
Jo Bonnier, Gentleman Driver

21 April 2014 | Charis Whitcombe

What is a 'gentleman driver'? Someone, perhaps, with the wealth to pay for his own drives but the talent to mix it with professionals at the highest levels of the sport? In which case, the heroic Swede, Joakim 'Jo' Bonnier, undoubtedly fulfils the criteria.

As Patrick McNally wrote in Autosport magazine, Bonnier 'enjoyed the gentle art of living gracefully without extravagance'. Tragically, these words were written in 1972, following Bonnier's death in the Le Mans 24 Hours. He was killed by a slower driver's error, in a race the Swede had led early on. What made it even harder to take was that Bonnier had been close to retirement after 24 successful years of racing.

The son of a professor of genetics at Stockholm University, Jo was born in 1930. Well-heeled, well-educated and cosmopolitan, he spoke six languages like a local. The world was at his feet when his passion for motor sport blossomed in 1948. Beginning as an amateur rally driver and ice racer, his ability to mix it with the world's best racing drivers soon emerged. By 1956, in a rapidly changing world, Bonnier turned professional - that being the best way to get good drives.

Of Maseratis and broken bones



His pro career began with Maserati in 1956, but at Imola he tangled with a backmarker in a race that very nearly cost him his life. After a poor start, he was gaining on the race leader at two seconds per lap when the slower driver pulled in front of him. Unable to avoid a high-speed collision, Bonnier was upside down in the air when his crash helmet struck the helmet of the other driver. As his Maserati hurtled towards destruction Bonnier was thrown out. Several bones, including vertebrae, were broken but he was alive and, as ever, keen. In 1957 GPs, he drove a Maserati 250F for the private Scuderia Centro Sud.

The greatest moment of his F1 racing career came in 1959, when Bonnier's BRM P25 took a convincing victory over Jack Brabham's Cooper-Climax in the Dutch GP at Zandvoort. After 10 years, it was the BRM team's first World Championship win and the first by a Swedish driver. Jo Bonnier's F1 career seemed on the brink of stardom but it was not to be - his remaining two years with BRM were marked by retirements.

The impeccable manners of a true gentleman



Stuck on the fringe of F1, Jo sometimes appeared as a reliable substitute driver for the works teams but he usually privately entered cars. From 1966 to 1971 he was a genuine F1 private entrant in his own right, occasionally getting good results with uncompetitive cars including an unwieldy Cooper-Maserati. Bonnier deserved better and he found it in sportscar racing, where he scored countless major victories, including the Targa Florio twice, in 1960 and 1963, with the Porsche works team. With Phil Hill, sharing a Chaparral, he won the 1966 Nürburgring 1000Km. There were many more.

Jo Bonnier had the impeccable manners of a true gentleman, formal yet with an almost alarming tendency to speak directly. That was countered by an extraordinary charm. Such qualities made him an extremely effective Chairman of the Grand Prix Drivers' Association from 1963 to 1971. He campaigned tirelessly for improved track safety – right up to his shocking death in that 180mph accident in 1972. It was a terrible loss.

Photos: Getty Images / Rex Features

<https://www.classicdriver.com/en/article/classic-life/jo-bonnier-gentleman-driver>

© Classic Driver. All rights reserved.