

Sidepodchat – Bernd Rosemeyer

Christine: This is show three of five, where Steven Roy turns his written words into an audio extravaganza. These posts were originally published at the beginning of the year on Sidepodcast.com but they are definitely worth a second airing.

Steven: Bernd Rosemeyer. Some drivers slide under the door of grand prix racing unnoticed and after serving a respectable apprenticeship get promoted into top drives. Some, like Kimi Räikkönen, fly through the junior formulae so quickly that they can only be granted a license to compete on a probationary basis. One man never drove a race car of any description before he drove a grand prix car and died a legend less than 3 years after his debut with his entire motor racing career lasting less than 1,000 days.

Bernd Rosemeyer was born in Lingen, Lower Saxony, Germany on October 14th 1909. His father owned a garage and it was here that his fascination with cars and motor bikes began. The more I learn about Rosemeyer the more he seems like a previous incarnation of Gilles Villeneuve. Like Gilles he had what appeared to be super-natural car control. Like Gilles he seemed to have no fear and like Gilles he didn't stick rigidly to the law on the road. At the age of 11 he borrowed his father's car to take some friends for a drive and when at the age of 16 he received his driving license it was quickly removed after the police took a dim view to some of his stunt riding on his motor bike.

After gaining some speedway experience he started road racing with a private BMW motor bike in 1933. Like Gilles mere details like money were irrelevant but fortunately his brother Job acted as his manager and dealt with contracts and the like. He started winning almost immediately and for the 1934 season he was signed by the DKW motor cycle team. DKW was one of four companies which combined to form Auto Union.

For the 1935 season Auto Union were looking for new drivers for their fearsome rear engine grand prix cars which were designed by Ferdinand Porsche. 12 drivers were selected to take part in trials on the Nürburgring. Rosemeyer turned up late dressed in a suit without overalls and when asked why he was so dressed he replied that this was an important day for him so the suit seemed appropriate.

He got in the car wearing the suit and clearly impressed enough to be selected as a junior driver. Bear in mind that experienced drivers struggled to deal with the Auto Unions which handled very oddly as a result of their rear engine layout and not only had Rosemeyer never driven any kind of racing car but the car he drove that day had ten times the power of any machine he had ever driven. In some ways it is surprising that he ever got a second run. Team manager Willy Walb went out to Muehlenbach corner to observe the trials. Rosemeyer on his first lap turned in at full speed and spun out requiring the team manager to throw himself in a ditch for his own protection. Being a fast learner the next time round Rosemeyer took the corner perfectly. He was soon able to match the times of the very experienced Hans Stuck.

Rosemeyer practically lived at the factory from the second the ink was dry on his contract. He spent his time asking endless questions to anyone who would listen to him. He had a huge hunger for knowledge about his new career. The first race of the 1935 season was at Avus in Berlin. Avus consisted of two parallel straights (sections of autobahn) of about 2.5 miles in length joined by a hairpin at the each end. Avus was

fearfully quick and definitely not the place for a rookie to make his debut. But Bernd would not be put off by conventional thinking. He started leaving notes around the office for Walb with comments like “Why is Rosemeyer not driving?” and “Where is the car for Rosemeyer?”. Walb eventually relented and gave him a car for the race believing that if, despite all his warnings, he wanted to risk his life then so be it. Despite never having raced a car of any kind, and driving a car that could scare the bravest of men on a circuit that his team manager didn’t think he was ready for, Rosemeyer qualified third but a broken engine put him out of the race.

The next race was the Eifelrennen on the Nürburgring. Rosemeyer was the fourth driver in the team and was supposed to back up the more experienced drivers however all of them had problems and Rosemeyer was let off the leash to chase the leaders. This he did with gusto catching and passing Chiron and Fagioli all the while power sliding the car around the Nurburgring at angles never before seen. Only the Mercedes of Rudolf Caracciola stood in his way but not for long. To the amazement of all, not least Caracciola, Rosemeyer passed him for the lead with three laps to go. Three 14 mile laps. Caracciola the most successful driver of the time sat on the tail of the unknown junior driver unable to pass. On the last lap Rosemeyer mistimed a gear change and Caracciola was through and went on to win by a couple of seconds. On the run from the finish line to the pits Rosemeyer was devastated. He drove one handed while his other fist pummelled the car.

On the basis of that drive he was promoted to full time third driver behind Hans Stuck and Achille Varzi.

Another parallel with Villeneuve is that driving in the manner Rosemeyer did coupled with his lack of experience resulted in damage to his car but like Gilles the mere detail that the car was a bit bent was not going to make him stop, or slow down. A good example came in the Coppa Acerbo at Pescara in Italy. Rosemeyer started from the back row but was soon in second place and catching Tazio Nuvolari’s lead. Pushing the car beyond its limits resulted in Rosemeyer leaving the track and bursting both rear tyres. After a quick pit stop to replace the rear wheels he continued at unabated pace, locked his brakes and again left the track. The car vaulted over a ditch and passed through the gap between a telegraph pole and a bridge parapet. Despite the rear of the car being badly bent he carried on and finished second to his team mate Achille Varzi. Ferdinand Porsche is reported to have been so amazed that he could get the car through such a gap that he went and measured it. There are various figures reported which range from the gap being narrower than the car to it being 5cm wider.

Some people believe the fact that Rosemeyer had never driven any other racing car an advantage. He had no idea how a proper racing car was supposed to behave so he didn’t realise how bad the Auto Unions were and while to anyone else it took a long time to adapt to the cars idiosyncrasies to him it was all he knew. Like Gilles with the evil handling Ferraris his solution was to grab the car by the scruff of the neck and to drive it sideways into positions it had no right to be in.

His first season of car racing ended with a victory at the Czech GP at Brno. While the win was a significant event in itself, more significant was that on the podium Rosemeyer was introduced to Elly Beinhorn. She was the German version of Amelia Earhart or Amy Johnson. Elly held many long distance flying records and was only the second woman after Johnson to fly solo from Europe to Australia. They met on 29th September and married on 13th July the following year. The daring young racing driver and the fearless aviator were very much the celebrity couple and had been noticed by those in power. Heinrich Himmler ordered Rosemeyer to become a member of the SS. To say the least Bernd was reluctant to comply but at



the time had little option. The couple's only child Bernd Junior was born in November 1937 ten days before his father's death.

Elly was not only brave in an aeroplane. While the Auto Unions were capable of scaring the most experienced of drivers they did not scare Elly. She got in and drove one of these fearsome cars round Monza and later round the Nürburgring in the fog. She also on one occasion got in the car with her husband so that she could experience what the car felt like when he drove. The car we are talking about had skinny tyres, very inefficient drum brakes and a V16 engine in the back that produced over 500bhp. She sat on the edge of the only seat hanging on while Bernd drove the Nürburgring in his usual exuberant sideways manner. She said that her initial enthusiasm was replaced by a conviction that they would not make it to the end of the lap after she was almost thrown out of the car at the first corner. He claimed that he had driven slowly to be safe however he completed the lap in 12 minutes as compared to the 9 minute 46 second time he recorded in qualifying.

While her husband died ridiculously young Elly died on 28th November 2007, a few months after her 100th birthday.

Rosemeyer's second season did not get off to the most auspicious start as he did not finish any of the first three races, including the Monaco GP which was the first of four rounds comprising the European championship. The rest of the season was much better though with wins in the non-championship Eifel GP and the German GP both of which were run at the Nürburgring. He also won the Swiss GP at Bremgarten and the Italian GP at Monza to clinch the championship. It is hard to comprehend the scope of that achievement. We are not talking of a Lewis Hamilton whose entire life had been dedicated to perfecting everything required to be a world champion. Lewis Hamilton's achievement in winning the top championship of the day at the second attempt after years of preparation is incredible but Bernd Rosemeyer won the ultimate championship of his day within two years of sitting in a racing car.

The return of Mercedes with Rudi Uhlenhaut's W125 for 1937 meant that they dominated that year's European championship with Rudolf Caracciola winning 3 of the 5 races to clinch the driver's championship and team mate Manfred von Brauchitsch winning one of the two remaining rounds. However, as was the norm at that time, there were many more non-championship races than championship rounds and Rosemeyer still managed to record a few victories. He won the Eifelrennen at the Nürburgring in June and the following month travelled to America to win the Vanderbilt Cup. In August he won the Coppa Acerbo at Pescara in Italy and at the beginning of October he won the Donington GP.

As mentioned previously Bernd Rosemeyer was no fan of the Nazis and a good example of this comes from Dennis David's fabulous website.

"At the beginning of the Grand Prix he stunned Mercedes, by taking pole position by six seconds. His race was marred by numerous off track excursions, but still he charged on in the ill-handling Auto-Union. After four hours he finished in third place behind the winner, Caracciola. As they mounted the victor's rostrum they were congratulated by the ranking Nazi, Adolf Huhnlein. Caracciola was presented with a large trophy depicting the Goddess of Speed. Showing his disdain for bureaucrats in general and National Socialism in particular he placed a lighted cigarette between the statues lips while Huhnlein's back was turned. Alerted by the crowds burst of laughter Huhnlein turned back only to see Rosemeyer's feigned innocence."



It can reasonably be argued that any death in a racing car is pointless and some are more pointless than others but few have been as pointless as Bernd Rosemeyer's.

In order to maximise the propaganda value of motor racing to the Nazi regime, the Mercedes and Auto Union teams would at the end of the season fit slipstreamer bodywork to their race cars and attempt to set speed records on a closed section of autobahn. It is impossible to underestimate how dangerous that was. At the speeds the cars had achieved by this time if a driver had his steering angled by one degree he would have two wheels on the grass verge in one and a half seconds. That is the margin they had on cars that were bouncing all over the place passing under bridges with central pillars.

On January 8th 1938 Caracciola had broken the flying kilometre and flying mile records that had previously belonged to Rosemeyer. Auto Union had fitted some new basic 'ground effect' skirts to the car and not wishing to spend any more time than necessary on this utterly futile activity Rosemeyer decided to fit all the new pieces for his first run. On that run he reached a speed of 429.9 km/h or almost 270mph. After that run some apparently minor modifications were made including sealing the skirts. One and a half minutes after started what was to be his final drive the Auto Union left the road at a speed of 432 km/h. The car somersaulted many times and disintegrated.

Caracciola's speeds set earlier that morning remain the fastest ever set on a public road.

Such was Rosemeyer's profile that his wife Elly received condolences from Adolf Hitler and his deputy Rudolf Hess. The Nazis wanted to give him a show piece funeral but Elly said if they did she would walk out of it. He was buried next to his friend Ernst von Delius who had also died at the wheel of an Auto Union. Every year on the anniversary of his death the city of Berlin in accordance with Elly's wishes places 13 roses on his grave. Bernd regarded 13 as his lucky number.

Few people have ever had a car named after them but there must be a very select club who 62 years after their death receive such an honour. In 2000 Audi produced a concept car which unfortunately was never intended for production called the Audi Rosemeyer Coupe. It had clear styling cues from the Auto Union GP cars and featured a mid mounted 16 cylinder engine. It's a really striking car.

Leif Snellman is generally regarded as the premier authority on this period. The following are his thoughts on Bernd Rosemeyer.

"In sheer natural speed and car control, was he the best ever? The only car Rosemeyer ever raced was the monstrous rear-engined Auto Union, a car that even Nuvolari found hard to master. Yet, in a meteoric career Rosemeyer established himself as the world's fastest driver and Germany's most popular GP driver ever. Starting in 1935 he was challenging for the lead in only his second race. In 1936, in his first full season, he clinched the European Championship and forced the mighty Mercedes to retire from racing in the middle of the season. On the infamous Nürburgring track, the ultimate challenge for any driver, Rosemeyer's abilities came to his own. He held the lead every single time he raced there and he finished 2nd, 4th, 1st, 1st, 1st and 3rd. No one (with the possible exception of Gilles Villeneuve) has been able to fully copy Rosemeyer's driving style. In total disregard for the laws of physics the thrill seeking driver, whose favourite number was "13", threw the heavy car around in impossible angles. While he made the occasional mistake, his 10 victories during a time of just two years show his class. Sadly his career was cut short by a 400 km/h crash during a world speed record attempt in early 1938."



I see no point in providing my own summary as Snellman knows far more than me about this period and the drivers. I will only say that from first acquaintance with Bernd Rosemeyer the parallels with Gilles Villeneuve seemed obvious and I am pleased that Snellman has come to the same conclusion. It was only on second reading of his summary that the full impact of it hit me. "No one (with the possible exception of Gilles Villeneuve) has been able to fully copy Rosemeyer's driving style." He is saying that Rosemeyer was even more extreme than Gilles. Surely this must be time polishing the memory of a favourite driver. No-one could be more Gilles than Gilles. Could they?