

PHIL HILL

Again, and simply because of circumstances of my working life, I have had the honor of meeting many great heroes of the motorsports world.

Phil Hill was one of them, and surely one of the very best ever. He was “our” driver in Europe, He was the first of my era to pack up and leave the familiar comforts of the United States and to travel to Europe to compete toe-to-toe with the vaunted drivers from England and the Continent.

He drove his way to the top of his sport with quiet determination and a stomach in knots. He was far from a “natural” driver, he had to work for every kilometer of speed that he picked up, and hey, could he pick ‘em up. He lived what many might call a “charmed life” in racing, never getting seriously hurt, always finding ways to make the best possible use of the race car that he was in at the time, be it shitbox or supercar.

If you look up the term “brutally honest” in the dictionary, you’ll likely note them using a photo of Phil Hill to illustrate the term. Phil Hill could not lie to save his own life. He told you what you asked about NOT what you wanted to hear. Specious, neighborly, small talk was never in Mister Hill’s playbook. He was charming but blunt. If you asked him about something that he may not have been particularly fond of, you would hear that, the exact reason for that lack of

enthusiasm, and not a whole lot more on the subject. He took very little time for any sort of flattery, but was effusive with the truth.

On the other hand, his enthusiasm was almost unlimited. He lit up when presented with an item or an idea that was well-conceived, well-made, honest, authentic. He was like that in every phase of his life and it must have helped as much as it hurt, because he always seemed to do well telling everyone the unvarnished truth from the fearsome Mister Ferrari to the kid serving the pasta. Good was good, but God help you if you were putting it on just for his benefit.

My own Phil Hill stories are all odd little vignettes, off racetrack incidents where I was nothing more than an innocent observer, but they stay with me as tightly as any memories I have.

Like sitting in the pace car at the Long Beach Grand Prix in 1976, waiting to pace the Karting demonstration race that my organization had put together with the help of Bridgestone.

Without so much as a howdy-do, a rather boorish fellow had the temerity to literally shove his lady friend's face in through my passenger-side window saying, "See honey, that's Phil Hill, the former world champion." Her head out of the window and his still nearby, I grabbed his collar and drew his head into the idling Toyota Supra. I smiled and then shouted right into his goddamn ear: "He's the 1961 World Champion, not an ex!" and shoved his mug back into the crowd. Phil was sitting there with a rather bewildered look in his

eye ... We never said another word about it as we were radioed off to pace the karts.

As a prologue to the following scene at Phoenix, I made a visit to Hill and Vaughn, the legendary restoration shop on Glencoe Avenue in Venice. I was there to show and tell Mister Hill exactly what we planned to do at the GP so he would not be surprised, embarrassed, or overly-hyped (three things that were anathema in his world).

Hill was working on a front strut from (I think) Derek's car. He had it in a vise, and was compressing the spring with a cable come-along. As we spoke, Hill continue his work, cranking the gnarly-looking device and tightening the spring. Now, I know that those springs are under a lot of tension and racking them down like Hill was doing is considered a touchy situation. With every stroke, I unconsciously took a little shuffle step back. When Hill stepped away from the vise, we were looking at each other and shouting our conversation from almost halfway the shop ... We both had a little laugh.

(By the way, the cars that came out of Hill and Vaughn were nuts-on exactly the way they looked, worked, and sounded when they came out of the factory. No better, no worse ... Precisely factory stock right down to the smell. The only explanation was that the space where a Hill and Vaughn-restored car stood was somehow a rift in time. Superb.)

At the 1991 Grand Prix of the United States in Phoenix a professional group that I belong to decided to recognize Hill on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of his world championship year of 1961.

We got some good ink for it, and Phil actually got his “gold card” a good-any-race/go-anywhere credential that every F1 champion is suppose to be given. His was given to him (by Bernie Eccelstone) behind the pit buildings in Phoenix and witnessed by exactly one person, 30 years after his world championship. Guess who? Yup me.

We had petitioned Eccelstone for the card for Phil for some time. Just as we passed each other on the walkway, Eccelstone called out: “Hey, Phil, wait a minute,” reached into his pocket, pulled out Phil’s lifetime card, handed it to him and skittered off. Pomp?, circumstance?, Nope nada. Again, we just sort of looked at each other without a word.

But there was sweet redemption and a startling reception waiting just around the corner. We need to be out on the grid NOW and the quickest way there was through one of the pit building. But that was verboten (may not with his new pass). Anyhow Hill just turns to me and says: “Quick, through here!” The Ferrari garage, the holy of holies, the forbidden land ... About halfway through, I noted that all activities on the cars had ceased, a millisecond later I realized that every mechanic, engineer, clipboard holder, and hanger-on was converging on ... Us.

They all stopped cold at about 4 feet away forming tight rings of young faces, most of whom weren't even alive when Hill won the F1 title for Maranello. They weren't coming to throw our asses out (had it been me alone, I most likely still have the bandages on), they were coming to venerate "Peel Heel" one of Ecurie Ferrari's favorite sons, a patron saint, come down from the clouds.

Reverent, hushed whispers and perfect, fluent Italian (coming from Hill's lips) ... It was a magic moment that's frozen in my mind. He chatted with each who wanted to say his name and theirs to him and then softly indicated that we needed to get to the grid for his lap of honor ... The sea parted and we walked out to the most wonderful, heart-warm round of sincere applause I've ever had the pleasure of (sort of) sharing.

Phil Hill was hands-on when he needed to be, and direct at all times. He was a good man, who made all of us in motorsports look good.

I'll miss him terribly as will we all.

-Stokes