

# Canada's New Star Wins



Gilles Villeneuve. Marc Sproule Photo

By Gary Witzenburg

Road Atlanta is not a place, not a "thing". She is undeniably a living female creature, though few would call her a lady. She is grassy green on top, Georgia red on her flanks and purely cantankerous underneath. She charms spectators, exhausts corner workers, frustrates race drivers, seduces the working press and eats cars like popcorn for breakfast, lunch and dinner, as this report will show.

## PRACTICE

The F/Atlantic field was large, strong and, for the most part, fast — a credit to the series its first time out this year. Seven of the 42 entries were Canadian, one Mexican, one Jamaican, five Californian, one Texan, with the rest from the East and Midwest. Canadian champ Bill Brack was there with his day-glo red STP Chevron B34, along with young protege Kevin Cogan, straight off the West Coast go-kart circuit, piloting a virgin-white B29. French-Canadian snowmobile king Gilles Villeneuve had a pair of shiny green March 76Bs and an operation which made John Greenwood look like a pauper.

Tom Bagley unveiled his brand new Fred Opert Racing Chevron dressed in lovely blue-on-yellow Kent Oil colors. Bobby Rahal rolled out a matched set of new Doug Shierson Marches in Red Roof Inn orange. Howdy Holmes and Johnny Gerber were the Bill Scott Chevron entries, the former sporting Jiffy Foods sponsorship. Tom Pumpelly had a new March with support from National Tire Wholesalers.

And there were a lot of other names well-known from one series or another: speedy independent Tom Klausler in the only new Lola T460; Jim Crawley in a Fred Opert Chevron; Canadian Marcel Talbot in a Tamaco Industries Chevron; Pat Walter in the Ralt, Tim Cooper, Cliff Hansen, Tom Outcault, Vince Muzzin, James King and Don Breiden-

bach in Marches, Lloyd Callaway, Wink Bancroft and Bobby Brown in Chevrons (Brown with Audiovox backing); John Barringer, James Cushing, Richard Melville and Harry MacDonald in Lola T360s (the latter belonging to Fred Phillips), and Carl Liebich up from Formula Ford in a Chevron B29.

The first of three qualifying sessions was flagged off at the mind-bending hour of 8:04 a.m. Saturday, and the drivers with no Road Atlanta experience set about the ticklish task of learning its formidable hills and bends. Crawley emerged as a surprise star of the first session at 1:22.626. Only Pumpelly was quicker at 1:22.598, (109.8mph) and Bagley and Rahal were the only others to break into the '22s, with 1:22.832 and 1:22.916, respectively.

The second session found hapless Holmes still awaiting a new clutch at the Bill Scott truck, while most others were out improving their times. Tim Cooper spun his March in turn seven and slid safely to a stop, only to be nailed by Hansen as the latter emerged from the blind entrance to the turn. Neither car was seriously damaged.

By the time the third session rolled around, there was a lot of engine changing going on. Road Atlanta, apparently feasting happily on errant GT and RS cars, had left the Atlantic machinery relatively unscathed — but she was taking her toll in powerplants. Most notable casualty was Rahal, whose crew had installed his fresh engine only to strip the spark plug threads and which was hurriedly changing to an untested unit for the heat race.

But Holmes was flying with his fresh clutch in place and quickly got down to 1:21.190 in spite of having missed most of the day's earlier track time. Villeneuve was also homing in on the fast lines and finally bettered Howdy's time with a 1:21.131. Klausler was the only other man in the '21s during the final go, piloting the new Lola to a 1:21.758 mark. Brack, Brown and King improved their times into the 1:22 bracket, while Bagley and Pumpelly were somewhat slower than before.

## HEAT RACES

With Pumpelly on the pole and Villeneuve next door, the first heat took the green at 3:18 p.m. The French-Canadian quickly took over the lead and the race evolved into a big bore — a rarity in F/Atlantic racing. Pumpelly held his second spot, followed by Klausler, Crawley, Breidenbach, Melville, Brack and Cooper. Brack lost several positions due to a minor first-lap spin, and provided most of the interest for the rest of the contest. By lap three, Brack had passed Melville and was closing on Breidenbach, who had inherited fourth due to an off-course indiscretion by Crawley. Tim Cooper had followed Brack past Melville and was sitting in sixth position.

The question was whether Brack could

catch Breidenbach for fourth in the remaining laps; he seemed to be trying very hard. Grid positions for the feature would be determined by finishing positions in the heats, so fourth place for Brack would mean the difference between the fourth and fifth rows for the contest that counted.

But the final order was Villeneuve, Pumpelly, Klausler, and Breidenbach, still barely ahead of the frustrated Brack; followed by Crawley, Cooper, Melville, Barone and Talbot. The race had taken less than 14 minutes to cover 25 miles at an average speed of 110.324mph. Villeneuve's margin over Pumpelly at the finish was a fairly comfortable 1.45 seconds.

## A HOWDY-BURGER

The second heat was a tad more interesting than the first but still far short of the F/At standard. Rahal, starting from pole next to Holmes, immediately jumped into the lead with Bobby Brown squeezed by Howdy — and Bagley proceeded to make a Howdy sandwich by pressing the Jiffy Mix Chevron between himself and Brown.

By lap eight, Rahal had cruised to a four-second lead, but just one lap later, and one lap away from the checkered, he coasted to a stop on the back straight. "Apparently we broke some rings," Bobby said. "It started blowing oil, but I didn't see it. Then the oil light blinked on, then off again, then on again. As I reached to shut it off, the engine blew." An expensive misfortune, and one that meant he would start Sunday's feature from the back of the bus instead of the driver's seat. One Bobby's bad luck was another's good. Brown suddenly found himself holding off Holmes for the lead. But Howdy's no dummy, and those who expected a last minute move for the win were sorely disappointed. Choosing to preserve his car and energy for the final, he followed the Audiovox Chevron across the line by a scant 0.188 seconds, Bagley still close behind in third.

Bobby Rahal, Atlanta star.

Bruce Czaja Photo





# America's New Series

Cobb had fallen abruptly out of sixth place and into Road Atlanta's jaws by spinning into the turn seven banking on the final lap. The average speed for the second heat was 111.571mph, better than one mph faster than the first 10-lapper.

## FINAL

Sunday morning burst as bright and beautiful as any race day ever has. Only a couple of campers had been jailed overnight and only a handful of motorcycles bore toothmarks from Road Atlanta's bedtime snacks. But the track had awakened ravenous for race cars after a good night's sleep.

There were many engine changes overnight, and the F/At troops were greeted with their first unpleasant surprise of the day in the form of a schedule change; their warmup was moved to 10:40 a.m. instead of the originally-planned 12:30 p.m. This undoubtedly hurt some teams counting on that extra two hours of preparation.

Thirty-five cars started the pace lap and 34 took the green flag at 3:03 p.m. with 100 miles of racing ahead. Pat Walter's Ralt was the first casualty, taking the pit lane at the start to end a frustrating weekend. Johnny Gerber and Vince Muzzin were also among the non-starters.

## GILLES & TOM

Going into turn one, Villeneuve out-braked Brown and Pumpelly followed him through, setting the stage for a classic battle between the green Skiroule (Snowmobiles) March and the similar National Tire Wholesalers' yellow machine. Less than a minute and a half later, Brown, Klausler, Brack (up from ninth), Bagley, Crawley and Breidenbach followed the lead pair across the line to complete the first lap, Holmes and King having fallen to ninth and tenth respectively. Rahal was already up to 22nd with Hansen following.

By lap two, the order had settled somewhat among the leaders except poor Howdy Holmes had faded to 11th, obviously suffering from some sort of mechanical troubles. Melville, running 14th, had pulled off at turn seven with a disabled Lola; and Rahal came by in 18th, with Hansen 20th. For the next two laps, while Rahal was picking off three positions per lap to Hansen's two, attention was focused on the lead pair. Villeneuve was not running away as he had in the heat race, and on lap four Pumpelly got by him in traffic at turn five. Crawley had moved into sixth ahead of Bagley, but then went off course with a broken halfshaft at turn 11.

The fourth time by the start/finish, it was Pumpelly leading the young French-Canadian, while the order behind was still fairly stable. Rahal had moved into 12th behind Cooper and Holmes, who was hanging in there with an obviously under-powered racer.

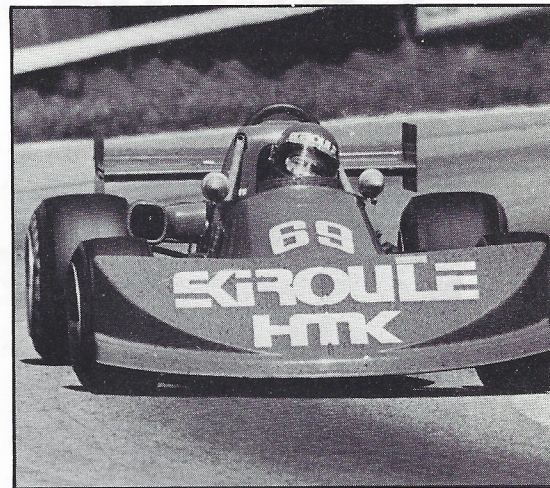
JULY 1976

## Results

Road Atlanta Formula Atlantic  
Gainesville, Georgia  
April 11, 1976  
40 Laps, 100 Miles

1. Gilles Villeneuve, Ecurie Canada/Skiroule March 76B, 40 laps, 55 min 20.907, 109.271mph average; 2. Tom Pumpelly, March 76B, 40 laps; 3. Bobby Brown, Bob Brown Racing Chevron B34, 40 laps; 4. Tom Bagley, Fred Opert Racing Chevron B34, 40 laps; 5. Don Breidenbach, March 76B, 40 laps; 6. Carl Liebich, Chevron B29, 40 laps; 7. Cliff Hansen, Shierston Racing March 76B, 40 laps; 8. Tom Klausler, Lola T460, 40 laps; 9. Wink Bancroft, Performance Marketing Chevron B34, 39 laps; 10. Tim Cooper, Bunce Racing March 752, 39 laps; 11. Price Cobb, Shierston Racing March 76B, 39 laps; 12. Tom Outcault, March 76B, 39 laps; 13. Marcel Talbot, Tamco Industries Chevron B34, 39 laps; 14. \*Michael Landrum, Chevron B27, 38 laps; 15. Kevin Cogan, Bill Brack Racing Chevron B29, 38 laps; 16. Sebe Barone, Shierston Racing March 76B, 38 laps; 17. John Baringer, Bill Scott Racing Lola T360, 38 laps; 18. Joe Colantonio, Lola T360, 38 laps; 19. \*James King, Raggedy Ann Motorsports March 76B, 37 laps; 20. Syd Demovsky, Demovsky Racing Chevron B29, 36 laps; 21. William Kneeland, Chevron B29, 31 laps; 22. \*Bobby Rahal, Shierston Racing March 76B, 27 laps; 23. \*Harold MacDonald, HCM Racing Lola T360, 27 laps; 24. \*Lloyd Callaway, Chevron B27, 23 laps; 25. \*Herman Gugliotta, Shierston Racing March 76B, 11 laps; 26. \*Howard Kelly, K-D Mfg Co Ltd Brabham BT40, 9 laps; 27. \*Howdy Holmes, Bill Scott Racing Chevron B34, 7 laps; 28. \*Bill Brack, STP/Bill Brack Racing Chevron B34, 5 laps; 29. \*Bob Nelkin, Nelkin Racing Organization Chevron B29, 5 laps; 30. \*Bruce Jensen, Jensen Exotic Plants Chevron B29, 5 laps; 31. \*Jim Crawley, Bill Scott Racing Chevron B34, 3 laps; 32. \*J. Desjardins, Lola T360, 3 laps; 33. \*James Cushing, Lola T360, 3 laps; 34. \*Richard Melville, Bunce Racing Lola T460, 1 lap; 35. \*Pat Walter, Ameropean Racing Ralt RT1, 0 laps.

\* Not running at the finish



Villeneuve at speed. Bruce Czaja Photo

Brack checked into the pits with something amiss in the handling department next time around ("We won't know what it is until we take it apart," said a crew member); and poor, tired Howdy Holmes joined him two laps later with a broken distributor drive to make a pair of very disappointed front runners.

Breidenbach was now running sixth, having gotten by King on the sixth lap, and Klausler knocked Brown out of third on lap nine. By lap 10 (one-quarter distance), it was still Pumpelly with a one-second lead over Villeneuve, followed by Klausler, Brown, Bagley, Rahal (up 26 positions in 10 laps), Breidenbach, King, Liebich and Cooper. Hansen had apparently leveled off in 11th, having gained 20 positions since the start.

That's the way it stayed for the next 10 circuits, except that Rahal picked off Bagley on lap 15, then Brown on 17 to lie fourth at half distance — and was gaining two seconds a lap on third place Klausler. Hansen had also climbed one more notch, passing Cooper for tenth on the 18th lap.

## BOBBY'S CHARGE

Two laps later things started to get exciting again. Klausler went wide under the bridge at turn eleven and Rahal drove inside him to take third coming down the hill. Next time around, Villeneuve had re-taken the lead and Pumpelly's yellow March had fallen to within kissing range of the charging Rahal, the result of a spin at turn seven.

Rahal continued to gain on Pumpelly, and the race got really interesting when Villeneuve spun at the very slippery turn seven and lost his 13-second lead. Now both leaders were within Rahal's grasp, and Bobby was prepared to move into the lead. But just as he pulled alongside Pumpelly on the back straight, his throttle cable snapped and his run was over. "I thought I had it won," said the very unhappy driver after the race.

Free of the bothersome Red Roof Inn

March, Pumpelly began gaining a few tenths a lap on the speedy Villeneuve. By lap 35 the margin was down to 0.6 seconds, but one circuit later the Canadian had opened a one-second lead.

One lap from the finish Pumpelly had again closed to within a second and it looked like he might have a shot at the win. Klausler had faded from third to fifth place and crossed start/finish very slowly. Then, when the leaders were coming into nasty turn seven for the last time, hungry old Road Atlanta flicked her tongue, missing the green car but sending the yellow machine flying off course again. Pumpelly escaped her clutches to salvage second, but finished 13.5 seconds in arrears.

Villeneuve, who says his goal is F1 did the 100 miles in 55 minutes and 20 seconds for an average speed of 109.271mph. Brown drove consistently to finish third (now with 500 miles on his engine) after Klausler's demise, and Bagley brought his lovely Kent Oil Chevron home fourth ahead of Breidenbach and Liebich. Hansen had passed Klausler for seventh, but Bancroft and Cooper did not catch the crippled Lola, finishing ninth and 10th, one lap down.

Out there over the hill, around turns five, six and seven on the far side of the course, greedy old Road Atlanta could be heard above the din of gridding GT cars, noisily munching on formula car suspensions and fiberglass and waiting. ○

Bill Brack puts a slow car ahead of Tom Pumpelly. Steven Mayer Photo

