

# Remembering Ronnie

Special feature  
Ronnie Peterson

Twenty-five years ago, F1 ace Ronnie Peterson died after a crash in the Italian Grand Prix. DAVID MALSHER looks back on the career of a man who epitomises racing in the '70s

**T**hink of Formula 1 at its most fantastic and there are a few driver/car combos that shine out like beacons: Jochen Rindt in a Lotus 49, Gilles Villeneuve in a Ferrari 312T4, Ayrton Senna in a Lotus 98T – and Ronnie Peterson in a Lotus 72.

Twenty-five years on from his death after a first lap crash in the Italian Grand Prix at Monza, it's still easy to understand why the Swede's special blend of automotive eye-candy had us salivating. Even back in the early to mid-'70s, when all the best drivers still drifted because that was the quickest way and tail-out antics were regarded as the norm, Peterson's exuberance was still extraordinary. He'd turn in at the conventional time, but get on the gas early,

nudging into oversteer even before the apex of the corner. And he would hold it out there. In an era when F1 cars rolled substantially, were softly sprung enough to absorb mid-corner bumps, and were booted with huge cross-ply tyres that slid progressively, Ronnie was not losing time by going sideways: he was using oversteer to go *faster* – faster than anyone else.

If we usually associate Peterson with the Lotus 72, so too you will find him inextricably linked with Monza. Not only did he win three grands prix there, but the Italian amphitheatre was also the scene of the fabulous battle between him and three other drivers for the spoils of the '71 GP, which he lost to Peter Gethin by just 0.01 seconds. Seven years later, Monza was where

his horrific final accident occurred. Peterson survived the fiery smash, but not the subsequent operation on his badly broken legs. A bone marrow embolism entered his bloodstream and he died 12 hours after the crash. It was a devastating blow for the sport.

For a driver who was held in such high regard, it's strange to think that in nine seasons in F1 Peterson never really had a clear shot at the title, despite twice – '75 and '78 – having the car to do it. In both cases he was behind the wheel of a Lotus. In both cases it came on the back of a season in the doldrums with another team. However, both times he was partnered with a genuine ace who became a major rival for the world championship.



## F1 TIMELINE

## Ups and downs

**1970** Antique Automobiles/Colin Crabbe Racing. March 701. Best Q position 9th (x2), Best finish 7th

The 701 is a tricky beast, and Crabbe's privateer team didn't have the best equipment. A quiet rookie campaign.



At Clermont in 1970, Ronnie qualified ninth

**1971** STP March Racing. March 711. Best Q position 5th, Best finish 2nd (x4), 2nd in championship

Elevated to the works March team, Ronnie is Stewart's closest title rival – and he almost wins the Italian GP.

**1972** STP March Racing. March 721/721X/721G. Best Q position 3rd, Best finish 3rd, 9th= in championship

The 721 is a bit of a duffer; Niki Lauda said so from the start. Ronnie enthused about it, but ultimately was to struggle.

**1973** John Player Team Lotus. Lotus 72D/72E. Best Q position 1st (x9), Best finish 1st (x4), 3rd in championship

High point: 1.9sec quicker than Emmo in Spain. Low point: losing to Denny Hulme on the penultimate lap – in Sweden!





**Ronnie's final win came in Austria in 1978. He took pole and fastest lap, too**



**Chapman celebrates the third of four Peterson victories in 1973, at Monza**

In '73 that ace was reigning world champion Emerson Fittipaldi.

"Ronnie was my best friend in Europe," recalls Fittipaldi. "So when Colin [team boss Chapman] told me he would possibly be my team-mate, I loved the idea. I knew he was going to be very fast, but if Ronnie had been in another team driving against me he would still have given me the same problem! But at the start of the year I won three of the first four GPs and was third in the other, so it was looking good for the year."

Over the course of the summer, though, Jackie Stewart fought back and Peterson's poor luck – the sort that robbed him of certain victory in Spain and Sweden, and podium finishes elsewhere – started to change. The Swede scored his maiden victory at Paul Ricard, was second at Silverstone and won again in Austria. Emmo was now on the back foot in defending his title from Stewart as the teams prepared for the Italian GP.

"We had agreed that if we were running one and two with 20 laps to go and Ronnie was ahead, then Colin would give him a signal for him to change over," says Fittipaldi. "But Colin never gave the sign. So when Ronnie looked in his mirrors and saw me, he started to race me!"

The manner of his title loss prompted Fittipaldi to leave Lotus for McLaren, but he felt no resentment towards his team-mate, and that surely says a huge amount about the Swede.

"We continued to get on very well," recalls Emmo. "He was a special guy with a great personality. Going wheel to wheel he always respected me; he never put me in a bad position. But he was a tough competitor, too – one of the toughest I have ever raced against."

Mario Andretti could be heard making similar "lovely bloke, amazing driver" comments five

years later. In between times, though, Peterson experienced just a few highs among plenty of lows. His stunning ability enabled him to carry the 72, effectively a five-year-old design, to three victories in '74 in the wake of the abject failure of its intended replacement, the 76. But even he hadn't a prayer in a 72 the following year, and when the new 77 looked set to flop, he ducked out after just one race of '76 and headed back to March for whom he scored a canny victory at Monza. However, he scored just one other point that year, and moved to Tyrrell, only to find a heavily-modified six-wheeler in its second year.

A disheartened Peterson was outclassed by Patrick Depailler that year, but Colin Chapman still signed him up for '78, knowing that just a whiff of a decent car would spark the Peterson talent into life.

Andretti realised this, too, and had to counter the Swede's searing pace.

"I had one up on him in setting the cars up," he says. "We'd start off each race weekend with basically the same car, and we'd try different set-ups and share our information. But when it came to fine-tuning, he didn't have a handle on that and would try to make up for it with his driving. But get the car working right for race day and you can do your part as a driver more consistently. Ronnie started to realise that when we were running in tandem. He had to work twice as hard just to go at the same speed."

"No doubt about it, though, he had amazing car control – it was an absolute beauty to watch. And having a team-mate like that makes you step it up, too. If you beat him, it's the best sort of day, and if you finish second to him, it's still a good day. That's the way to regard drivers of that kind of calibre."

## GUNNAR NILSSON

# Potential star

SWEDISH Formula 1 fans suffered a double tragedy in 1978, for on October 20, barely six weeks after Ronnie Peterson's death, compatriot Gunnar Nilsson succumbed to cancer. Of course it wasn't just Sweden that mourned: it was everyone whose life he had touched. No-one had a bad word to say about Nilsson: in just two seasons of F1 he had become one of the most popular figures in the paddock.

If Mario Andretti's affection for Peterson is blatant, it is matched by his regard for the man he had partnered at Lotus for the previous two years.

"Gunnar and I became very good friends in a very short space of time," he says. "He was that sort of guy. Easy to be with, and fun off the track."

On track the Lotus 77 was a daunting car for a rookie to fathom, and in '76 Nilsson did well to secure a couple of podiums and a handful of top-10 grid slots. He was almost always in Andretti's shadow, but a teacher-pupil relationship soon developed.

"There was a lot of mutual respect," agrees Mario, who was eight years Gunnar's



**Nilsson struggled with the 77 but he tried hard!**

senior. "His driving needed polishing up, but I could see the talent he had. I was watching practice trackside and saw the way he was attacking this particular corner – all throttle and wheelspin. We spoke after, and I pointed out that when he was going sideways he wasn't going forward, and he took that on board."

By mid-'77, driving the Lotus 78, Nilsson's confidence was flourishing, and at Zolder in his 22nd grand prix start Gunnar took a tremendous win in tricky wet/dry conditions.



**Gunnar and Ronnie died within six weeks of each other**

Among his peers it wasn't just team-mates who held Peterson in high regard, though. Stewart recalls a "quiet, placid man with a dry sense of humour", but a fierce competitor. "He was extraordinarily quick, an absolute natural, who drove with the verve of Jochen Rindt rather than the smoothness of Jimmy Clark. Ronnie could drive to the limit and beyond and there was

no-one who could teach him a thing about that.

But it's Fittipaldi who best sums up why we miss the tall blonde Viking from Orebro, Sweden: "For the spectators he was so special because his style of driving was always aggressive and spectacular. Often I saw Ronnie put himself and his car in positions that only Ronnie could recover. And he did." ❧



**Ronnie as everyone loved him: rowing an old Lotus 72 along with great panache, and a remarkable degree of success, in '73**



**It was clear immediately at Monza in 1978 that the accident was serious**

**1974** John Player Team Lotus Lotus 72D/72E/76  
Best Q position 1st,  
Best finish 1st (x3)  
5th in championship

Acrobatics reach new heights in pensionable car. Dijon drive is incredible, so is equalling Lauda's pole time at Brands.

**1975** John Player Team Lotus Lotus 72E  
Best Q position 4th,  
Best finish 4th  
12th= in championship

In the whole season, he leads one lap. It's at Monaco, where he shines, as ever. But in the Austrian rain, he's awesome.

**1976** John Player Team Lotus (x1), Theodore Racing (x1), March Engineering (x14) Lotus 77/March 761  
Best Q position 1st,  
Best finish 1st  
11th= in championship

Pole at Zandvoort, front row at Mosport – fantastic efforts.



**A triumph at Monza in 1976 driving the March**

**1977** Elf Team Tyrrell Tyrrell P34  
Best Q position 3rd,  
Best finish 3rd  
14th in championship

Six-wheeler in its second incarnation douses Ronnie's flame. Monaco and Mosport qualifying are only solace.

**1978** John Player Team Lotus Lotus 78/79  
Best Q position 1st (x3),  
Best finish 1st (x2)  
2nd in championship

Happy again; supremely quick again; mourned the world over  
**123 GPs. 10 wins, 14 poles**