# Franziska Neef
# Blinkers on? Not at Conti!

"Sometimes I feel more comfortable covered in grease under a machine than sitting at my desk," she says, laughing, and adds: "But I need to strike a balance between theory and practice." If anyone manages to accomplish that delicate balance, it's Franziska Neef, who works at the precise intersection between research and production. The 30-year-old graduate engineer is responsible for developing hot retreaded truck tires, the ContiRe. Or, in her own words: "I breathe a second life into the tires."

Her office is located in the Research and Development department, inside one of the numerous buildings on Continental's extensive location. "The nice thing is," Neef says, "that for commercial vehicle tires, none of us just works in one tiny sub-area. We are developing tires for the entire world. So the scope of each person's responsibility is much broader." She also sees this job as unique from the technical perspective. "Truck tires aren't throwaway items," she says. "I appreciate their longevity compared to car tires. They spend a very long time on the road in their first and second lives. In some regions, they have more than five lives. That is an entirely different set of challenges that we need to consider in development."

But that's not all. Each country has different practices, different climatic and geographical requirements she must take into account. One country may be characterized by cold and rainy days, whereas another country may have many dirt roads with large potholes. There are also differences in the customers' requirements for retreaded tires. In the United States, for instance, the distance a tire can cover is the sole concern. In contrast, European customers want their retreaded tires to be almost a perfect copy of a new one. "Truck tires require a very focused work," Franziska Neef confirms. "To make good tires, we simply need a better understanding of the world." It helps that her team is international. "We have an incredible number of nationalities and age groups," she says, "with a good blend of men and women. This gives us entirely fresh input when we discuss the topic with such a wide variety of people."

In fact, the young woman, who is just as comfortable in sneakers as in high heels, started out with rather different plans. Growing up in the somewhat less cosmopolitan countryside near Hanover, she rode dressage horses and wanted to study veterinary medicine. "But," she quickly clarifies, "I didn't want to spend all day clipping parakeet claws!" Indeed, she hoped to become a farm veterinarian, to help cows during calving and treat sick horses and pigs. In the end she decided against that career.
"Being a farm vet is back-breaking work, and you are never off duty. Also, if you plan on ever starting your own family, the two are difficult to reconcile."

Yet her voice does not sound tinged with much regret. With her pragmatic attitude, she had little trouble switching gears and finding another career. As a child, she helped her father with repairs around their 400-year-old family home, and developed an interest in technology. She preferred subjects with clear-cut, true-or-false answers, and chose mathematics and physics as her concentrations in the final years of secondary school. The logical next step was to study mechanical engineering. A degree in engineering would give her many more chances to achieve her goals, and – not a negligible factor these days – there was high demand for engineers.

Yet of the 44 students in her program, only two were women. Wasn't it an intimidating prospect to enter a profession dominated by men and pursue career opportunities there? Not for Franziska Neef. "I never experienced any prejudice or heard any narrow minded comments," she said. "It did take some time for some outside service providers to accept new approaches if they came from a young woman. In those cases, it just helped to repeat whatever it was a second or third time, and eventually they would take me seriously. It never posed a long-term issue."

She has been at Continental for almost ten years now. When she arrived as part of her dual study program, she could never have dreamed of leading a team of her own so soon. "It doesn't take long here to be given responsibility over products, developing product lines, major projects, employees, team management. It's a great thing." Still, she was curious about what else was out there, and at one point she took a job at another company.

"But the corporate culture there was completely different," she says. So different, in fact, that she left the company during the trial period and returned to Continental. "There are no blockers here, no attitude of 'this is the way things have always been done,'" she says, explaining the choice. "I can make a real contribution here and move in new directions. Continental is very flexible and I have fair opportunities for advancement. For me, Continental is a place where we can develop freely, where nothing really stands in our way. We're listened to and taken seriously. And that is another reason why this job is such a perfect match for me."

The engineer never left country life entirely. Her horse Romeo is boarded at a pasture on the outskirts of Hanover, and she drives there almost every evening after work to take care of her "other half", as she refers to him affectionately. It may seem like a big disconnect: on the one hand, developing tires for a living, and on the other hand, keeping such close ties to nature and her horse, but Franziska Neef doesn't see it that way. "Of course there are some differences. During the day I deal almost exclusively with men and in the evening with women. But there is also an important commonality: the smallest things can have a huge impact. Concentrated, focused attention to every detail is very important both as an equestrian and in my job. And the things I've learned in my years of dealing with horses – to be fair and open and begin each day anew – I can also apply to my work with my team."

Franziska Neef has found her niche in ContiRe development. One thing she would still really like to do is get a truck driver's license. "I would love to be able to experience the power of what we produce for myself. One time, when we were developing a tire, we got to sit in the truck with the test driver in the Contidrom. That's not something you get to experience every day. 'Feel that? Feel that? . . . It's sliding!'" She laughs. "That was really something, just seeing the relevance of our work."

In fact, she can already see its relevance every morning on the way to work. "I'm happy when I get to see my own tires on the road. Whenever you're stuck in a traffic jam – I'm sure this is normal for any truck tire developer – you just can't help looking over to the right: what kind of tires has he got? That is when you feel proud, when you see your own tire in action. It's awesome!" And she adds with a smirk: "Our retreaded tires have ContiRe on the side, so I recognize them: Every ContiRe is mine."