

Sidepodchat – Jim Clark grew up as a boy who loved cars

Christine: Welcome to show four of the series where guest writer Steven Roy turns some of his previously published work into audio greatness. If you like your F1 history, you'll like this. Over to Steven.

Steven: Jim Clark grew up as a boy who loved cars. On April 7th 1968 Jim Clark died in a Formula 2 race at Hockenheim. He remains one of the small group of drivers inevitably mentioned whenever the subject of "the greatest of them all" arises. This tribute explains the effect that Clark's fatal accident had on a small boy in Scotland.

Just over 40 years ago the greatest driver of his generation was killed in a Formula 2 race at Hockenheim in West Germany. Today it is inconceivable that a top grand prix driver would compete in a lower formula but then it was quite normal.

It is well known that Clark drove for Lotus in all 72 of his world championship grands prix and Lotus like Brabham made F2 cars and their grand prix drivers drove them. Although, on this occasion Clark and his team mate Graham Hill were originally scheduled to drive Alan Mann's new Ford F3L sportscar in its debut at Brands Hatch but Lotus boss Colin Chapman insisted they go to Hockenheim.

Most people first become interested in racing after watching a race on TV or being taken to a track. My introduction was a bit different. At the time I was eight years old and living in the west of Scotland. In the 11 years between 1963 and 1973 Scotsmen won 5 drivers' world championships yet there was practically no media coverage. Races were not shown on TV and newspapers covered football and nothing else. It is hard to imagine someone growing up in Germany during the Schumacher period that would not have recognised him but Jim Clark could have walked through almost any town in Scotland unrecognised. Motor racing was very much a minority interest.

During my childhood my father worked night shift for a total of about six weeks. I only remember this fact because one Monday morning he came in while I was eating breakfast and put a newspaper down. There was a picture of a man in a helmet and a line saying he had died. I asked if that was another astronaut dead and he said 'No son, it's Jim Clark. He was a racing driver.' That was the limit of his knowledge. Despite being someone who read the paper every day he knew Jim Clark was a racing driver and nothing more. I have always been curious as to why I asked if it was another astronaut who had died as the only astronaut deaths I can find any record of were those of Gus Grissom, Ed White and Roger Chaffee in the Apollo test AS-204 that was retrospectively named Apollo 1 but that took place 15 months earlier - which is a lifetime at that age.

That afternoon when I returned from school as I always did I took the paper and spread it out on the floor and read what I could. As always I started with the sport at the back but what caught my attention was the double-page spread in the centre of the newspaper. It was all about Jim Clark. It had a few pictures of him racing, on his farm and one of him as a young child on a pedal car. I can remember it like it was yesterday. The opening line read 'Jim Clark grew up as a boy who loved cars' and I can remember thinking that is just like me. Needless to say he wasn't just like me and over the decades since I have acquainted myself with his legend. I read every word of those two pages and became fascinated with the man and motor racing.



To me it still seems incredible that at a time when Scotland (and England) was dominating F1 there was no coverage of it. At that time I knew Jim Clark, Jackie Stewart and Graham Hill were racing drivers and I knew that the little snippets of racing I had seen on TV interested me and that was it.

Jim's career is well documented from his original meeting with Colin Chapman, where Chapman beat him in a race where they both drove Lotus Elans, to his two world championships, to the two others he lost to mechanical failure in the last race of the season. His win at Indianapolis, the second 'win' which was actually credited to Graham Hill although most people believe that was due to a lap scoring error. His second place at Indy to Parnelli Jones whose car was spewing out oil but the officials refused to black flag him because they didn't want a 'furriner' to win in 'one of them funny little cars'.

After that race which was his first visit to Indy he demonstrated the well disguised steeliness in his personality by insisting Chapman took his car to another oval race. They went to Milwaukee and won.

Clark would race anything. He famously raced the Lotus Cortina in the British saloon car championship and won the championship. The images of him three-wheeling that car around a track have gone down in legend. He raced sportscars, he almost won the RAC rally, he even raced in NASCAR.

Nowadays all that matters is a driver's results in F1. Jim contested 72 races and won 25 of them; a record number at the time. He took 33 pole positions which was also a record. The most telling statistic is that, although he won 25 races, he only finished second once. If the car was good enough to win, he won. Of course Lotuses had two distinct features: they were quick and they were fragile and Jim lost a lot of wins because the car broke down while he was leading. He was very much the driver who liked to get pole, make a good start and lead from the front. He drove for seven full seasons and won two championships in 1963 and 1965. He also lost the 1962 and 1964 championship to mechanical problems in the last race of each year. With a little bit of luck he could have won the majority of the championships he completed.

In 1963 he won a record 7 races in one season. There were ten races in the season with the driver's best six scores to count. So not only did he score the maximum number of championship points available, but he had a win to spare. However it could be argued he was even more dominant in 1965. After 7 world championship races he had won six and again a driver's best six scores counted so he was champion by August 1st. He did not win the Monaco GP but that was because he was in Indianapolis, winning the 500 instead.

During the winters of the 1960s the top racing drivers did not spend weeks on end pounding round Barcelona, testing endless new pieces of carbon fibre. They decamped en masse to Australia and New Zealand for the Tasman series. This championship was run for Formula One cars but with 2.5 litre engines. The championship ran for six seasons from 1964 to 1969 and was made up of 4 races in each country. Jim Clark contested the four of these championships and won three of them.

Jackie Stewart tells a story about Jim Clark that shows the difference between the assured, confident racing driver in total control of his environment and Jim the man. The two of them were in the USA and arrived at a railroad crossing in open country. According to Stewart they could see about two miles in each direction with no-one else around and Clark, who was driving, turned to Stewart and asked if he thought it was safe to cross.



At Jim's funeral, his father pulled Dan Gurney aside and told him that he should know that he was the only driver Clark feared on the track. Gurney admits to shedding a tear that not only did the great man rate him so highly but his father took time out of what was a personally tragic time to tell him.

Jim Clark was regarded by all of his peers as the best driver of his generation. There really was no debate on the subject. Clark drove at a perilous time to be a racing driver and the fact that the universal reaction to his death was shock that it could happen to him tells you all you need to know about how he was regarded. The corollary of course was that if it could happen to him, it could happen to anyone. All of a sudden they all felt more vulnerable than they ever had.

Jim Clark was the greatest driver of his time. Was he the best ever?