

K Á R O L Y M É H E S



GILLES
VILLENEUVE

HIS UNTOLD LIFE FROM BERTHIERVILLE TO ZOLDER

48 INTERVIEWS

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BY KÁROLY MÉHES



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I never dared to hope I would publish a book about Gilles Villeneuve. He was my hero during my adolescence and after his death on 8 May 1982 I kept his memory vividly inside me – and later on as a Formula One journalist as well. Becoming part of the F1 paddock and the press rooms, I got to know several people who had either worked with Gilles or interviewed him during his years in F1. After the 2007 Canadian Grand Prix, I was lucky enough to have the chance to visit Berthierville and in 2010 I was in Zolder, too, standing on the very spot where his wrecked 126C2 landed.

I did some reporting about these highly emotional experiences but still not with the intention of writing a book.

Then in 2013, I got in contact with Jonathan Giacobazzi, whose family was Gilles' personal sponsor and I did a long interview with him. This was the turning point when I got the bug: why not contact those contemporaries who would for sure have very personal memories of Gilles? Former Ferrari team members, paddock people, fellow drivers of his era and media personalities. Systematically I began my research, and thanks to the modern communication of emails, internet and Facebook, in many cases it was only a question of time finding out addresses and mobile phone numbers or simply leaving a message.

I definitely believed if they would hear the magic words Gilles Villeneuve they would be ready to talk.

That was exactly what happened.

I managed to do email interviews with Jody Scheckter, Chris Amon, Alastair Caldwell, Marco Piccinini, Bobby Rahal, Alan Jones, Tullio Abbate, Alain Bellehumeur and Antonio Tomaini. I was privileged to talk by telephone with Walter Wolf, Mario Andretti, Emerson Fittipaldi, Carlos Reutemann, John Watson, Patrick Tambay,



Derek Warwick, Nigel Mansell, René Arnoux and most importantly, Jochen Mass.

And there were the personal meetings with Sir Jackie Stewart, Andrea de Cesaris, Marc Surer, Sergio Vezzali, Brenda Verner and Jacques Villeneuve. Not to forget the senior journalist colleagues like Heinz Prüller, Pino Allievi, Ercole Colombo, Peter Windsor, Fredrik Af Petersens and many others. And of course, it was a special privilege to meet Joann Villeneuve after the publication of the first edition.

I must mention those people who I never met but who became "virtual friends" and who helped the project all the way. Special thanks to Allan de la Plante for his advice and editorial work; John Townsend in Budapest; Tony Eyckmans, Carlos Ghys, Robert Murphy, Willem J. Staat and Raymond de Haan for the unique photos they provided for the book just because they are all fans of Gilles and liked my efforts.

The first edition of the book came out in November 2014 – and it was a highly emotional moment for me, of course. But holding the Gilles volume in my hands was almost nothing compared to the feeling which came during the weeks and months afterwards. The adoring Villeneuve fans around the world were just unbelievable: due to their orders in a few days the book landed in five continents, from Japan to Israel, from South Africa to Canada.

What else could I have hoped for?

And above all, a big thank you to my wife Enikő who had not heard about Gilles Villeneuve before we met, but still she happened to be the greatest supporter of my passion.

31 May 2018, Pécs / Hungary

After Scheckter left I wanted Gilles

Walter Wolf worked together with Villeneuve in Can-Am in 1977. And then he paved his way to Maranello.

How do you remember meeting Gilles for the first time? Were you sad to lose Scheckter to Ferrari?

I met him first in Formula Atlantic. Then he drove for me in Can-Am. One day I got a call from Commendatore Enzo Ferrari asking me to put them in contact with Gilles and tell him to go to the factory in Maranello. It happened that simple way, he went there and they signed him for Ferrari.

Did you consider hiring him in your own team?

Yes, after Scheckter left, I wanted Gilles. In my team there were many British people, with Harvey Postlethwaite and Peter Warr and others. And they voted for James Hunt.

Well, not really. When I came I thought about two or three years. I hired the best people in the paddock and this was what convinced Jody to sign for me. He saw we had the best guys and I put more money into the team than any other team at that time. So we won our very first race in Argentina and then Monaco and Canada, and we were on the podium eleven times. That was a kind of wonder. If there wouldn't have been poor Pryce's accident in South Africa and then a flat tyre in Long Beach we could have won the title, actually. But then I lost interest.



In 1977 the newly established Walter Wolf Racing won three times and came second in the championship

© R. Murphy



Gilles learned to fly a helicopter in Walter Wolf's machine

© C. Ghys

Who was Gilles for you?

He was overall a very, very pleasant guy. We spent a lot of time together. I taught him to fly a helicopter. He was my neighbour in the South of France, we lived 500 metres from each other. I found him this place when he moved to Europe. They were very often in my house with Joann and the kids. I got to know Jacques when he was five and he played in my garden. After a while they

left to live in Monaco. People were always telling me scary stories about Gilles flying, actually, your helicopter... Well, you know, a helicopter is not a car. If you crash you are probably dead. This is a very delicate vehicle and he recognised it and did not drive it like his racing car. He was very talented in it, too.



Start of the 1978 Canadian Grand Prix. Gilles made the icy day hot for the Canadian fans. Scheckter in the Wolf (20) came home 2nd
© P. Windsor

How did you see Gilles at Ferrari?

Well, he was Enzo Ferrari's darling, he liked him so much. At that time I also had a road Ferrari as well as my Lamborghini and each time I took it to the factory for a service we had a nice lunch together with Mr Ferrari. Gilles wasn't present but I always heard from him a hymn about Gilles' talent.

Montreal 1978. What are your memories of this race?

Very simple. We won the last race in Mosport 1977 with Scheckter. I also helped to set up the new Montreal circuit with the mayor of the city. As Gilles won and Scheckter came home second in a Wolf it became a real Canadian day and everybody was happy. I was clever enough to ask our Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau to come because as it turned out it was a great event for Canada.

May I ask your view about Imola 1982 and the tragic competition between Gilles and Didier Pironi?

The problem was Gilles thought only he had the right to win that race. In my eyes Didi was a very good and aggressive driver. I was very good friends with him.

They had their infamous agreement...

Well, the agreement is an agreement and the race is the race. Okay, Gilles was angry at the end of the race. He had the right to be angry. I don't really know the background as I had never discussed it with Didi.

What was the general feeling in Canada after his death?

Well, obviously Gilles was the big hero in Canada. The Prime Minister sent his Boeing for his body to Belgium. Everybody was devastated. He is a legend today because he was the first Canadian who won. Don't forget that Canada was nowhere in international motor racing. Then first it was me and then Gilles who put Canada on the map in F1. What we already knew about him when he drove in Formula Atlantic he managed to transfer to F1.



The Wolf WR1 is a frequent visitor to classic F1 races including Hungary 2007

© K. Méhes



Chris Amon
© R. Murphy

CHRIS AMON (NEW ZEALAND)

Ferrari driver 1967-1969

He had an outrageous driving style

Chris Amon was among those who recognised Gilles Villeneuve's talent quickly. Amon, who felt his Wolf Can-Am car undriveable, suggested to car owner, Walter Wolf, that he should hire Gilles Villeneuve to drive the car.

Where and when did you get to know Gilles?

I had heard of Gilles and his exploits in Formula Atlantic and all the stories of his battles with Keke Rosberg. I first got to know him after a Can-Am race at St Jovite in Canada in 1977. I had finished second in this driving Walter Wolf's Wolf-Dallara. Apart from being the driver I was also the team manager. I was finding it difficult to do both jobs properly. It was my intention to retire from racing at the end of that season, so I suggested

to team owner Walter Wolf that we find another driver. Walter lived part-time in Montreal and knew of Gilles' abilities. He also knew his manager Gaston Parent. Walter suggested we approach Gilles to see if he was interested in testing the car and if he would possibly drive it for the rest of the season. This is subsequently what happened.



A difficult debut with Ferrari, Mosport 1977

© R. Murphy

How did you see him as a young driver?

It became obvious to me very early on in our relationship that he was an exceptional talent. He was very quick, but at that point it was fair to say he was a little rough around the edges and pretty hard on machinery.

There is a famous story of you calling Walter Wolf telling him about the test at St Jovite. Can you tell us about this call?

I can't really remember the details of my call to Walter, but I'm sure it was after Gilles had tested the car at St Jovite. I suspect I relayed to Walter that his lap time was quite a bit quicker than I had been able to make the car go throughout the race weekend. We subsequently discovered that he had cut out the chicane on the back straight on his fastest laps which certainly helped his lap times. Regardless of that, I conveyed to Walter that I thought he was very talented and suggested we run him for the rest of the season.

How was your relationship on a personal level?

I think our relationship on a personal level was very good. He was very well liked by the other team members. I had some amusing moments with him, at least they are amusing in hindsight. Gilles drove on the road in a fairly similar manner to the way he drove on track, no obstacle too great to overcome. I only rode with him twice, the first time was from the track back to the motel in St Jovite. After that I swore I would never get in a car with him again! I did however end up going with him from the motel at Watkins Glen up to the circuit. We were running a little late and there was quite a line of cars waiting to enter the track. To Gilles this presented 'no problem' at all. He drove through roadside ditches, down the oncoming lane, anywhere the car would fit! We entered the track remarkably quickly. However, we had a number of members of the local sheriffs' department in tow. After that I made absolutely sure I never rode with him again!

Did you suggest to Enzo Ferrari about hiring Gilles?

I didn't speak with Mr Ferrari about Gilles, but I did speak to one or two of the team personnel about him. I'm struggling to remember who, but I suggested that I thought he was a very good prospect for the future.

You drove against many of the greats like Jim Clark, Jochen Rindt and Jackie Stewart. Was Villeneuve in the same league?

It is difficult for me to compare Gilles with people such as Clark, Rindt, and Stewart because I never raced against him. Comparing his performance against people that I did race against I would suggest that he was certainly in that league.

How do you see his career at Ferrari? Why was Gilles a good fit for them?

By the time Gilles arrived at Ferrari I think things may have changed somewhat compared to my day. I feel that Montezemolo, during the Lauda years, had probably made these changes, but I think Mr Ferrari himself would have very much liked Gilles' slightly outrageous driving style and on-track antics.



Spins and crashes at Mosport and Fuji in 1977

© R. Murphy



On the learning curve, Zolder 1978

© C. Ghys

Did you keep in touch when Gilles drove for Maranello?

I didn't have any direct contact with Gilles after 1977. I came back to New Zealand at the end of that year to live and it was to be some twelve years before I went back to Europe for a visit. I did have some indirect contact with Gilles through one or two journalists that I kept in touch with.

Knowing his driving style, was it almost destiny for Gilles to die in a racing car? How did you hear the news of Gilles' death?

I actually didn't have any concerns about Gilles being likely to die racing. You could never be sure about mechanical breakages and the like, but I always felt he had brilliant car control which would keep him out of trouble. Given the events leading up to his death I have always thought that he probably was not totally himself when the accident occurred.

At the time he died it was the middle of the night in New Zealand so I learned of his death from a morning radio broadcast.

How is your relationship with Maranello today? Do you visit them? Do they invite you on some occasions?

I'm ashamed to say I haven't been back to Maranello since the seventies. I receive invitations to the ten-year anniversaries but for various reasons I've become a reluctant traveller as time has passed.

As if each lap was his last

Bobby Rahal was one of Gilles Villeneuve's hardest opponents in America. This is how he recalls their early days.

You raced many times against Gilles. Do you remember the first time? Did he come with a reputation?

The first time I raced against Gilles was the opening round of the 1975 Player's Formula Atlantic series at Edmonton, Alberta. I qualified 2nd for the first race, but had electrical issues on the pace lap and finished many laps down due to numerous pit stops. I can't quite remember where Gilles qualified and/or finished. I certainly had heard of him, most notably from his accident in 1974 at Mosport where he broke his leg!

In your mind, do you think he drove any differently once he got to Formula One?

Gilles always drove as if each lap was his last. He had tremendous car control and he relied on that. I don't know if he had any pace other than flat out! As you

know he drove many great races in F1, notably the 1981 Spanish GP, where in a car that shouldn't have won, did so. I don't ever remember Gilles driving 'angry' because of something someone did in the race, but he was willing to take great chances for even a lesser placing (1979 French GP).

The American racing community is famous for its amicable mood...was it like this in the 70s?

Yes, perhaps even more so. We were all young, trying to get to the top, and going from race to race was like a circus. We ate together, drank together, laughed together.



Bobby Rahal's first GP at Watkins Glen in 1978, driving a Wolf WR5

© R. Murphy

In the famous race at Trois Rivières that included James Hunt, Patrick Depailler, Alan Jones and Vittorio Brambilla to name but a few, you qualified near the front and finished 5th. What was it about that race that sticks with you?

We all loved Trois Rivières because it gave those of us over here the chance to show our 'stuff' against the guys from over there! We all wanted to show the world that we could compete against the best F1 and F2 drivers of the time – and we did, with Gilles winning in 1976. The rest was history for him. It was a great victory and I think raised our own perceptions of where we stood against those drivers.

A number of drivers from the era who raced in Formula Atlantic eventually drove in Formula One. Was that your goal as well?

F1 was absolutely the goal! And of course I did drive in the 1978 Canadian and US Grand Prix at Watkins Glen. Unfortunately I did not really have a champion as Gilles did (Ray Wardell) to promote me to those in the know. Ray really turned Gilles, in my opinion, from a very fast driver to a race-winning driver.

After Gilles' one-off drive for McLaren, he returned to Formula Atlantic. Did he seem to have changed?

No. For as long as I knew Gilles, he was the same from the day I met him until his death.

Were you surprised when he was picked up by Ferrari?

Not particularly, although I thought it was wonderful for him. Talk about starting at the top! And of course he repaid that decision by Ferrari with many wins.

At the end of the 1978 season you again drove against Gilles when you drove for Walter Wolf in his Formula One car. Did you get a chance to chat with your old foe?

A little bit, but as always, everyone has a job to do and there wasn't much socialising on an F1 weekend.

You drove in that famous race in Montreal where Gilles won his first Formula One race right on his home track. What was that weekend like?

Cold, wet, and miserable. Yet I was having a very good race until mechanical issues ruined my day, but what a day for Gilles. To win his first GP for Ferrari and to do it in his own country. Unbelievable!

Did you ever have contact again?

Not really as we were going in different directions.

In the Indy 500 and the Indy series, you drove against Jacques, Gilles' son and Jacques, Gilles' brother. Were they similar or different types of drivers?

I drove against both of course. I personally don't think either of them were like Gilles.



Gilles was often pointed at in 1978

© T.Eyckmans



Preparing for a test, Monza 1981

© C. Ghys

ALASTAIR CALDWELL (GREAT BRITAIN)

Team Manager, McLaren

Only one race, but...!

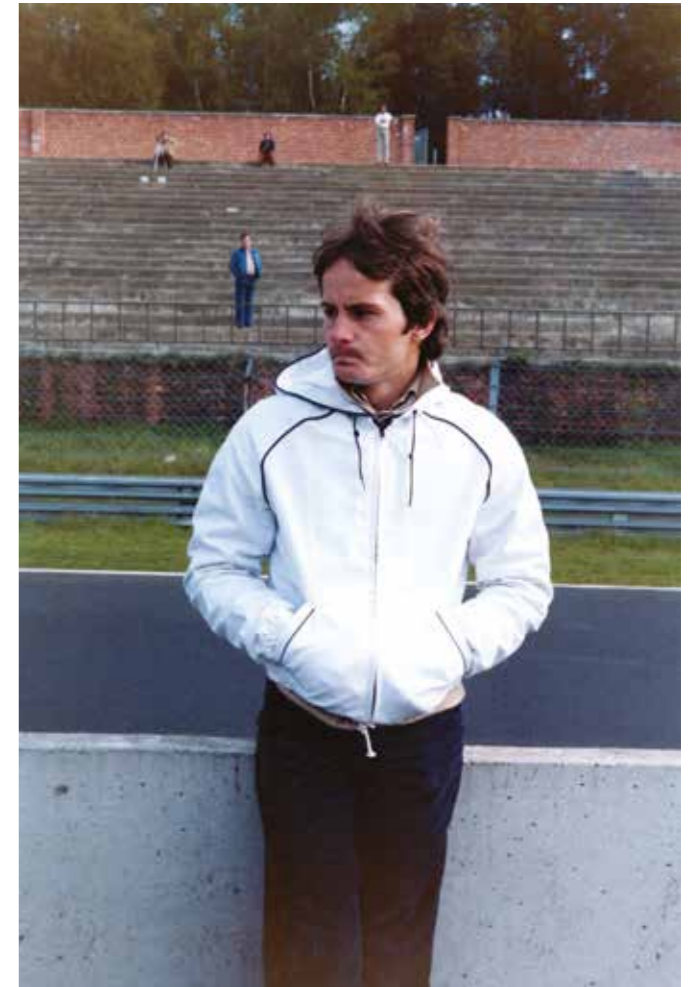
Gilles Villeneuve entered Formula One with a McLaren-Ford at the 1977 British Grand Prix. Although the British team had an option on his further services, the Canadian became a hero with Ferrari.

When James Hunt reported to Teddy Mayer about Gilles in 1976, why did McLaren decide to try him and why not before Silverstone?

We called Gilles and talked to him about giving him a test and possibly running him at Canada and the States at the end of the year, as was our normal practice in those days as there was generally less pressure at the end of a season. He immediately came to the McLaren factory in Colnbrook without us asking him. This was a very good move on his part. We showed him everything and knew right away he was our kind of driver. He was smart, direct, loved cars and driving and had already shown initiative by turning up.

How was that weekend in 1977 with the British GP with McLaren having three drivers? The World Champion who was going to win the race, his teammate Jochen Mass and the rookie Canadian?

We decided to run him much earlier at Silverstone since he had shown so much interest and this was our home race so the logistics of running three cars there was so much easier. He did very well, as you know, drove well and did not crash the car, though he spun on every corner of the track except Abbey. He did impressively well. When we found out that he was spinning the car he told me that was how to go fast. His car control was so good we did not know about this until journalists came and told us. The weekend went very well. Sadly, the water temp gauge failed and when he came in to report the problem he was sent right back out, otherwise he would have finished in the points in his first F1 race.



A Ferrari driver from his second race on, Zolder 1978

© C. Ghys

Why did McLaren opt not to run Gilles again?

I personally, and most of the team, were certain that he should stay with us, but sadly Marlboro were not so keen as they wanted a European driver to help sell their products. Still, we were sure that he was for us and offered him a testing contract.

How did it happen that you let him go to Ferrari in October?

Ferrari asked to see him and with our knowledge he went to see them and came back with a similar offer to ours. Sadly, Teddy Mayer told him to ask for a full contract from Ferrari. He was convinced the Old Man would send him packing and therefore he'd come back to us, but this backfired. He got a full contract and we lost him.



He came home in 9th place, enough for a contract from Enzo Ferrari

© Glass Photograph



The flat 12-cylinder engine in Gilles' Ferrari in its last season, 1980

© C. Ghys

Did you regret letting Gilles go?

I always regretted losing him. He was the perfect match for us, our style of driver, and I am sure he would have thrived in our style of team and gone on to great things and become World Champion. You cannot alter history, but he would probably still be alive and enjoying his grandchildren by now. No driver has died in a McLaren Grand Prix car as yet...

How did your personal relationship with Gilles develop in the coming years?

My relationship with Gilles was fine, but in those days I was careful not to become friends with racing car drivers. Both my brother and Bruce McLaren were my friends and died in race cars so I decided to keep my distance from them. If I had to at all, I wanted to go to their funerals as a team manager, not their friend...