

In Memory Of Gilles | Allan Besselink

Written by Allan Besselink
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This week marked a significant passing for me, a date and time that won't be easily forgotten.

It was May 8, 1982. Twenty five years ago this past week. And what made this date so important?

It was the day that Gilles Villeneuve died.

So the next question I'm sure is "Who is Gilles Villeneuve?", yes?

In 1982, I was a 16 year old that had a fascination with Formula One racing. Actually, in all reality, I had a fascination with almost any type of auto racing - excluding NASCAR (which to me, is a whole different issue). It was a time when I was pondering the possibility of becoming an automotive engineer. But I didn't want to be just any automotive engineer - I wanted to design Formula One racing cars for Ferrari.

My parents took me to see my first Formula One race in 1972. I grew up within hours of both the Canadian Grand Prix (at Mosport and then relocated to Montreal's Ile Notre Dame) and the US Grand Prix (at Watkins Glen). September and October always brought two quick trips to these events. This was back in the day when pulling a high schooler out of class didn't involve anything more than your parents saying "we're doing it" and you making sure that your homework was done when you got back to class. Oh and a few times it involved me doing a little class report on my return - but that was the high price of seeing the world's greatest cars and drivers - the best of the best.

For much of my youth, I had the good fortune of seeing two GP races a year - something that is almost unheard-of in these days of high ticket prices!

Where does Gilles Villeneuve fall into all of this?

Gilles was Canada's first great Formula One star. I'd seen him race a few times as he was refining his craft. In 1976, he was a star of Formula Atlantic - at that time a stepping stone to Formula One - and was given his first one-off race in Formula One by McLaren in 1977. By the time of the Canadian and US Grands Prix that year, he was picked up by Ferrari. Gilles was in the international limelight with the most recognizable and famous team in Formula One (if not in all of motorsport). He was quoted as saying "If someone said to me that you can have three wishes, my first would have been to get into racing, my second to be in Formula 1, my third to drive for Ferrari". That says it all right there!

And along with this, he was slowly becoming a national hero for Canadians.

I think that's one of the greatest memories I have. Everyone in Canada knew about Gilles. He was a person we'd all come to know and love. He was Canadian - one of the few international sports stars we have that aren't hockey players. He was an icon in the sport - known for his supreme dedication, his natural driving abilities, his car control, and his speed. Watching his hands was a delight - rarely pointing in the direction that the car was traveling, always on the edge, trying to extract every last ounce of speed from the car.

His first grand prix victory was in 1978 - in front of a home crowd in Montreal. A fitting site for a first victory!

Then there was what could only be described as one of the greatest racing battles of all time - Dijon 1979. This is true (and typical) Villeneuve - hard, fair, fast and not to be denied!

[youtube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kj-5B1ufJAI) [kj-5B1ufJAI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kj-5B1ufJAI)

His masterful wet weather performances are legend. In 1979 at Watkins Glen, he was 9 seconds faster than anyone else in the rain. This is simply unheard-of in today's racing world.

The legend of Gilles was only enhanced by (yet another!) stunning drive in the rain in 1981 - in a downpour, in front of a home crowd yet again, and without a front wing! I remember watching this on TV - absolutely mesmerized! And to think - all of this for a third place!

[youtube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNhVgq0mfxs) [JNhVgq0mfxs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNhVgq0mfxs)

But then there was "that day" - the tragic day of May 8, 1982. I can distinctly remember sitting at home, watching the news as a 16 year old.

[youtube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ou95bIVAzps) [ou95bIVAzps](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ou95bIVAzps)

I included this clip not for the morbidity but for the reality. I was 16 years old, watching this unfold in front of me. One of my childhood heroes - a Canadian hero - had died. It shocked me, my family, and the country. It was a moment in time

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in which it didn't matter whether you were an English-speaking Canadian or a French-speaking Canadian - we were all proud and saddened by the passing of this amazing man.</p> <p>At the funeral in Berthierville, former team-mate, Jody Scheckter, delivered a simple eulogy: ♦I will miss Gilles for two reasons. First, he was the fastest driver in the history of motor racing. Second, he was the most genuine man I have ever known. But he has not gone. The memory of what he has done, what he achieved, will always be there.♦</p> <p>His memory was recorded on a Canadian postage stamp many years later. I think it was one of the anniversaries of his passing. Somewhere in my memoirs, I have those stamps - mint condition, of course. His memory is firmly imprinted in my mind - even 25 years later. Though the memories may not be mint condition, they certainly are vivid. Gilles, we miss you.</p>