

Gilles Villeneuve, 20 Years After
Wheels 2002

May 9 is Ascension Day. Christians hold that, on this day, the crucified Jesus was carried in Elijah's chariot, pulled by horses of fire, in a whirlwind to the Throne of God. Ascension Day symbolises Jesus' departure from his human limitations, and his arrival in the eternal life of the gospels.

On May 8, 2002, I stood in a Belgian forest, alone but for the tall trees, looking across 11 metres of lonely asphalt. Exactly 20 years earlier, in the final 10 minutes of qualifying for the Belgian Grand Prix, Gilles Villeneuve's Ferrari 126C2 had howled past the pits about half a kilometre behind me, passing the 'In' board held out by Ferrari F1 team manager, Mauro Forghieri.

At 1:52pm, travelling at some 225 km/h down the hill to my left, the Ferrari clipped the rear wheel of Jochen Mass's cruising March. In the ensuing whirlwind that took place right in front of where I now stood, the great French-Canadian – the last true Ferrari driver, the last racer's racer, a 32-year-old bloke with two young kids – began his eternal journey. Twenty years ago, I heard the silence, felt the blackness in my gut, across a space as wide as the world.

Nineteen-eighty-two was an extraordinary year in Formula One: 1.5 litre turbo engines made this (still) the most powerful era in F1's history; ground-effect was in (almost) full force, with fixed skirts and rock-hard suspensions; the FISA vs FOCA feud peaked with a drivers' strike at Kyalami; Ferrari, Renault and Alfa Romeo had full factory teams; the 16 races were won by 11 different drivers; and the eventual world champion, Keke Rosberg, was a chain-smoking hooligan.

It was, I maintain, the golden era of Formula One.

Having only a black and white TV myself, I was compelled to regularly ask a tall, fair-skinned girl named Virginia, with black hair and dark eyes, if I could watch GPs late at night in her apartment in Coogee. No trouble, she said: she had no interest in Formula One, and even less in me.

I honestly can't remember if I heard about Villeneuve's crash during Sunday, or whether I saw the footage a few hours before the Belgian GP telecast, on the six o'clock news. Certainly, it was on Virginia's television, in her ground-floor flat, with the yellow lounge chairs and the brown bean bag and a cat whose name I forget.

The Zolder circuit, or just that short downhill stretch to the right-hander before Terlamenbocht, is locked into that picture, too. It was some time last year that I realised I'd probably still be in Europe when May 8, 2002 came around. Nothing – whether tens of thousands of Ferrari fans, or

locked gates on an unexceptional Wednesday – would make a quiet homage to the circuit seem pointless.

A phone call established only that, yes, Zolder was going to be open that day, because a driver training school had booked the circuit.

Zolder is about 70km east of Brussels, in the Limburg province, at exit 27 on the E314. The circuit is set amid stands of pine trees, whose slender, tan trunks and yellow-green foliage have an almost luminous quality under the Euro-grey sky. The pretty, rural, 4.0km circuit hosted its last F1 grand prix in 1984. That race, somehow fittingly now, was won in Ferrari number 27, by Michele Alboreto.

Driving out from Brussels, you pass the turnoff to the town of Leuven. It was to one of the town's three hospitals that Villeneuve was flown; nobody in Leuven today seems to know which. He was artificially kept alive until his wife, Joanne, could be brought from Monaco, where she and their two children – Jacques (11) and Melanie (8) – had remained for Melanie's holy communion that day.

Eerily, this was the first grand prix that the Villeneuves hadn't attended together as a family.

Only one Ferrari, a gunmetal-grey 500 Maranello on Belgian plates, passed me on the long, sooty motorway to Zolder. When I arrived at 11 o'clock, the circuit was clearing up the clutter from the previous weekend's DTM German Touring Car round, but my eye was caught by a yellow poster that read: 'Ceremony – Memorial Gilles Villeneuve 1982-2002.'

"Who will show up, we will see at 12 o'clock," shrugged Walter Goossens, Zolder's friendly and enthusiastic marketing manager, who explained that the circuit and two Belgian Ferrari clubs had organised a small, commemorative service. It would include the unveiling of a new memorial plaque at the site of the crash, long since named the Gilles Villeneuve chicane.

Along with the 50-odd car club people who did turn up, we just had to wait until midday, when the driver training classes paused for lunch, before we could walk over there. I found the guy in the reddest-looking Ferrari jacket and introduced myself. He was Giulio Giulietti, secretary of the Ferrari Club Genk. He was here. Not just now. Back then.

"I was a member of the paddock crew, and I was standing in front of the first building here in the pit lane when the crash happened," he said. "My first feeling was that it wasn't so bad, because Gilles had many crashes, and he always came without injury, and I thought perhaps he broke his leg or something. But I never thought that it was really bad..."

"After some minutes, the security gave us more information, and we knew very quickly that it was very bad ... We knew by 3:00pm that Gilles was dead, but you can't make the announcement of these things."

The clubs, and Zolder circuit, had invited Jacques Villeneuve today. Nobody had expected him to come, but he had at least replied. “He isn’t involved because he has his way of life,” Giulietti said. “He doesn’t want too be remembered as the son of Gilles, he has his own life to go.”

Other people do come, Goossens says. “There is new management here since 1996, and every year, we noticed people coming over on the eighth of May. Maybe 10 people, it depends on the weather and if it’s a weekend. From Canada, New Zealand, America, Great Britain... A couple of British people are here today.”

Trevor and Jacquie Green had left Milton Keynes (“it’s near Silverstone!”) at sparrow’s this morning, and were driving back this afternoon. That made it three visitors who weren’t members of the Genk or Charleroi Ferrari Clubs. Mind you, both clubs seem to suffer a paucity of actual Ferraris; the only exotica in the otherwise unremarkable car park were a new 360 Modena, a weathered 328 GTS and an Alfa Romeo SZ ‘Mostro’.

Jacquie wore a T-shirt bearing the image of Gilles’ helmet. The Greens, late-30ish, had hearts that were pure. “We came here just to pay our respects to the guy,” Trevor said. “He meant a lot to us when we first started watching F1, basically he brought us both into F1 ... he’s a long time gone, but everyone still remembers him.

“I mean, Gilles *made* F1 for five seasons. You look at those years – when he started in 1978, he blew people away in a McLaren that was three years old... He sat in a car that James Hunt couldn’t drive, and he drove it around Silverstone and blew ’em away... The guy never gave up.”

What were you two expecting to find here today? Jacquie: “I wasn’t sure whether there’d be thousands here or maybe, 10. One or the other.”

Trevor: “When we got hold of Walter, and he said there’d be a small press conference, then we walk over and dedicate the new memorial, I thought, ‘Great.’ That’s all you really want. Some recognition of what the guy really was, and what he held up.”

Just after midday, we tailed Goossens and the group of car club people to the back of the pits, entering the circuit at the back chicane. We walked up a gentle rise, the pedestrian bridge spanning its crest, and suddenly the line of the trees and the land gently falling away just-so and the stupidly thin-looking ribbon of track spilling fast and down and away to my left ... immediately I knew it, and now I saw it as he had seen it.

It was there, on the exit of this devastatingly fast left-hander, that Villeneuve had come upon Mass’s March-Ford. The German driver was on a cool-down lap; so, supposedly, was Villeneuve. With eight minutes remaining in qualifying, his tyres well past their best, he wasn’t likely to better eighth on the grid. Eighth didn’t matter. What mattered was that his duplicitous team-mate, Didier Pironi, was sixth.

My stomach sank, standing there, as I understood that all the algorithms in the world probably would not have delivered a different outcome from the one we got on May 8, 1982. Thirty metres before or after – half-a-second at 225 km/h – there would have been a right and a wrong. But the two cars' trajectories coincided precisely where, for both drivers, the choices of moving left *or* right are equally valid.

Both moved right.

I watched them unveil the memorial plaque, a subdued affair in dark, polished granite, and saw the accountants and salesmen and lawyers and tyre retailers pose for photos and give three cheers for a man, a brave and gifted man, they were claiming as a lost brother. Then they went to lunch. I decided to stay awhile. I had no place special to be; on May 8, certainly no place more special than here. Disturbed by nothing but the sound of wind, and the dark vision of a Ferrari climbing into the air, I crossed the track before the driving school cars came out, and I waited.

At 1:52pm on May 8, 2002, at the site of the crash that claimed one of the most gifted and loved drivers in Formula One history, there was just one person. I suppose I'd hoped it would be like this. I had leaned against the Armco fence by the woods, pondering this man's death, honestly hoping to feel something special other than respectful sadness – hoping to be touched by a spirit.

Instead, I heard a noise behind me and turned around to face ... me.

Taller, fairer-skinned, but the man who had appeared through the trees and had paused there, looking back at me, was of a similar age, similar build, similarly balding – and similarly, here at this place and time.

He carried a single, yellow rose with a card tied to its stem; photographic paper bearing the words, 'Salut, Gilles' next to a photograph of Villeneuve and the number 27. He laid the rose along the steel catch-wire fence, motioning to the card. "It's a bad picture of him, but ... it has a little memory for me."

Armand had taken the day off work to drive down from his home in northern Holland. In 1982, when he was 17, he lived in Maastricht, just half an hour away. And on May 7 that year, he was here.

"I saw him on the Friday, for the last time ... Saturday, we couldn't go because my father was ill, but I saw it on TV. I was quite shocked, I tried to come here as quickly as possible, but it was too late."

Armand has come back on every fifth anniversary since, always at this spot at 1:52pm. He thanked me for being there. "The last time I was here, I hung up a Canadian flag, but there was no-one else. I have been a few times, and I was always alone. That's Formula One – they forget the whole thing..."

Armand was happy to hear that, at Zolder, Gilles had a new monument, one that was promised to last for years and be cared for and respected. He

said he thought there were now two generations of Formula One fans. I said there were probably about 10, each united by a driver – Fangio, Clark, Lauda, Senna – who dominated and defined their era. For two strangers from opposite sides of the planet, Gilles Villeneuve had captured a time, a place, a mood. Coming to Zolder, we realised, had been about celebrating a life that is unique and irreplaceable: One's own.

“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.”
– Enzo Ferrari