes to be the role model she didn’t have when she started racing. “It’s hard to believe in yourself when you don’t have an example of someone who looks like you succeeding in the sport,” she says. “I want to show girls who might want to get into it that we do belong and that there should be space for us.”

From the beginning, Tan’s biggest supporters have been her family, particularly her father, who is a car enthusiast and shares his daughter’s innate passion for racing. He bought Tan her first car when she was six years old—a red-and-yellow off-road Peg Perego Jeep powered by a 6V motorcycle battery. It could get up to 32 kilometres per hour. “It didn’t take long before she was executing perfect 180s and ‘drifting’ it whenever it snowed,” he says, laughing.

One day, he watched as Tan manoeuvred her Jeep around parked cars and piles of mulch in the driveway, and knew he was seeing something special:

“I noticed that, even though she was going all out, she never looked at the mounds of mulch or the cars coming towards her. I thought, *Wow, I never taught her that*. It took me two years of advanced driver training to learn that. Samantha did it instinctively.”

Kenneth began taking his daughter to track days and car meets, and, at 14, enrolled her in a performance driving school (he had to get special permission because of her age). Tan brought a pillow to sit on because she couldn’t see over the dashboard. At the end of the program, she rode in a race car with a professional driver, and the thrill she felt cemented her future: “In that moment, I knew that I wanted to try racing.”

Tan started driving on a track at age 13 and began racing at age 16. But a career on the track wasn’t the original plan. Both her parents had backgrounds in business and finance, and she studied economics at the University of California, Irvine, juggling classes with training, racing and trips to the podium. Racing alone didn’t feel possible to her, at least not yet.

Then, in 2017, when she was 19, Tan had her first major crash when she hit the wall during the first lap of a Pirelli World Challenge event at the Virginia International Raceway. She was travelling at a blistering 160 kilometres per hour when she wrecked her car, spraining her ankle in the process: “You’re taught to tuck your feet and arms in right before impact, but my fight-or-flight kicked in and I kept my foot on the brake.” She walked out of the car to cheers,





Left: Preparing for practice at Circuit of the Americas (COTA) in Austin, Texas, in 2024. Below: Celebrating on the podium after winning the Pro-Am class of the GT World Challenge race at COTA in 2024. Bottom: En route to victory in the 12H Mugello race in Italy in 2022.



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PHOTOGRAPHS: TOP LEFT BY CAL SPORT MEDIA / ALAMY; TOP RIGHT BY GETTY; BOTTOM BY CHRIS LAZENBY

but she says mentally it was a huge blow. “I held myself to such a high standard and thought, *I have to be flawless. I can’t make mistakes like this.* I questioned whether I was good enough to continue, whether I really belonged.” After a week of self-reflection, Tan forced herself to get back in the car. “Thank God I did,” she says. “That crash was one of my lowest points, but giving myself the grace to mess up and overcoming my self-doubt helped lead me to where I am today. I just had to pick myself up and get back in the car—because if I didn’t, the fear would just have kept on manifesting and it would have been over.”

Later that same year, Tan and her father tapped into their joint interest in entrepreneurship by launching their own team, Samantha Tan Racing, a diverse team of up to 35 members during race season. In 2019 and 2020, ST Racing won back-to-back team championships in the Pirelli World Challenge, triumphing in the race where Tan’s earlier crash had threatened to end her career. In 2021, ST Racing brought home its first endurance racing win at the 24H Dubai.

Endurance racing is a team sport timed in hours, not minutes, and is demanding on both cars and drivers. Tan’s goal is to be the first Asian woman to win 24 Hours of Le Mans. Established in 1923, it’s the world’s oldest endurance race and is part of the “triple crown” of motorsport, along with the Indianapolis 500 and the Monaco Grand Prix. Winning it is a *very* big deal. In June, Tan made her first step toward that dream with a strong debut in the Road to Le Mans

support race. “I actually got to drive the track and it was such a moment for me that I got literal goosebumps. It’s something I’ve been working towards for my entire career. It felt like my dreams were coming true,” she recalls.

To win an endurance race, everything has to go right for everyone on the team. And one of the teammates Tan relies on is Neil Verhagen, a 24-year-old American driver who enjoyed early fame as the youngest driver to win the SCCA National Championship Runoffs in 2016. He joined ST Racing in 2023, and in their first race together that year, he and Tan took their place on the podium, coming in second. Verhagen says what he likes most about racing with Tan is her mindset and motivation: “There’s so much that goes into motorsport that people don’t realize. It takes a lot, both mentally and physically, and Samantha is super dedicated to putting in the time. She works incredibly hard and what she’s done for women in motorsport is amazing.”

Like in many sports, training is grueling. Tan hits the gym at least five days a week, doing a combination of cardio and strength training. It takes a high level of fitness to operate a race car, Verhagen explains: “You need arm strength to steer and you need to put over 100 kilos of force into the brake pedal to get the car to a full stop.” Cardio is also important, he says, not just to help you withstand all the g-forces hammering your body, but because cockpit temperatures can surpass 54 degrees Celsius during a race, exacerbated by three layers of fireproof clothing.



Jacket, **Mackage**, mackage.ca; gloves, **Tom Ford**, tomford.com; tights, stylist's own; boots, **Christian Louboutin**, christianlouboutin.com; earrings, **Biko**, ilovebiko.com; rings and bracelet, **Birks**, maisonbirks.com

For Tan, the mental training is every bit as important as the physical, maybe even more so. “Unlike with other team sports, we don’t always get to practise together, and time on the track is limited and expensive,” she says. “A lot of the development and practice you get happens mentally.” The team uses simulations (like high-tech video games that include laser scans of the tracks) to prepare for race day. The night before a race, Tan lies in bed and visualizes herself driving the track. “It helps me get in the right mental focus and to remember all the little details going into the next day.”

When Tan needs to unwind, she goes for a drive in her 2011 BMW 1 Series M Coupé in Valencia orange, which she’s had since she was 15. “It’s just me in the car. It’s my moment. I like to blast my music and just clear my mind.” Not surprisingly, her playlist changes with her mood—before a race, it’s EDM, but on her quiet drives, she listens to what she calls “sad-girl” music. “I’ve been loving Laufey lately. She’s an Icelandic Chinese artist and her music is a mix of jazz and pop with some great floor songs.”

After years of trying to assimilate, Tan is increasingly tapping into her Eastern culture, from the music she plays to the clothes she wears. For red-carpet events, she favours Asian fashion labels like Hong Kong-based Sau Lee and Chinese American label 3.1 Phillip Lim. And her Chinese name, Sung Xinxin, which was given to her by her paternal grandmother, is now on her race car. “For a long time, I felt like I had to downplay my culture in order to fit in. I’ve slowly been reclaiming that part of my identity and now I’m trying to bring my culture into the things that I do. It’s about celebrating that piece of myself, because it’s a big part of who I am.”

Tan’s quest to reconnect with her roots highlights a common challenge among those living in the diaspora: finding a space where a person can fully embrace multiple cultural identities. “A lot of Asian Americans and Asian Canadians had a cultural identity crisis where we either didn’t feel Canadian enough or Asian enough. But I found that middle ground where I can celebrate my culture and not have to fit in a box of what is ‘so Canadian’ or ‘so Asian.’ I think there’s so much beauty in that and being able to celebrate [both].”

She’s also working on making her sport more accessible for everyone, regardless of cultural background or gender. In 2021, she launched an eSports team to give young talent a platform: “It’s a more cost-effective way to get into motorsport that could eventually lead to real-world opportunities.” She also sponsors Aylee Létourneau, a 10-year-old girl in Montreal whose racing career she’s helping launch. “It’s a full circle moment for me. I feel like I’ve finally gotten to where I’m able to not only support girls through my social media platform, but also financially, offering them that investment at the entry level. It’s about kicking the door open for the next generation of young women racers.”

The sport has changed a lot since the days when Tan was the only woman in the series. “It used to be very lonely, but now I’m seeing a lot of women stepping into every role and succeeding as drivers, as engineers, as team managers,” she says. “So, we’re getting there.” She’s also excited about signing her first big beauty sponsor, Olay, hoping it will be yet another way for her to challenge people’s perceptions of women in motorsport as she prepares for the 2026 racing season.

“It’s been really cool to be a part of this movement and now we just need to keep the momentum going,” she says. “We have to keep talking about it, keep platforming our stories and keep showing that women are valuable and that we belong on the track.” ●●●