Villeneuve flags down Lou Marsh

Wins close vote over sprinter Donovan Bailey

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The groundbreaking year of Jacques Villeneuve continued yesterday.

Villeneuve, 24, was named 1995 winner of the Lou Marsh Trophy as Canada's athlete of the year, the first auto racer to receive that award in a year when he was the first Canadian to win both the Indianapolis 500 and the IndyCar series championship.

The native of Berthierville, Que., grew up in Monaco, where his father the late Gilles Villeneuve, moved his family when his mercurial career in world championship Formula One racing took off. He died at 30 in a 1982 crash while practicing for the Belgian Grand Prix.

Jacques is following in those large family footsteps, parlaying his IndyCar success into a ride with the top-rated Williams-Renault F1 team.

While the Marsh award was being discussed by the selection panel, Villeneuve was in day four of a heavy test session at the Estoril track in Portugal and wound up second on the day's time sheet to teammate Damon Hill - after being quickest Wednesday - but in front of two-time world champion Michael Schumacher.

The award commemorates the late Lou marsh, long-time sports editor of The Star, and the winner is selected by a panel comprising the sports editors of the three Toronto daily newspapers - Dave Perkins of The Star, David Langford of the Globe and Mail and Scott Morrison of the Toronto Sun - Canadian Press sports editor Neil Davidson and Brian Williams of CBC Sports.

Villeneuve took the award in a close vote over sprinter Donovan Bailey of Oakville, who won the 100 metres at the world track and field championships.

Also receiving consideration were world men's figure skating champion Elvis Stojko of Richmond Hill, speed skater Susan Auch of Winnipeg, out
Indy champ follows father into head of Formula One

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fielder Larry Walker of the Colorado Rockies from Maple Ridge, B.C., and centre Eric Lindros of the Philadelphia Flyers, from Toronto.

The selectors gave the Marsh award to Villeneuve because of his season-long consistency (four victories at Miami, Indianapolis, Road America in Wisconsin and Cleveland, plus six pole positions as fastest qualifier); his brilliant drive in auto racing's richest event, the Indy 500, when he won despite a two-lap penalty; and his sharing the F1 ride with an exceptional test session.

Villeneuve could not be reached at the Portuguese track yesterday for comment on the award.

While traditionalists scorn race drivers' being included with athletes from other games, some physiologists now say that F1 drivers very likely are the best conditioned sports participants.

Small and wiry at 5-foot-6 and 145 pounds, Villeneuve was an excellent competitive downhill skier in his early teens, which he spent in Switzerland attending a private school.

"I liked sports with speed and a bit of risk," Villeneuve said. "I made the choice between skiing and car racing, no big deal. Racing cars offered a big challenge."

"One part of that is to be fit, especially in stamina, because the long races like the 500-milers of the multi-turn road courses can be very exhausting. I run a great deal, swim as much as I can and work on the gym equipment to build up my ability to do an intense activity, often in very hot temperatures, for extended periods."

Villeneuve's name was part of his appeal to F1 teams. Gilles Villeneuve was a major sporting hero in Europe (especially Italy) with the beloved Ferrari team) with his flat-out driving approach and easy-going, accessible personality.

Gilles won six races in his five-plus seasons, including a dramatic first victory in the '78 Canadian Grand Prix at Montreal, where the circuit now bears his name.

His son plays down the obvious family emulation factor but there's no escape.

"I was too young to really know my father as a race driver, just as my dad, but it was fun to go to the races with him when I was young," Villeneuve said. "I did not get into racing because my dad had been a driver. It was just something I wanted to try."

After attending race driver schools in Mont Tremblant, Que., and at Shannonville, Ont., where he also took a mechanic's course that has proved invaluable in his ability to set up race cars, Villeneuve raced sedans and open wheelers in Italy, then spent a year in the Japanese F3 series, winning three times.

Player's Ltd., long-time auto racing sponsor, brought Villeneuve to North America, first in the '93 Atlantic Championship -- the series where Gilles had made his name and earned an F1 try -- then in IndyCar on a team fielded by the brilliant Barry Green.

Villeneuve was second to Al Unser, Jr., in the '94 Indy 500, won at Road America with a brilliant late pass of Canadian Paul Tracy and was top rookie in the series, an indicator of what was ahead.

Only three F1 teams are winners now -- Williams, Benetton and Ferrari -- and Villeneuve was invited to test for Williams in August.

His times were the equal of team drivers Hill and David Coulthard. Hill was retained; Villeneuve was hired to replace Coulthard on a contract worth approximately $5 million in '96.

"It might be a dozen years before another chance with a team like Williams came along," Villeneuve said. "When the train slows down in front of you with a door open, you have to jump on."