



Races to Remember – France 1979

Hello and welcome to the fourth episode in the Races to Remember mini series. Last time we looked at an amazingly close race in the sixties, and today we're travelling forward more than a decade, but the competition is just as fierce.

On the 1st July 1979, the French Grand Prix was held at Dijon. The track has only ever hosted six F1 races, between '74 and '84. After it's debut on the calendar, it was obvious some changes had to be made as the lap time was under a minute and traffic was a serious problem. By the time our chosen Grand Prix was due, though, that had been sorted, and Dijon was notable instead for it's fast, sweeping corners.

There was a five week break between the Monaco Grand Prix and the French race, and most of the teams did a lot of testing miles during that time. Renault were into their third year as a constructor, and so far, their reputation was one of unreliability, and very little in the way of results. However, the drivers – Jean-Pierre Jabouille and Rene Arnoux – were given a new car, the RS10 to try and impress at their home race. They got off to a good start by locking out the front row in qualifying - Jabouille first - with Gilles Villeneuve behind them in the Ferrari.

As the pack got away, Gilles made a great start to get ahead of both the yellow cars, with Arnoux falling back to ninth. He spent the first few laps gaining back his positions, but the ease with which he returned to fourth place showed how good the Renault cars really were. For once, the naturally fragile turbos were running well and the cool summer conditions were not putting undue pressure on them.

Arnoux managed to get past one Ferrari to slip into third, whilst his team mate was hustling the other Ferrari for first place. Villeneuve's lead was falling constantly, and by lap 45, Jabouille had his Renault tucked up nicely behind the red car. Of course, catching your opponent is vastly different to overtaking, and it wasn't until the pair came across back markers that Jabouille could make his move. As soon as the Renault was in front, the crowd went wild, even more so as Villeneuve's tyres gave out and he began to fall into the clutches of Arnoux.

When the second Renault caught the Ferrari, on lap 78, it didn't take long for him to overtake, giving the crowd something else to cheer about. A right kink at the end of a long straight allowed the overtaking manoeuvre. However, at the same place on the next lap, Villeneuve scorched his tyres under braking and shot past the Renault, holding on to take the lead. For one corner. The Renault slipped past again, and then they were side by side, tyres touching, each spending some time on the grass, hustling for the position. As they rounded the last corner, Arnoux slid wide, and Villeneuve got a good run on the finish line. They crossed the line just two tenths apart, with Villeneuve ahead.

Just under 15 seconds before that, though, Jabouille had secured Renault's first Grand Prix win since 1906. It was also a notable victory as the French Grand Prix was won by a French constructor and engine, running French tyres, with French fuel and driven by a French driver. If that's not enough, it was the first win for a turbocharged car. That was all completely overshadowed, though, by the spectacular battle for second place in the closing laps. The competition was tough but what made it special was that for once, it was a fair fight. Afterwards Arnoux said: "You can only race like that with someone you trust completely. He beat me, but it didn't worry me. I knew I'd been beaten by the best driver in the world."

That's it for this episode of Races to Remember. As ever, please send me your feedback on this show, this race, or any suggestions you have for future subjects. You can email me christine@sidepodcast.com, or leave a comment on sidepodcast.com. See you tomorrow.