

Globe Sports

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Old foes put differences in rear-view mirror

Michael Schumacher and Quebec's favourite son, Jacques Villeneuve steer away from talk of 1997 controversy

It's been long enough that they can comfortably share a stage and even a laugh, but enmities this old seldom subsist entirely.

While his one-time nemesis Michael Schumacher is driving in this weekend's Canadian Grand Prix, Quebec's favourite son, Jacques Villeneuve, is preparing for a cameo on [NASCAR](#)'s second-tier circuit.

Not that Villeneuve has given up on returning to [Formula One](#), where he hasn't raced since 2006, coincidentally the year Schumacher retired (he un-retired this season).

"I'm quite happy right now. I've been busy raising kids, and it's more work than actually racing, which I didn't expect," Villeneuve said on Thursday. "But I would obviously be happier behind a wheel. Once you've been a racer I think you're a racer all your life. I worked hard in 2010, it didn't work out, and I'm giving myself until 2011, so there's still a few months."

Villeneuve and Schumacher found themselves together on Thursday on a track north of Montreal at a CAA-sponsored news conference on emerging road-safety technology.

Asked if he regretted the infamous incident in 1997 – where Schumacher's Ferrari rammed Villeneuve's Williams-Renault in Jerez, Spain, during the race in which the Canadian cinched his first and only driving championship – the 41-year-old German took the gracious route. "It would have been a shame because we wouldn't have had anything to laugh about," he said.

Schumacher may be a seven-time world titleholder, but his return to F1 hasn't gone as auspiciously as he may have hoped – he is ninth in the driver standing and his best results are a pair of fourth-place finishes in Spain and Turkey.

But Villeneuve's analysis of Schumacher's return is more nuanced.

"It's great. I think it's brilliant for Formula One as well because I think we were starting to run a bit short on heroes, so the more you have champions like Michael, who has won seven times, to fight against every day I think it's important. It brings back the fans, and I think he's done quite well. He was behind at first, but when you look at the last few races he's finished ahead of his teammate."

Just before Schumacher and Villeneuve spoke, race organizers held an open house at a chilly and rainy Circuit Gilles-Villeneuve in downtown Montreal, which featured an unannounced autograph session with all the F1 drivers who will participate in Sunday's race – save Schumacher. Such sessions became the norm last season, when the circuit skipped its lone Canadian date over a contract squabble with the former promoter.

And it would appear racing fans, who were charged 2008 prices for tickets, are appreciative: organizers announced late Thursday that Sunday's race is a sellout.

Montreal's atmosphere, fan support and racing conditions make the course a favourite among drivers, who lined up to talk about how thrilled they are to be back.

"I love it here. It's one of my favourite Grand Prix of the year," said McLaren driver Lewis Hamilton, who won his first F1 race on the circuit in 2007.

"The city is fantastic here. It is one of the best and youngest and most fun cities to be in throughout the Grand Prix calendar, so I am really happy to be here and looking forward to a good weekend."

Mercedes driver Nico Rosberg agreed. "I really enjoy the track," Rosberg said. "It is a great track. Lots of fun. Also the city, the spectators are great, very enthusiastic, so it is definitely a highlight."

Said Schumacher, who has won the race seven times: "The spectators really live the Grand Prix, and you can feel that, so it makes it special from that point of view."

And with that, he wandered outside to give a high-speed demonstration of a luxury car's electronic traction control for a horde of television cameras, hopped out to pose for a few photographs with Villeneuve, and with a jaunty toot of his horn roared off in direction of downtown, leaving behind the van provided to bring him to the event.

Racing legends don't generally need to worry about obtaining permission for such things.

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