

Ayrton Senna's NASCAR connection



By Marty Smith
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I enjoy watching movies.

But I don't make a point to see them, no matter how gripping the trailer may be. They are a vehicle by which I pass time on transcontinental flights to Las Vegas and Los Angeles and rainy days in Pocono.

But when a good friend of mine in the NASCAR industry approached me late last season with the pointed suggestion that I make certain to see the film chronicling the extraordinary life and times of three-time Formula One world champion Ayrton Senna, I took heed. This person is as educated as he is passionate about auto racing. He would not be flippant about a racing film's particular impact.

And he was right.

"Senna" is among the best movies I have seen. It is quite possibly the best. Maybe that opinion is based on Senna's composed intensity. Maybe it is his grace. Or his spirit. Or resilience. Or patience. Or talent. Or honest willingness to acknowledge political injustice in his arena. Or penchant for pure magic with a steering wheel in his hands.



Ayrton Senna was a superstar, but an approachable one. His influence in racing has proven to be lasting.

Maybe it's just that I'm a sucker for a good rivalry. Maybe my love for auto racing collided masterfully with my love of documentary films. Maybe I saw in Senna character traits I wish I carried.

But I know this for certain: Very few movies reach my soul. "Senna" does.

When the movie began and I saw Ayrton Senna's face for the first time, I was mesmerized.

I immediately hit the pause button. I just sat and stared at it, awestruck by its resemblance to Max Papis' 6-year-old son, Marco. Marco is buddies with my son, Cambron. He is beautiful, a striking mix between his mother and father, Tati and Max.

His face is Senna's face. It is uncanny.

When I arrived in Las Vegas for the year-end NASCAR banquet ceremony, I noted the striking likeness to Jimmie Johnson, who agreed and proceeded to inform me that Senna had in fact been integral in Max's career development. Knowing Max as I do -- the intensity and desire coupled with a keen intellect and genuine kindness -- it made perfect sense.

I couldn't wait to discuss it with him. I wanted proof that Senna was the person he was portrayed to be.

When we spoke, I nearly wept. Max nearly wept, too.

The memories are painful. Max is invariably gregarious and jovial, brimming with a fire for life. To hear him speak in a strained and stoic fashion was unusual. Senna, 12 years his senior, was his mentor and friend. When they were together in the paddock or at lunch, most folks in their midst presumed Max was his little brother.

They met through a man named Diego Mombelli. Mombelli is a karting legend in Europe, both as a driver and mechanic. When Senna moved from Brazil to Europe to chase his racing dream, Mombelli tuned his engines. And when Senna ascended to Formula 3000 (F1's version of the Nationwide Series), Mombelli moved along to a 12-year-old named Max Papis.

That's when a special relationship began.

"Ayrton was a myth," Papis said in carefully chosen words, his cadence much slower than normal. "Everyone was talking about Senna! Senna! Senna! He was in Formula 3000. I was 14 years old. This was 1983."

Senna won the Formula 3000 championship that year, and the following season, in 1984, he debuted in Formula One for the Toleman-Hart team. It was a ragtag bunch, but Senna nearly shocked the world in Monaco, passing cars in the rain as if they were parked. With Senna gaining on leader Alain Prost at an alarming rate, the F1 brass called the race.

Senna finished second that day, but it was a coming-out party. Senna had arrived.

"I was there in Monaco," Papis said. "Nobody knew who the kid was. My dad took me and my brother to the track. I remember the garage opened and we went to see Ayrton. I had a video camera and my dad asked me to do a video for Diego, but I was too shy. I just filmed it from far.

"My dad had a VW Rabbit, and after the race we picked Ayrton up and he gave me his helmet to hold. We took him to the hotel and I remember him telling me, 'Max, s---, they stole my race.' And my dad, in Italian, said, 'I don't think this will be the last time you have a chance to win a race.'"

Senna ultimately won 41 races and 65 poles in 162 starts, as well as those three world championships. He was recently voted by his peers as the greatest F1 driver of all time.

But his driving prowess was but a small portion of his legacy. He was an even better person.

Papis tells the story of Senna's second year in F1, driving the black and gold Lotus John Player Special car. It was qualifying day at Monza, and Papis and Mombelli, wanting to watch Senna run but not disturb his routine, bought grandstand tickets to watch the session. Senna put the car on pole, and was subsequently surrounded by what Papis estimates were some 50 to 60 media members.

During their time together, Mombelli always called Senna "Monster," or "Mostro," in Italian. And that day in Monza, with Senna engulfed by media, Mombelli gleefully screamed down from the grandstands, "Hey, Mostro!"

Senna stopped in his tracks.

"Ayrton turned and looked up at us, and told the media, 'Look, I'm sorry guys. Give me five minutes,'" Papis said. "He came and picked us up and took us down, and said give me half an hour and I'll be back with you guys. He did his media center stuff and then we had lunch. That is the level of person he was.



"Most people know the era of Michael Schumacher, the seven-times world champion. But Michael Schumacher will never be able to polish the shoes of Ayrton Senna. Because of the level of person Ayrton was was extraordinary. It is very difficult to find.

"Ayrton had a grace and humbleness much like Jimmie Johnson's. I tell Jimmie that I'm sorry Ayrton is not here anymore. He and Jimmie would have gotten along really well, because they have a lot in common. Jimmie reminds me a lot of Ayrton in that he is super-determined but still so humble."

Senna was close to the entire Papis family. He had a habit of ringing the Papis home when Max went to Victory Lane. Every time Senna raced or tested at Monza, some 30 minutes from Max's childhood home, Max went to see him and was embraced.

And it's not just Max. For a time, Tati Papis -- Max's wife and daughter of Brazilian legend Emerson Fittipaldi -- lived in South Africa. Her father was the first Brazilian driver to win a Formula One championship, and was a key mentor for Senna. Every time Senna visited South Africa to race or to test, he arranged for Tati to be picked up at her home and driven to the racetrack, where they would lunch together. Just the two of them. Every day.

The week Senna died, Max was racing in England, at Silverstone. It was the first F3000 event of the 1994 season, and the first year in some time, he said, that many F3000 races were to be run as support events for F1. As a result, he explained, the first race he would have the opportunity to compete in front of his mentor would be in two weeks in Barcelona.

It was not to be.

Max qualified at Silverstone and upon returning to the garage noticed his mechanics and engineers were not acting normally. An engineer approached and told Max he should call his father immediately. He did so, and his father notified him that Senna had been involved in a bad accident. He was leading the San Marino Grand Prix at Imola and crashed. Hard. Max shrugged it off. He would be fine, right? Again, his father noted it was very bad.

An hour later they spoke again. Senna was dead. Max was numb.

"For me it was very bad," Papis said. "I had that feeling when Ayrton died. And when Greg Moore died. And when Dan Wheldon died. Nothing else mattered. I was so confused. It's like a black curtain going down.

"It was a very black weekend. He was waiting for me on Tuesday down at Imola, where he was doing testing. He wanted to introduce me to [F1 owner] Frank Williams. When you get introduced by a person of that level obviously people listen to you. Unfortunately, he passed away."

"What Ayrton did for me, besides being my mentor, was I was able to drive for the same Formula 3 team that he raced for, because he basically made it happen. He never told me how. I don't know if he paid them. He would not tell me. He was always there for me."

Senna was there for Papis in Barcelona, not in body but in spirit. Max felt him. It would have been Papis' first race with Ayrton present. Upon arrival, Max walked the F1 garage. He saw Senna's car. It was his car, but his name wasn't on it. Max couldn't grasp it, couldn't accept it.

"I couldn't even go in there and look," he said. "I'd been waiting for that moment for so many years, to be able to show him what he had done for me, and have him on the grid with me. I was dreaming about that moment for so long."

His performance proved Senna's influence.

"That race was amazing for me. I put the car on pole and I won by 26 seconds," Papis said. "I can tell you that every time I came out of the last two corners, I wasn't alone. I was not alone. I was on another level. Something else guided me."

The day before the race, Papis had placed on his arm a yellow band, the same yellow as Senna's racing helmet. On his own helmet he placed a decal that read: "Perte," the Italian word for "For you."

It was his first and only F3000 victory, and propelled him into a test-driving position for Lotus Formula One.

"I know he was not there anymore, but he always inspired me," Papis said. "And even when he was gone I always listened to his interviews and the way he talks and I always learned. I learned from Ayrton that you can beat the opposition with a smile on your face.

"Ayrton is a little bit like Dale Sr. He is a guy that goes beyond the sport. Even after 10 years since Dale Sr. passed away, he is still very, very present. And I tell many people, Michael Schumacher? Yeah, he won seven championships and whatever. But the day he retired he didn't leave much. He didn't leave a legacy. Ayrton left a legacy. He left an example and inspired a lot of people. I miss him."

Papis makes a keen observation. Like Dale Earnhardt, Senna's personal story reaches far beyond victories or championships or money or fame. It clutches the human element. And the human element speaks to every individual and prompts us to look more closely at our own lives, and often teaches us something about ourselves.

Even those who never knew them. That is quite a legacy, indeed.