

Gunnar Nilsson remembered, by Mario Andretti

Submitted by [Andy Hallbery](#) on June 4, 2012



It was 35 years ago this week that Gunnar Nilsson scored his one and only Grand Prix win. Who better to get thoughts and memories from than one of racing's legends, Mario Andretti, teammate to Gunnar at Lotus?

By [Mario Andretti](#)

Gunnar was a free spirit, a really nice individual who was easy to be friends with. We just loved the guy, the family did. It's rare that you have a teammate that you spend a quite a bit of time with outside a racing weekend. He was one that was special to us, he really, truly was. I remember going to Sweden... and spending time with him there. Of course we would be testing but I would be there for a week and a half, we would do our 'gallivanting,' if you will.



He became a true friend. Between him and Ronnie (Peterson) you can imagine! I used to call them the “Swedish wankers!” It was a very warm relationship that we had. It’s just amazing that we had to lose Gunnar the way we did. It’s actually... Well it’s wrong.

It’s not very common to have that sort of relationship with your teammate. We were very compatible with one another and even though there was some age difference, I really wanted him to do well. I would interject and do some ‘critiquing’. I remember I had an issue in Japan, in Fuji in 1976. It was during practice. I was parked on the side of the track and I was watching him. He was really just hustling the car and wasting a lot of motion.

I suggested a few things to him and he picked up a half a second a lap. I had more experience than he did and I was totally willing to share it with him. I just wanted him to spread his wings. There was a definite talk about coming to Indianapolis where I could help him too. I wanted him to experience all of it.

Gunnar came to America and did IROC in 1978, and did really well. They were the last three races he did before the illness really took hold. I definitely felt comfortable that he had the talent to deal with Indianapolis for sure. Before him I was very friendly with Clay Regazzoni, and I was the one to suggest for him to come to Indy, which he did. But that wasn’t very successful.

With Gunnar it started at the end of the ’77season. There was something wrong because he was here in my home in Nazareth and we were travelling, I think we were going to Japan. And he was not feeling well. We didn’t know what to do. That’s really when it started and all of a sudden it just precipitated. He was just overtaken by it in a relatively short period of time.

It was 1978, and Ronnie was now my teammate. Gunnar was ill, but none of us really knew how ill he was. It was the International Trophy race at Silverstone. I crashed out very early, and decided to go and see Gunnar in hospital. The cancer had taken hold. He looked so different. It was devastating to see that.

He was such a young man, with so much life, so much future in front of him and seeing him taken down like this. It was... Heart-wrenching for sure. I mean it's the worst feeling you could ever have. He was like a family member. It's one of those deep, deep feelings... Things will never be the same when you lose them.

My favourite Gunnar memory? I have so many. When we would be racing in the US, he would come to my home and we would go up to the lake – our 'vacation' spot if you will. It's about 70 miles from where I live, and I have all the toys. Ronnie was there, and my son Michael. We had motorcycles – we have anything you can think of as far as things to play with.

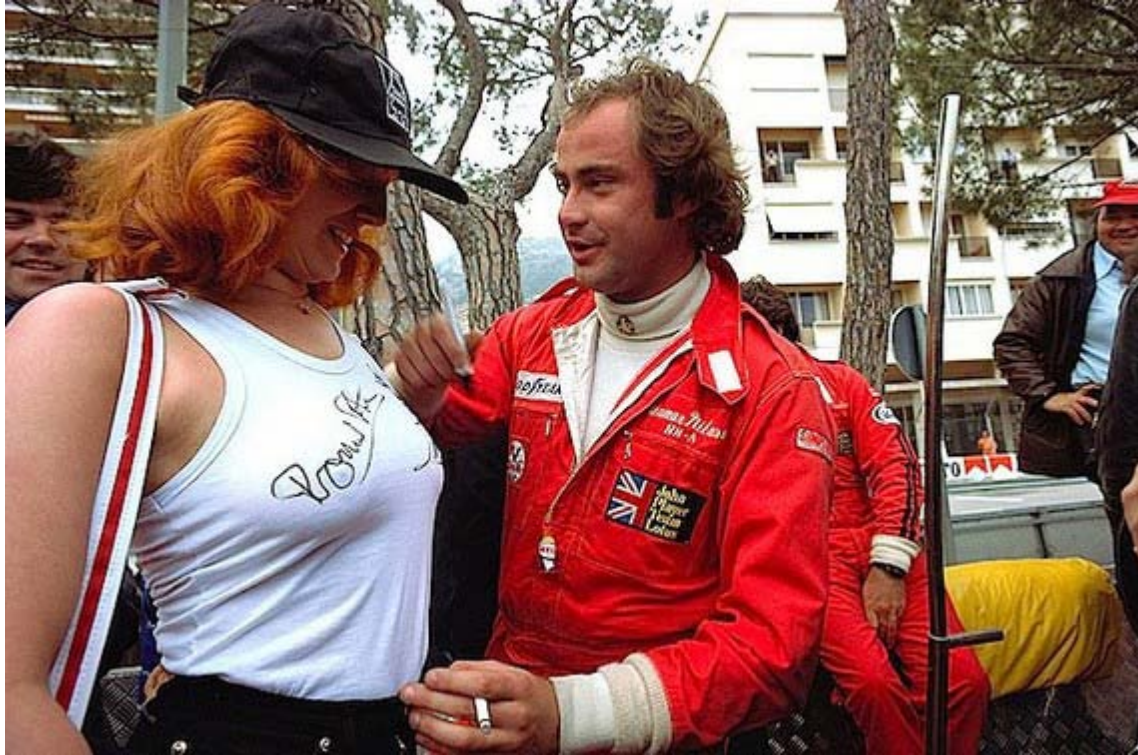
Michael, still a kid, was racing them. I was racing with four-wheelers. We would go waterskiing and play tennis. Our objective was to just take him to the ground you know. Really tire him out! We had that type of fun. I have photos of that, us together.



A shot from Mario's personal album

It was just wonderful being with him. Also interesting was the time I spent with him in Sweden. I've got to tell this! I remember we went there and of course he had this BMW, and we had a couple of drinks. And the laws in Sweden are very, very strict.

Coming back, even if you are a passenger you are responsible, so I figured I had a couple of drinks but I'm ok. So I'm now driving and he gets out of the car and he is walking alongside of me. He really didn't want to be caught in the car! So I pulled over and we found a couple of bicycles and we bicycled home for about eight or ten miles. It was crazy things like that. It was just so much fun.



There is no question that the end of 1978 was a double-edged sword for me. I have said this many times. Monza should have been the happiest day of my career but I couldn't celebrate. I was F1 World Champion. I remember talking with my wife the day after Ronnie's accident on the way to the airport – then I found out that he died. I was so, "Oh my God". We were going to celebrate together and, never, never did, we never could now obviously, never could. It took a long time. It takes a long time to heal but it's never the same. Like I said when we have those types of relationships, you know it's a big void when they're no longer there.

And weeks after losing Ronnie, Gunnar went as well. That really was a tough few weeks.



But there is [Gunnar's foundation](#), which he was really committed to, and it has raised a lot of money. That's wonderful. That shows how many friends he had, and how he touched the world of motor sports in a very positive way.

Two great friends, and not forgotten.

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Huge thanks to [@MarioAndretti](#). Not just for the memories, but the personal photo. Follow him on Twitter.

Mario Andretti was speaking with Andy Hallbery

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