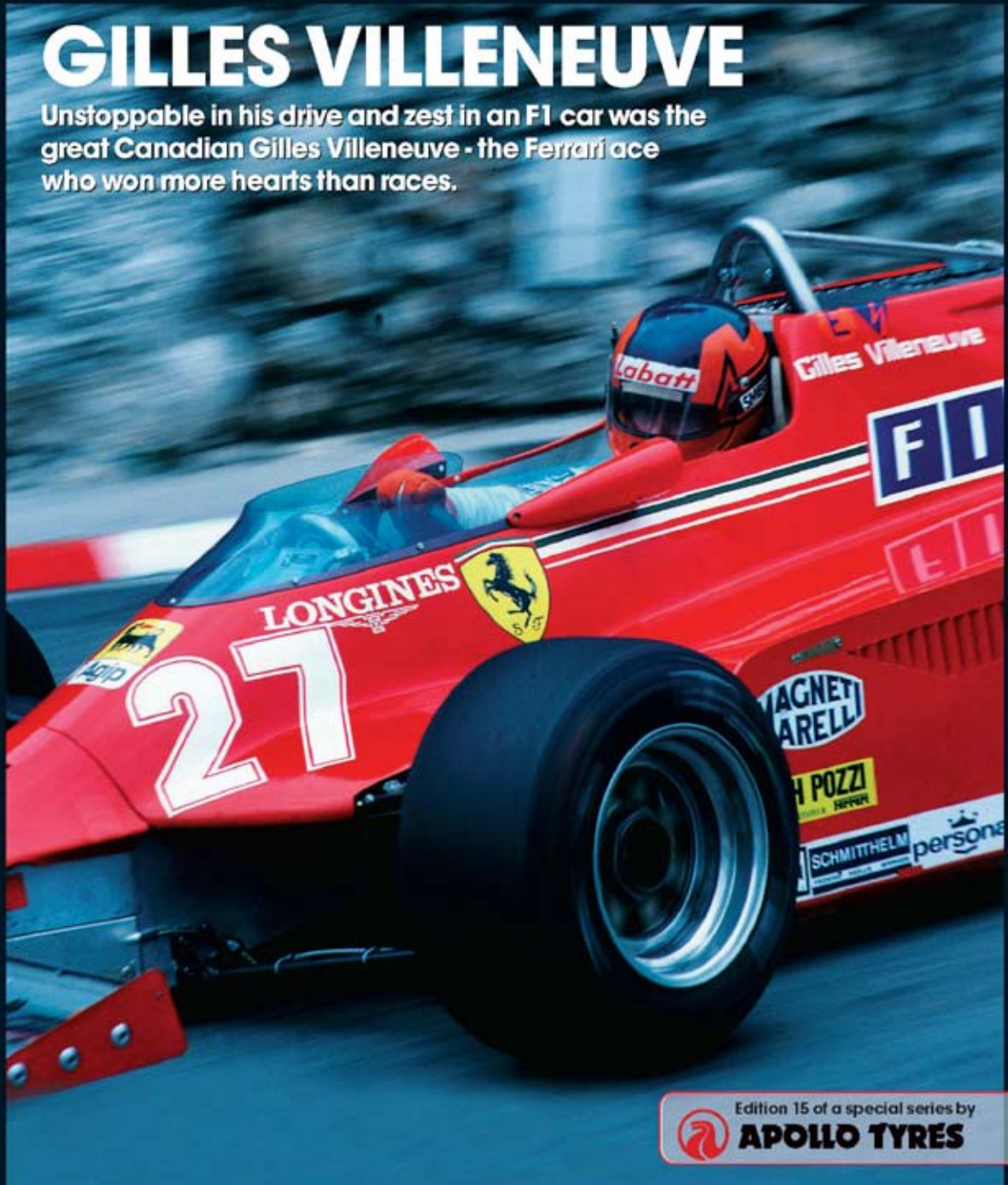


unstoppable

GILLES VILLENEUVE

Unstoppable in his drive and zest in an F1 car was the great Canadian Gilles Villeneuve - the Ferrari ace who won more hearts than races.



Edition 15 of a special series by



APOLLO TYRES

ENZO FERRARI WAS A HARD man to please. Despite having the who's who of Grand Prix drivers race for him, he found only one of them worthy of occupying space on his desk in Maranello. That honour belongs to Gilles Villeneuve.

68 GPs, 6 wins, 2 poles, 8 fastest laps. For someone driving a Ferrari, the numbers are hardly inspiring. But when you watched Gilles take a corner sideways, statistics seem so irrelevant.

Gilles was born to be a Ferrari driver. Articulate, fiercely competitive and blessed with natural talent beyond his peers, his sheer speed plus his press-on-regardless style meant he could, and often would, take hopelessly uncompetitive machinery by the scruff of its neck and wring out wins which made many others looking on in awe.

It was just such an instance which caught the eye of 1976 F1 world champion James Hunt who raved about Villeneuve's style and drive after being beaten by him in a Formula Atlantic race at Trois Rivieres. Hunt was so impressed by the Canadian's performance that when he returned to Europe, he was on phone to Teddy Mayer, McLaren's MD at that time. "Teddy, you've got to give this chap Villeneuve a run. He is extraordinary. I've never seen anything like it. He was virtually bouncing off the walls at every corner. His car control was phenomenal."

Apparently, Gilles, armed with local knowledge of the track, upstaged James by racing wider, using the walls to stop the slides. "It wasn't that big a deal. It was easy in a car like the March," were his actual words.

On Hunt's insistence, McLaren gave Gilles an old M23 to play at the next year's practice session of the British GP. He spun the car so many times the McLaren crew lost count of it. But what they admired most was that he never damaged or stalled the car. Those were the days of the third car, so he was allowed to qualify and he promptly put the M23 9th on the grid - ahead of regular driver Jochen Mass. His car spinning abilities however didn't impress Teddy Mayer, so he declined Gilles a regular drive.

At the age of 27, he got a call from Maranello and he was strapped into a Ferrari. The red 312T2s were demons to drive and the Canadian

had it all to do. Despite crashes galore Ferrari retained him for 1978 and even though team-mate Carlos Reutemann blew him into the weeds, Gilles used all that to learn at every instance, storming to score his first GP win - on home ground at Mosport Park - in 1978.

Jody Scheckter took over at Gilles' team-mate in 1979 and the duo got on infamously well. The new 312T4 was coming on well and with it started the Villeneuve legend. He won in South Africa and then in Long Beach but his all out style meant far more DNFs than the smooth driving Scheckter. This was



competitor. But for some of Gilles' conservative peers, his display of on-the-limit driving was over the acceptable limits. Gilles remained unfazed. Soon at Zandvoort, he was driving on three wheels!

Had he slowed down to let second-placed

Alan Jones past, he could've finished second, giving him precious points. In hindsight, those points would've made Gilles the world champion, for he lost it to his team mate Jody by just 4 points. He, however, had a startling argument - "How the hell can you drive a race car, fight with people - and think all the time about

always relied upon to do the impossible. In the run-up with the early Ferrari Turbos, his skill made the car look good but the others were better. However it was said that the last few GPs of his life were full of acrimony with this team-mate Didier Pironi stealing away a win when the duo had agreed upon something else.

He was also one of those drivers who never hesitated in speaking his mind, especially when it came to safety. "Without drivers, F1 is nothing," he said. He was against the qualifying rules, which limited each driver to two sets of soft tyres (the qualifying tyres, as they were called). "This puts a ridiculous pressure on everyone to take risks in traffic. We should ban qualifiers, or limit the number of laps we can do or have no limit to the number of tyres we use. Something has to be done," he insisted. Nothing was done, because just like now, the drivers then, were to keep their mouths shut and get on with the job.

It was an agitated Gilles who took to qualifying at Zolder with the uncompetitive Ferrari. As he came up on the slow moving March of Jochen Mass and sensing an opportunity to pass, he lunged for the small gap without lifting off. The Ferrari's left front clipped the March's right rear, flicking it into the air. The television cameras captured the horrendous accident as the car landed nose downwards, the impact ripping the seat off from the chassis. Gilles was thrown out of the somersaulting car, his body coming to rest after crashing into the barriers. His neck broke instantaneously. Shortly before midnight, the doctors switched off his life support. With it came to an end, the life of a man who won more hearts than races.

The news of his death drove Enzo Ferrari to tears. "My past is scarred with grief...father, mother, brother, sister, wife...my life is full of sad memories. I look back and I see my loved ones...and among my loved ones I see the face of this great man: Gilles Villeneuve." Those who knew the Commendatore, said that no greater compliment would fall from his lips, especially as he had said earlier in the season that Villeneuve's drive and attitude reminded him of the legendary Tazio Nuvolari.

Vijaysimha Vellanki



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probably why Enzo Ferrari gave him the title "High Priest of Destruction."

The title swung Jody's way, but that didn't deter Gilles. In that year's French GP, he put on a fantastic show of driving an F1 car in anger which probably ranks as one of the greatest displays in our sport. Racing against Renault's Rene Arnoux at Dijon-Prenois, he was captured on TV banging wheels and out-braking on the outside, on a circuit that is full of blind brows and long corners. To this day, this dogfight remains the epitome of F1 racing. Even Rene Arnoux has fond memories of it. "The duel with Gilles is something I'll never forget - my greatest souvenir in racing. He beat me, yes, in France, but it didn't worry me. I knew I'd been beaten by the best driver in the world," he said.

It was clear to the world - behind the boyish looks was an unforgiving

points for a bloody championship? How can you settle for a 'safe' third place or something, because it's four points...? Jesus, people like that should be accountants, not racing drivers." Ferrari's legendary technical director, Mauro Forghieri, explains it best. "Gilles had a rage to win."

Just before the Italian GP at Monza, Gilles' former teammate Carlos Reutemann had a piece of advice. "Don't play with the championship. You may only get one shot at it and this is it. Don't give it to Jody. You've been at Ferrari longer and you deserve it just as much." Gilles, though, liked Jody and trusted him. For him, the team was larger than himself. So he didn't mount a challenge on Jody. The fact that a fighter like Gilles finished just 0.46 of a second behind him was a clear indication.

Gilles never got a fair crack at another F1 title claim but he was