

THE DAY WHEN JACQUES LAFFITE WON HIS LAST GRAND PRIX

Jacques Laffite only won six grands prix in 13 years and never laid his hands on the world championship.

But he came close, very close.

In 1981, the Ligier team strapped Matra's screaming V 12 to the back of Laffite's JS17 chassis.

The combination scored five podium finishes and a win in Austria.

But travelling to Canada for the penultimate round, the Frenchman was still only on the fringes of the title battle. He needed a win.

Running the '81 Canadian grand prix in September, was not one of the sharpest pieces of Formula One scheduling.

At that time of year, the winds blow from the North West Territory's icy wastes, bringing early snow and bone-achingly cold rain to Montreal.

Friday qualifying, however, was conducted in autumnal sunshine, with only a hint of things to come. Saturday's session, however, clouded to a dull overcast.

Throughout qualifying, the Michelin-shod runners, Laffite among them, had struggled to bring their tyres up to a temperature where their surface magically changes from hard and glassy to soft and sticky.

The Ligier driver would start tenth.

Meanwhile his main title rivals, nearly all on Goodyear rubber, occupied the first two rows of the grid.

Nelson Piquet (Brabham) was on pole position, with championship leader Carlo Reutemann (Williams) breathing down his neck.

Alan Jones(Williams) and Alain Prost(Renault) were right behind.

The paddock woke up to a storm on Sunday—and not just that provided by the sheeting rain. Team bosses were unhappy at an insurance waiver foisted on them by the race organisers and refused to sign it.

It took all the persuasive powers of Formula One Constructor's Association president Bernie Ecclestone to break the impasse.

But ninety minutes had been lost, during which the weather had worsened.

In the Goodyear garages, faces were as dark as the clouds.

Goodyear wets were no match for Michelin's.

The tables had been turned.

By the start the track was awash.

Great rooster tails of spray plumed into the air as 24 sets of wheels fought to clear the water that divided them from the asphalt.

The tyres on Jones' Williams bit first and propelled him into the lead.

Behind him a wall of water reduced visibility to zero.

Accidents were inevitable.

Eleven of the day's 13 retirements were due to contact with the barriers—or other cars.

Laffite was revelling in the conditions, however. He was up to fourth by Lap Five.

Two laps later, Jones spun-- holding up second- placed Piquet.

Prost ducked past both to lead, followed by Laffite.

The Renault kept the Ligier at bay for six more laps before giving up the unequal contest.

P.2

John Watson's McLaren, also on Michelins, tried to mount a challenge, but could make no dent in Lafitte's 20 second advantage.

On Lap 63 of the scheduled 70, the race reached the magic two-hour mark, beyond which no grand prix is allowed to run.

Lafitte was declared the winner. His points total was swelled to 43, six behind Reutemann and five behind Piquet.

The title was within his grasp going into the US grand prix at Las Vegas.

However, his dreams were dashed in the Caesar's Palace car park three weeks later, when he finished a lacklustre sixth.

The crown went instead to Piquet.

Lafitte never won another grand prix.

He had two unproductive years with Williams in '83 and '84 before returning to Ligier.

In a freak accident at the start of the British grand prix at Brand's Hatch, his car was deflected nose first into the barriers at high speed.

His legs were broken.

His Formula One career was over.