

# 1977 CANADIAN GRAND PRIX

GILLES VILLENEUVE MAKES HIS CANADIAN FERRARI DEBUT, BUT A DIFFERENT CANADIAN STEALS THE SHOW



STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY JEREMY SALE

For Canadian racing fans gathered at Mosport (Canadian Tire Motorsport Park) on October 9, 1977, there was to be drama aplenty. Number one, and the big focus for fans and I was the debut of Gilles Villeneuve in a Formula 1 Ferrari. A Canadian, driving for Ferrari! What could be better? With flimsy credentials I had scammed a photo pass, so I could go pretty much anywhere I liked.

Crouching behind a two-foot-high piece of Armco I took my photos of Villeneuve for posterity. Well, OK, mainly for myself. Finding the photos recently brought back some of the memories of the race, which had much more than its fair share of drama. Villeneuve, to the huge delight of Canadian fans, played a large part, though he ultimately didn't manage to finish the race. There was drama in practice. The track was rough by Formula 1 standards and there was concern about the cars getting "light" at the hump on the long back straight. Ian Ashley's Hesketh was destroyed on the Friday. According to Ashley, he had just passed Jacques Laffite's Ligier when the nose section on the Hesketh collapsed at over 300 kph and the car climbed 10 metres into the air and did two and a half back somersaults.

It took 45 minutes to cut Ashley out of the wrecked car and he was then whisked off to Sunnybrook Hospital by helicopter. Fortunately, he survived his injuries and returned to race IndyCars in 1985.

Niki Lauda provided further drama before the race started. With his 1977 F1 world championship now firmly locked up, Lauda, who had been unhappy with Ferrari for some time and joined Brabham the following year, declared that running a third car for Villeneuve was stretching the team's efforts too far. He abruptly decided on the Friday morning not to compete and left for Switzerland.

So what drama was left? There was plenty. Canadian fans still had Vil-

leneuve to cheer on, though he finished the Friday qualifying session with a crash at Moss Corner. There was also the Wolf WR1 designed by the great Harvey Postlethwaite, owned by Canadian Walter Wolf and sporting a Canadian flag on the nose. With Jody Scheckter driving, the car had won its very first time out in Argentina and then again at Monaco.

Could it win again in Canada?

The cars formed up on the damp grid with minutes to go before the start. Armed with my magic photo pass I walked between the front rows, clicking off a few shots of Mario Andretti. I was nervous. Sure that someone was going to say "where did you get that photo pass? You're not a real photographer!"

Andretti, in the black and gold John Player Lotus, impassively looked right through me. I took a few more shots and then the grid was cleared. Standing right beside the track, behind the minuscule Armco barrier, I raised my trusty Pentax camera and tried to look as though I belonged with the professional photographers. A frazzled marshal asked us to please move back a little, not that it would make the slightest difference if the cars touched wheels and launched themselves at us, mere feet from the track. We obediently retreated a yard or two, and then promptly moved back as he turned away.

Andretti was on pole in his Lotus with James Hunt (McLaren) beside him. Ronnie Peterson, in the six-wheel Tyrrell, and Gunnar Nilsson (Lotus) were on Row 2. Jochen Mass (McLaren) and Patrick Depailler (Tyrrell) were on Row 3, with Scheckter in the Wolf behind them. Carlos Reutemann and Villeneuve, in the uncompetitive Ferraris, were back in 12th and 17th, respectively.

When the flag dropped the explosion of power, as the cars rocketed away, was stunning from my position a few feet away. Twenty-five Grand



Gilles Villeneuve (above) was the main attraction at the 1977 Canadian Grand Prix, but race-winner South African Jody Scheckter (opposite page, main), in the Canadian Wolf WR1, stole the show.

Prix cars blasting off the grid so close I could almost touch them. Perhaps I jumped back, I can't remember, I think I probably froze until, seconds later, they were gone. Andretti jumped into the lead, closely followed by Hunt. Clay Regazzoni and John Watson were out almost immediately as the 80 lap charge continued on the wet track through the wind and the cold.

The Andretti versus Hunt chase went on for most of the race. I moved around to various positions by the track. I found a great spot between Turn 9 and 10 on the outside. I was a little nervous, as this was behind a tiny piece of Armco and was also the spot where Jim Hall had landed his flying Chaparral in 1964. But what the heck, it would be worth it for a picture of Villeneuve in a lovely four-wheel drift, rounding Turn 9 and, for a split second, pointing right at my camera.

I focussed on the spot on the track where he would be aiming right at me before flicking hard right into Turn 10. I was ready, but oops. For some reason, the photo was blurred. I vacated my spot shortly after.

By Lap 60 Andretti was still leading with Hunt in hot pursuit. In fact, so quick was their pace that they had lapped everyone except Hunt's teammate, Jochen Mass. As the two leaders came up behind him, Mass managed to impede Andretti at Moss Corner and Hunt quickly took advantage, getting by Andretti and into the lead.

But both Hunt and Andretti were still behind Mass and somehow at Turn 3 the two came together and Hunt was out of the race. Hunt, after standing trackside, angrily shaking his fist at "Herman the German" as he called his teammate, tried to cross the track and was restrained by a marshal. Still furious, Hunt punched the marshal, who went down for the count.

Years later, I tracked down the unfortunate marshal, Ernie Strong.

"The impact and momentum were enough for Hunt to lose a driver's shoe. I was first to the incident," said Strong. "James was headed back to the racing surface. I had no idea what was going on in his head. I was thinking he was disoriented and grabbed him from behind by the shoulders. Then he hit me with an uppercut! If I said anything to him I can't remember.

"Hunt gave me a 'Sorry, old man' and headed back to the pits and I went back to my corner station. Someone else on the corner saw the cut under my jaw and the blood trickling from it. I then got a ride trackside in the ambulance to the track medical station. How did I feel? Wronged and blindsided. Did that really happen? Ron Dennis came over to check on me and apologized. I never heard from James personally, but his brother, who was his personal manager, wrote me a letter of apology."

Hunt was fined \$2,750. Mass went on to finish third. There was more drama in the final four laps. On Lap 77, Riccardo Patrese spun his Shadow into the second Hesketh of Rupert Keegan, which had crashed earlier in the race and had been left on the side of the track. The following lap, Andretti's engine blew and laid oil as he coasted into the pits. Vittorio Brambilla (the Monza Gorilla!) hit this oil and spun his Surtees, collecting the wreckages of Keegan and Patrese's cars. Finally, Danny Ongais spun his Interscope Penske on the same oil, but was able to continue.

But all Canadian eyes were now on the car with the Maple Leaf flag on the nose. If we couldn't have Villeneuve's Ferrari win, how about the Wolf? Through the gathering gloom and rain, the victory grew closer and closer and so, in the end, Jody Scheckter brought the "Canadian" Wolf WR1 home in first place.

And I had my photos of Villeneuve.

### ABOUT VARAC

Jeremy Sale is the Publications Director for the Vintage Automobile Racing Association of Canada. VARAC is the main Vintage Racing Club in Eastern Canada and has members from Ontario, the Prairie Provinces, the US, Europe and Quebec. VARAC races cars made before 1990, split into four age groups: Pre-war (including post-war MG T series cars), Vintage (for cars up to December 31, 1961), Historic (for cars from January 1, 1962 to December 31, 1972) and Group 70+ (for cars from January 1, 1973 to December 31, 1989).

VARAC also organizes the annual Canadian Historic Grand Prix (CHGP) at Canadian Tire Motorsport Park. The 2015 CHGP is scheduled for June 19-21 and will feature historic Formula Fords as the feature class.

VARAC's philosophy is that vintage racing should be enjoyable to participants and spectators, with a minimum emphasis on trophies and awards. When you are competing just for the joy of taking part, it really does keep the fun in vintage racing. That's the VARAC spirit!

For more on VARAC, visit [www.varac.ca](http://www.varac.ca) and for more on the 2015 CHGP, visit [www.canadianhistoricgrandprix.com](http://www.canadianhistoricgrandprix.com).