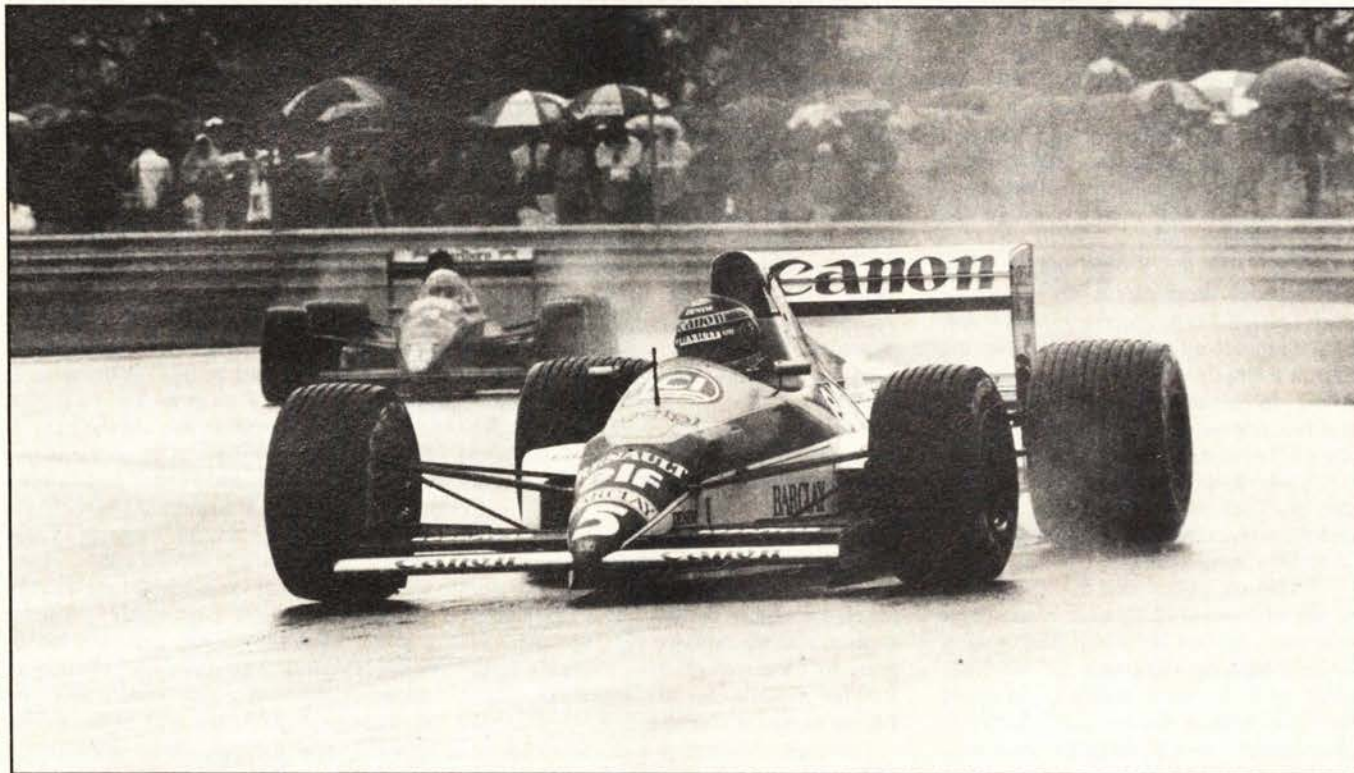


COMPETITION

Canadian Grand Prix, Montreal Yet another 1-2 finish

But this time—surprise—it's the Williams teammates at the front of the field

By Nigel Roebuck



Thierry Boutsen raced through the rain—why, he even smiled on the podium, after recording the first Grand Prix victory of his career

All through qualifying we suspected another 1-2. And we got it. After Ayrton Senna retired, it was plain sailing.

What's that you say? After Senna retired? What kind of 1-2 was this? The McLarens weren't involved?

Well, actually, no. It does happen sometimes. It happened to Ferrari at Monza last September. Of course, the McLaren-Hondas had to account for themselves on that occasion. On Sunday they did the same thing. Consequently, in the appalling conditions at Montreal, the Williams-Renaults of Thierry Boutsen and Riccardo Patrese came through, and not too many people were sad about it. Smiling winners are hard to find these days.

Some risk of thundery showers around noon was the TV weather prediction for Quebec last Sunday. The man was either a raving incompetent or a lunatic. By first light it was teeming down, and through the morning there was only occasional respite.

There'd be hints of blue through the clouds, even the odd, brief balm of sun, but then the umbrellas would go up again, and quickly. Most of us were soaked through before we reached the paddock.

Nigel Mansell, at least, was pleased with this meteorological development. He has always been quick in the rain, and now saw the Canadian Grand Prix as a rare opportunity to get on terms with the McLarens. In the warmup he was fastest—just—over Boutsen's Williams, with Alain Prost and Senna next up, nearly two seconds away. It didn't necessarily mean anything beyond the fact that wet races throw up wild cards. You knew that from the fifth and sixth men, Roberto Moreno and Nelson Piquet.

If Mansell's session was free of problems, however, teammate Gerhard Berger's was not. His Ferrari ran but a lap before pitting with gearchange problems. As usual, they had nothing to do with the semi-automatic gearbox itself. The problem was elec-

tronic, stemming from the alternator. And we would see more of the same before the day was through.

The start was scheduled for 12 noon, precisely the hour at which the "thundery showers" were due to present themselves. In fact, at this point the skies were clearing, the day brightening perceptibly. But the track, although drying visibly, still glistened in the sun too much for anyone to consider starting on anything other than wets. And a "wet race" was officially declared, which meant every man for himself if, and when, it came to tire changes.

For the 10s and 12s—if not their drivers—the rain was manna, for their more supple throttle response was highly desirable on a slippery track, and there was less reason to fear running out of fuel on this, the thirstiest circuit in Formula One use.

The risk was further reduced after the final parade lap, for Berger stalled on the grid, which meant going through the whole

starting procedure again—and a reduction in the race distance from 70 to 69 laps.

Off they went for the second time, and in the course of the parade lap both Mansell and Alessandro Nannini decided to gamble on slicks. By now, they reckoned, a dry "line" was far away and they peeled off into the pits while the rest moved in formation up to the grid. The tire changes were swiftly effected and Mansell and Nannini duly powered away to the end of pit lane, from where they expected to join the action.

At which point official incompetence came into the picture. Mansell expected to find a red light at the pit exit, but there was none. He slowed, looked about him, then floored it. Nannini, a little later, was confronted with a flashing yellow, but not a red. He followed the Ferrari out. Each, not surprisingly, assumed the race had started.

Not so. A few seconds after Mansell and Nannini were on their way, the rest got the green light on the grid.

Farcical. Had the Ferrari and Benetton really started? Were they a lap behind, or what? Later a FISA statement would suggest it was up to all competitors to know the rules for themselves, but that was fatuous, a cop-out. In circumstances like these, a racing driver responds to his instincts; he sees a red light, he stops; he doesn't, he doesn't.

Officials disqualified both Mansell and Nannini. They should also have disqualified themselves from positions of authority at a World Championship.

Exit Mansell, fastest man in the warmup, and one who would surely have been central to this race. And on lap seven, Berger, who had been hassling vigorously for the lead, retired with the same problem. Magneti Marelli has work to do here, and quickly.

Immediately prior to Berger's departure, he had been pressing Patrese for first place. We were only a few minutes into the Canadian Grand Prix and already much had occurred. In the course of the first lap Modena had hit a puddle, then Pierluigi Martini's Minardi, then the wall.

Very soon afterward, Prost was out, too. Under braking, the top left-hand front suspension pick-up point simply pulled out of the monocoque. Hard to believe a manufacturing fault of a McLaren, but true.

At the end of the fourth lap, Senna was in for dry tires, rejoining in fifth place. At the front were the Williams-Renaults of Patrese and Boutsen, followed—temporarily—by Berger. Fourth, remarkably, was Lola-Lamborghini of Philippe Alliot, then Derek Warwick's Arrows and Larini's Osella.

At 10 laps it was Patrese, over Boutsen, a fast-recovering Senna (now on slicks).

Now the rain began to come down again—precisely as Boutsen came into the pits for a change onto slicks. At the time it looked like the end of the Belgian's day. Senna's, though, looked to be following a familiar path. Raining it might have been,



Derek Warwick actually had his Arrows in front for four laps before Senna surged past

but his dry-shod McLaren began to close on Patrese's wet-tired Williams. It was the World Champion at his most inspired. By lap 15 the two were running together, and by now it was pelting down.

For all his freakish abilities, though, in these circumstances Senna began inevitably to fall back again. So hard was the rain that we began to ponder the question of the race being stopped. On lap 16 Senna was 2.5 seconds back of Patrese, and 22 ahead of Warwick. By lap 20 he was 23 seconds behind the Williams, and only a couple clear of Warwick. So it was into the pits again, this time for more wets. And when he came back out his position was sixth, going on a minute behind the leader. Conditions now were dreadful.

However, Senna is Senna. Anyone who witnessed his first Grand Prix victory, at Estoril back in 1985, knows of his unequalled sureness of foot on a treacherous surface, and we expected him, on fresh wet tires, to carve pieces from Patrese's lead. But for a while the gap remained static. Patrese looked in fine shape.

Teammate Boutsen, though, was back in 12th, with only Ivan Capelli and Moreno behind him. After struggling with the slicks, Boutsen came in for wets.

"There was no choice at all," he said. "It was impossible to continue without wets. My first stop had been a disaster—I'd stopped for slicks at exactly the wrong moment because as soon as I rejoined, the rain began again. As well as that, the stop itself had been very slow, because they couldn't get the right-front on. After the second stop I was a long way back, and things looked hopeless for me."

"My tires really weren't in very good shape by this stage," Warwick said, "but I kept in touch with the pits all the time and they kept telling me to stay out there."

Patrese was in the same predicament, but came in for new wets on lap 25, thereby handing the lead to Warwick. "I hadn't led a Grand Prix for five years," he said, "and I'd forgotten what 'P1' meant."

"Realistically, I knew I wasn't going to keep Senna back for very long, but I thought we might hang on for a second."

For four laps Warwick was in front, and it was a lovely thing to see. But Senna was

lapping three or four seconds faster, and on lap 39 came by in the lead, apparently set for the afternoon. Only two laps later Warwick pulled off. "Don't know what it was," he said. "I change up from fourth to fifth, and the engine just cut out. Dead."

Now it was brighter and the track started to dry out. Senna had a 25-second lead over Patrese, who was 20 seconds on Boutsen.

The last part of the race looked like a stalemate: Senna over the Williams pair, all of them well spread out. Quite suddenly, as we went into the last 20 laps, Boutsen began to catch Patrese. By lap 61 the two white cars were circulating as one. At the hairpin, Boutsen made his move. Out of the corner both cars fishtailed and Patrese let his teammate know he wasn't finished yet with second place, putting him on the grass as they accelerated up towards the old pits.

"Riccardo, you know, is not the kind of guy who lets people pass easily," Thierry grinned, "but it was O.K." He got by, finally, and four laps later that overtaking maneuver assumed a new significance. As Senna began lap 67, the wail of the Honda engine became a cough. Senna immediately pulled off to the left, parked it, cockpit shrouded in smoke.

Without a backward glance, he walked toward the pits, not looking as distressed as one might have expected. He had driven a stupendous race, and Prost, after all, had not scored, either. And if Senna were to hand victory to anyone, he would probably choose Boutsen, his closest friend among the drivers.

Thus a disbelieving Boutsen found himself in the lead, with only eight miles to the flag. "When I saw 'P1' on the board, I couldn't believe it," he said, "and next time round, when it was still there, I was petrified! Here I was, about to win my first Grand Prix, and imagining all the things that could go wrong."

Boutsen's confidence has been low recently. His Rio testing accident affected him more than he had acknowledged at the time. "What he really needs," suggested Renault Sport boss Patrick Faure, "is a good result—a podium." He got that, and more. And what a delight to see someone new win a Grand Prix, someone not blasé about it, someone who smiled in victory. ■