



Sidepodchat – The fastest Grand Prix driver ever

Christine: Welcome to the second show of a five part series, where guest writer Steven Roy brings his own words to life. Even if you read these posts when they were first published at the beginning of the year, I highly recommend giving them a listen this time round.

Steven: The fastest grand prix driver ever. This was originally written to mark the 26th anniversary of Gilles Villeneuve's death and it appeared unchanged on Sidepodcast earlier this year. For this audio version, I've made a few minor updates to keep the sense of the original.

Gilles Villeneuve died on 8th May 1982 during qualifying for the Belgian GP at Zolder. He was in a rage after being betrayed by his team mate at the San Marino GP two weeks earlier. F1 lost the greatest driver of his generation and one of its most popular drivers ever. I decided to write a few words to mark the anniversary and it turned into a bit of a monster. I could easily have written 10 times as much.

On that day the fastest grand prix driver there has ever been died. The bare statistics of Gilles Villeneuve's Formula One career are nothing special but few drivers have ever been held in such esteem by both their fans and rivals. Gilles competed for only 4 full seasons, starting 67 grands prix and winning 6. It says much about the manner in which he raced that those of us old enough have distinct memories of so many of those races. It is difficult to think of anyone having such a short career making such an impact. As a comparison Nico Rosberg will equal that number of grand prix starts at the 2009 Singapore Grand Prix.

For those who were not fortunate enough to watch his career it is difficult to understand what he did, how he did it and the effect he had on people. Nowadays we tend to think of a number two driver spending his whole career as a number two. There was a time when young drivers would have a spell as a number two before becoming a team leader. Team orders were very much the norm and in 1979 Gilles was number two to Jody Scheckter at Ferrari. Imagine Felipe Massa was the definite number two at Ferrari last season a couple of seasons ago to Räikkönen, and Räikkönen after a few seasons running near the front was on course to win the title. That is the situation we had in 1979. Now imagine a race where first practice is so wet only eight drivers decide to risk going out. Räikkönen comes in and admits he had driven so fast that he scared himself; genuinely scared himself and swears to his pit crew that no-one could possibly have gone any faster - only to be told that Massa had beaten his best time and beaten it by eleven seconds. Gilles did that to Jody at Watkins Glen.

"I scared myself rigid that day", Jody remembered. "I thought I had to be the quickest. Then I saw Gilles's time and - I still don't really understand how it was possible. Eleven seconds!"

Jacques Laffite (think Rubens Barrichello), on seeing Gilles go out, went round his pit garage urging people to come out and watch because he knew Gilles in those conditions would be something very special.

Some drivers arrive in F1 with barely a ripple while others arrive with a bang. Gilles managed to create an impression in his first practice session. He had started in snowmobile racing and won the 1974 snowmobile world championship derby. Gilles had a reputation in certain quarters of not really understanding the



technical aspects of the sport; however, while he was racing snowmobiles he designed and built a revolutionary suspension system which was subsequently copied by all the works teams.

In the 70s it was still common for F1 drivers to compete in other formulae. James Hunt entered a Formula Atlantic race in Canada along with a few other F1 drivers and was so impressed by Villeneuve he phoned McLaren and told them to sign him. Gilles won the 1976 Canadian and US Formula Atlantic Championships in a self-run, self-engineered car. His budget was so low that he couldn't even afford the entry to the race at Mosport. He won the Canadian championship again the following season.

At the time it was quite common for Formula One teams to run a third car for a young driver every now and again. McLaren signed Gilles for five races starting from the 1977 British Grand Prix. James Hunt and his teammate Jochen Mass had the new M26 and Gilles had the tried and trusted M23. Having never sat in an F1 car nor ever having seen Silverstone, Gilles came up with an innovative way to learn the circuit. He knew that this may be the only chance he had to show the F1 world what he could do and he was determined to make the most of it. He decided that the best way to learn the track was to go through each corner a little faster each lap until he spun and then he would back off a little. Initially people thought he was simply out of his depth but as soon as it became clear that he never hit anything and that he recovered each spin without fuss and set off again, people realised he was a bit special. It should be remembered that this was not the modern sanitised Silverstone with all the twiddly bits - this was the old fashioned Silverstone that Keke Rosberg lapped at 160mph a few years later.

Despite lacking experience on a scale that is incomprehensible today, and driving the old car, Gilles qualified ninth, two places ahead of Mass in the new car. That in itself is a stunning achievement. Despite his total lack of experience, and the need to create an impression, Gilles noticed the engine temperature rising during the race. Rather than carrying on and blowing up the engine, he pulled into the pits to report the problem and was delayed for two laps while the team diagnosed the problem as a faulty gauge. Gilles returned to the race setting the fifth fastest race lap and finished 11th overall. Had he ignored the problem and just carried on he would have finished 4th in an out of date car at a circuit he had never seen before. Despite this incredible performance McLaren released him from his contract and Ferrari snapped him up. Before Ron Dennis took over, McLaren gave both Villeneuve and Prost their F1 debuts and let both go.

1978 was dominated by the ground effects Lotus 79 which immediately rendered the previous season's championship winning Ferrari obsolete. While it is fair to say Ferrari struggled, Gilles scored his first podium finish, finishing third on the mighty Osterreichring and in the final race of the season he won the Canadian Grand Prix on a circuit that was soon to be renamed Circuit Gilles Villeneuve.

For 1979 Carlos Reutemann was replaced as Villeneuve's teammate by Jody Scheckter. Jody had number one status and used that to win the championship. Gilles won three races and a legion of fans. He won on Jody's home ground in South Africa and the US GP West at Long Beach early in the season. At the Italian Grand Prix Gilles sat behind Jody knowing that finishing in those positions would guarantee Scheckter the title. Gilles was outraged when after the race someone suggested he should have passed Jody. He was quoted as saying that it never crossed his mind to break his agreement but that he stared at the back of Scheckter's car willing it to break. Gilles won the final race of the season at Watkins Glen after that incredible first practice performance. Gilles was happy to stick to the terms of his contract because he knew soon he would be number one and would benefit in the same way.



It seems odd that in a year where a driver establishes himself as a regular grand prix winner and as the fastest driver in the sport, that his most memorable performance should be one in which he finished second. At the same 1977 race Villeneuve made his F1 debut, Renault introduced the turbo charged engine to the sport. In its initial guise it was notoriously unreliable and rapidly gained itself the nickname of the kettle because it boiled so often. By 1979, however, the engine was much more reliable and powerful. Appropriately at the French Grand Prix at Dijon it won its first race in the hands of Jean-Pierre Jabouille and no-one remembers it. All anyone remembers about Dijon 1979 is the titanic battle for second place between Rene Arnoux in the second Renault and Villeneuve in a totally outclassed Ferrari. Fortunately Gilles never recognised the limits of a car or let the laws of physics limit his performance and put on the most incredible driving display to wrestle second place from Arnoux. Arnoux's performance that day was very special but what Villeneuve did with that Ferrari was beyond belief.

Jacques Laffite best summed up the view of the drivers of the period when he said "I know that no human being can do a miracle. Nobody commands magical properties, but Gilles made you wonder. He was that quick." I can't imagine any current driver making similar comments about his rivals.

One of the best examples of Gilles's refusal to accept defeat or reality came at Zandvoort. He suffered a slow puncture in his rear left tyre that eventually caused him to spin off. Gilles wrestled the car back on to the track and drove it with his usual verve to the pits with the left rear wheel flailing around breaking bits of suspension and body work. When he slid to a halt in the pits he was furious that his mechanics had not fitted a new wheel. It was only when he stepped from the car and saw that there was nothing for them to attach a wheel to that he calmed down.

The Ferrari 312T5 of 1980 was a terrible car. It's really difficult to comprehend how bad it was. Suffice to say Gilles did things with it that should not have been possible but by this time that was the normal state of affairs. Scheckter managed only one points scoring finish and suffered the ignominy of being the only reigning world champion in history to fail to qualify for a race in Canada. Gilles managed 4 points scoring finishes for a total of 6 points but somehow managed to finish fifth in the race that Jody didn't qualify for. Imagine if we still had proper qualifying and Räikkönen didn't manage to do a fast enough time to qualify for the back of the grid and Massa finished fifth in that race. Unbelievable!

For 1981 Ferrari replaced the unloved 312T5 with the 126CK which housed Ferrari's first turbo. This was variously referred to as the big red Cadillac, a truck and by Gilles as a s**tbox. Enzo Ferrari believed that cars won races and drivers lost them. He was totally intolerant of any criticism of his cars by his drivers but simply laughed at Gilles's description. He knew that Gilles took that car to places it never belonged. Gilles was asked by a journalist what he thought of the car. He replied 'It is a s**tbox. I am not complaining. It is my job to drive it and I will but it is a s**tbox.' I can imagine how a few team principals would respond to a comment like that today.

Scheckter retired after the 1980 season and Gilles became the number one driver at Ferrari as he had always believed he would. His new number two was Didier Pironi who Gilles trusted implicitly, despite being warned by his wife to keep a close eye on him. Joann Villeneuve decided very quickly on first meeting Pironi that he was not to be trusted. If only Gilles had listened to his wife.

The 126CK had a very powerful engine but didn't like corners. On a straight there was nothing to touch it but it was hopeless when it came to going round any corner. As usual Gilles didn't let reality get in the way



of his adventures and won in Monaco with it. Who else could win in Monaco with a car that didn't do corners and was only good in a straight line? As Laffite said, sometimes Gilles made you wonder. Clearly he was playing by a different set of rules to everyone else.

The following race was the Spanish GP at Jarama. This race ended in yet another legendary performance. In 1981 a grand prix consisted of 26 drivers leaving a starting grid and driving unaided to the chequered flag. Proper grand prix racing in other words. Gilles won the race by doing his version of the Trulli-train except he was in first position and the train comprised positions two to five. Gilles was lightning quick down the straight but had to drive a defensive line through the corners. He didn't do it by blocking or making the now customary 'one move'. He drove a perfect, clean line lap after lap after lap and won the race despite having four faster cars on his tail for the whole race. He knew that if he made one small mistake he could drop those four positions.

Keke Rosberg best summed up Gilles attitude to racing. "To Gilles, racing was really sport, which is why he would never chop you. Something like that he'd look on with contempt. You didn't have to be a good driver to do that, let alone a great one. Anyone could do that. Gilles was the hardest b*****d I ever raced against, but completely fair. If you'd beaten him to a corner, he accepted it and gave you room. Then he'd be right back at you at the next one! Sure, he took unbelievable risks - but only with himself - and that's why I get p*****d off now when people compare Senna with him. Gilles was a giant of a driver, yes, but he was also a great man."

Nigel Roebuck commented that all drivers took risks but 'Gilles was the only one working without a safety net'.

The victory at Jarama was his last and stands as a fitting tribute to the man and the racer. He won in a car that had no right to be anywhere near the front of a grand prix. He won in a car he had described as a s**tbox because he knew it shouldn't be able to run in the positions he put it in, and he won by driving absolutely correctly and by not making a single mistake for the entire race distance.

The 126C2 of 1982 was a car capable of winning a championship and Gilles as number one knew this would be his best chance of winning a Formula One championship. Despite this he had already made up his mind to leave Ferrari. He had considered setting up his own team which gives a different perspective to Jacques Villeneuve's BAR adventure. However he was negotiating with McLaren and it was likely that he would have been Niki Lauda's team mate in 1983. The 'discussions' at times were a little too public. At one test session Ron Dennis walked out of the McLaren garage, picked up a pit board and some numbers and put it down facing the Ferrari pit showing 2.5 (meaning \$2.5 million per season). After Ron returned to the garage Gilles strolled over and took out the 2 and replaced it with a 3.

We were at the height of the FISA-FOCA war and the start of the season suffered with the drivers strike at Kyalami amongst other problems. The FOCA teams boycotted the San Marino race but the event went ahead with only the FISA teams in attendance. Gilles led followed by Pironi and Ferrari signalled to them to hold station and save the car. They were winning easily and cars were nowhere near as reliable as they are now so there was no point in taking a risk. Pironi eventually took the lead and Villeneuve re-took it. Gilles said after the race that he thought Pironi was only putting on a show for the crowd and he had expected him to honour his contract in the same way that Villeneuve had honoured his when he was number two.



However, on the last lap, Pironi dived into the lead and finished first. Gilles was livid and swore never to speak to Pironi again.

Nigel Roebuck was a close friend of Villeneuve's and tried to phone him in the days after the race. He eventually spoke to him and the conversation became the basis for his Fifth Column in Autosport on the Thursday before the Belgian Grand Prix at Zolder. It is the most chilling piece of motor racing writing I have ever seen. Gilles explained that he thought Pironi was putting on a show and that he would let him lead for a bit, pass him and slow the pace. Gilles claimed that the laps he led were several seconds slower than the laps Pironi led, backing up his argument. He said that although both drove Ferraris as far as he was concerned from now on they drove for different teams and he would treat Pironi as another opponent. He was clearly furious at the betrayal.

The Ferrari management made matters much worse by refusing to state publicly that Pironi had broken his agreement and so Gilles felt doubly betrayed. He was quite clearly not in the right state of mind to be behind the wheel of a racing car at Zolder. In 1982 we still had qualifying tyres. These were very soft tyres which lasted for one lap and in some cases less than a lap. A rule had been brought in which allowed each driver only two sets of qualifying tyres. This resulted in drivers being forced to take ridiculous risks because if they didn't get a clear lap on one of their two sets of tyres they had to make one.

Gilles may have taken more risks than anyone else but he was well aware of the dangers. "I don't have any fear of a crash," he said. "No fear of that. Of course, on a fifth gear corner with a fence outside, I don't want to crash. I'm not crazy. But if it's near the end of practice, and you are trying for pole position maybe, I guess you can squeeze the fear..." On his second set of qualifiers at Zolder, Gilles had already completed three flying laps and had been shown the in board by Ferrari, but he was still going for it because Pironi was marginally faster. He clipped the back of Jochen Mass's March and was launched into the most sickening accident I have ever seen. Gilles was pronounced dead in hospital that night.

The loss of Gilles was a huge blow to anyone with an interest in motor racing. To those that knew him the blow was enormous. I remember reading Keke Rosberg's comments about his drive past the circuit on the Monday after the race. "It's the emptiest place in the world after the race. After all that activity and intensity, there's not a soul about. It's dead. Nothing but litter. And parked out there was Gilles's helicopter. Then it hit me. Very hard."

You would not expect Jackie Stewart to be a fan of Villeneuve's as they were polar opposites in their approach to racing, but JYS recognised his ability. "Oh, I think he's superb, and I believe he'll get better and better. At the moment he still makes mistakes, misses the odd apex, gets up on a curb, uses a little too much road on the way out sometimes, but I'm being hypercritical here. His level of natural talent is phenomenal - there's real genius in his car control." Gilles received plaudits even from those who have made a career of being hard to impress. Niki Lauda said: "Gilles was the fastest racing driver, with the best talent of all of us. He was the best - and the fastest - driver in the world." A lot of people thought he was the fastest driver but to someone as analytical as Lauda he was also the best driver. Can you imagine any driver in the last 20 years saying that about a rival?

Like Nigel Roebuck when some new rule is brought into F1, one of the ways I look at it is to ask if Gilles would approve. Somehow I think he would hate the current set up. He had a very clear idea of how F1 should be. "I love motor racing," he said. "To me it's a sport, not a technical exercise. My Formula One car

would be something like a McLaren M23 with a big normally aspirated engine, 800 hp, 21 inch wide rear tyres. A lot of people say we should have narrower tires, but I don't agree because you need big tyres to slow you down when you spin. And you need a lot of horsepower to unstick big tyres, to make the cars slide. That would be a fantastic spectacle, I can tell you. We would take all the corners one gear lower than we do now, and get the cars sideways. You know, people still rave about Ronnie Peterson in a Lotus 72, and I understand that. I agree with them. That's the kind of entertainment I want to give the crowds. Smoke the tyres! Yeah! I [care about the fans], because I used to be one of them! I believe the crowd is losing out at the moment, and that's bad." If only Gilles had survived to become FIA President. I much prefer his version of F1 to Max's strategic chess match.

Gilles didn't just attack a race track without fear, he attacked all aspects of his life in the same manner. The following is from Gerald Donaldson's excellent book on Villeneuve and shows his total lack of fear and his innovative approach to problem solving.

'I flew with them in the Wolf helicopter to Fiorano for training. Every time we took off Jody left his heart on the ground and picked it up again on the way back. We were coming back to Monaco when a red light started flashing. Jody said, "What does that mean?" Gilles says, "No problem. It's not important." The light kept flashing and Gilles drops us down at the airport to go through customs out of Italy. Gilles goes into airport to sign the papers and Jody pulls out the manual and looks up flashing red lights. It means the battery is overheating and might explode. It's a warning and you've got 30 seconds to land!

Gilles comes back and Jody tears into him. "Villeneuve, the battery is kaput! You aren't gonna take off and kill us all!" Gilles says, "Take it easy, there is no problem", and we take off 3-4,000 feet. We were over the sea coming into Monaco and the light starts flashing again. Then Jody almost flies out of his chair. "Villeneuve, what the f*** are you doing? Stop!" - Because Gilles is cutting the motor off - and we're going sh, sh, sh, sh, sh - then he starts it up again. He's cooling the battery. The rotor is still turning but we drop - zzzzzz - until he starts the motor again. He cooled the battery all the way into Monaco like this and Jody is having a heart attack. He got out of that helicopter as white as sheet and said "F*** you Villeneuve, I'll never get back in that goddamn thing again!" And he didn't.'

His drives from Monaco to Maranello were as legendary as his on-track exploits. He and Pironi would take turns each to see who could keep his foot flat to the floor for the longest, without lifting, with the passenger operating the stop watch. I believe it was Scheckter who said that a normal person took 5 and a quarter hours for that journey. If you were really quick you could do it in 4 and a half. Gilles routinely did it in 3 and three-quarter hours.

Like Jimmy Clark, Gilles was a mass of contradictions. He drove without fear but never put another driver at risk. He was as competitive as any driver we have ever seen but loved by his rivals. The other drivers accepted that he was the best but because of his personality there was never any animosity toward him. He was the last true maverick but, in some ways, he was the most modern driver of his time. He was a traditionalist but capable of the most incredible innovation.

As I mentioned earlier, some people mis-interpret his antics in some of the hopeless cars Ferrari provided him with as over-driving and not understanding the technicalities of the sport. In reality the cars were rubbish so he simply took them by the scruff of their necks and forced them to do things way beyond their capabilities. As a result he did not drive nice, neat lines in them - he threw them around because that was



the only way to get speed out of them. When he had a good car he drove precisely and accurately but, unsurprisingly, it is his performances in less than stellar machinery that is etched on the memory. There are people who believe that the only way to measure a driver is by what he can do with sub-standard machinery. On that scale, as on many others, Gilles was the best there has ever been.

In the days before the fax or internet were invented, telex was the only way to communicate in writing. Effectively, a telex was a typewriter connected to a phone line. At a time when most of the drivers only thought about their cars while they were sitting in them, Gilles had a telex installed in Monaco and every day sent long messages to Ferrari's secretary with suggestions for improving the car. He not only understood the technicalities of the car well enough to come up with a never ending list of improvements, but he pushed the team into trying them in the manner of Schumacher.

It is unlikely that we will ever again see a driver like Gilles Villeneuve.

Salut Gilles. Thanks for the memories.