

Racing driver turned cult figure : Jo Siffert: A legend on the big screen

Autor(en): **Wey, Alain**

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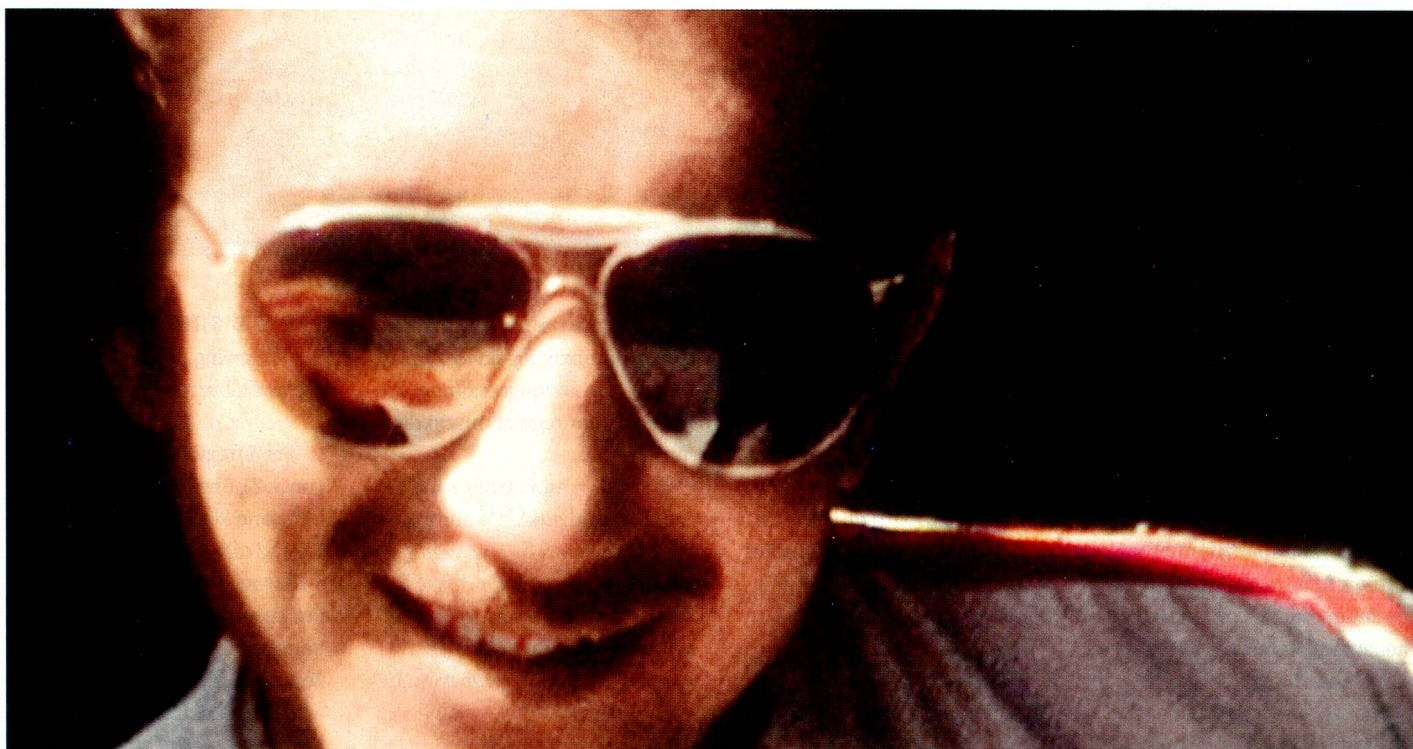
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Jo Siffert: A legend on the big screen.

He came from humble beginnings but went on to become one of the greatest racing drivers of all times. Jo Siffert of Fribourg lived life in the fast lane at 300 kph. A documentary traces his flamboyant but tragic fate. In search of a legendary hero. By Alain Wey

1963 brought his first Grand Prix victory in Syracuse. Jo Siffert was one of the few drivers to enter races as an independent. He put together his own team which he called the "Jo Siffert Racing Team" and which was honoured by the Grand Prix Drivers Association that same year. His rivals were works drivers, yet he still managed to beat the then world champion Jim Clark twice (Enna, 1964/1965). In 1964 he



Joe Siffert 1968: "A charming gentleman and a charmer"

A heroic epic à la "Rocky." A whirlwind life on racetracks all over the world. A virtuoso of motor racing with an iron will. Racing driver Jo Siffert of Fribourg embodied all this and much, much more. Motor racing was his life and his death. 34 years after his death, the documentary "Jo Siffert, Live Fast – Die Young" celebrates Siffert's life to a sound track of 60s-style pop music. In the minds of his fans, however, this Formula 1 driver will keep on racing for all eternity.

He was a courageous go-getter who did everything in his power to make his childhood dream of becoming a Formula 1 driver come true. Jo Siffert succeeded with a combination of bravura and humility. His popularity and success was reaching new heights when fate put a sudden stop to his unprecedented rise to the world's racing elite. In 1971, at the Brands Hatch circuit in England, 36-year-old Jo Siffert suffered a fatal accident during a F1 race in honour of world champion Jackie Stewart. All of Switzerland grieved for him and more than fifty thousand people attended his funeral in Fribourg. The legend became a myth.

His humble beginnings meant that he had to work hard for everything from very early on in

life. Joseph Siffert, nicknamed Seppi, was born in Fribourg in 1936. His rise to fame was just as steep as the funicular railway that connects the upper and lower portions of his home town. "Even when he was very young, all he ever wanted to be was a racing driver," recalls his sister Adélaïde. "But what really made up his mind was the Grand Prix of Berne in Bremgarten that his father took him to." Born into a poor family, as a child he sometimes collected rags or cartridge cases before beginning an apprenticeship in a car body shop. His goal was clear, but he needed the financial wherewithal to reach it. Seppi combed Western Switzerland for accident-damaged cars that he then repaired and sold. He started out by entering motorcycle races and then sidecar races in Europe (with him in the sidecar). News of his courage and desire to win got around. His hard work paid off and, at the age of 24, he was able to buy a Formula Junior and moved from one European racetrack to the next along with two mechanics, Michel Piller and Jean-Pierre Oberson. A vagabond who slept and ate in the truck along with his mechanics, he soon won his first title. Then he shifted up to the next class: Formula 1.

began entering long-distance races in sports car prototypes, the discipline he was destined to dominate. Fortune continued to smile on Seppi in the Formula 1 circuit. Rob Walker, an English patron, took him into his racing stall. Walker described his protégé as "one of the greatest racing drivers of our time, behind the wheel of both prototypes and single-seaters." "He was a sportsman through and through, and never lost his temper unless his car was acting up despite his good driving," recalls Walker. "If that happened, he would sit down in the box like an enraged lion. But just half an hour later, he was back to his normal good mood and all you would hear was the occasional 'merde alors!'"

The Siffert epic unfolded during a transitional phase in motor sports. Jacques Deschanaux, biographer and friend to Siffert, points out that it was "in the process of changing from a gentleman's sport to a professional sport" and adds, "There were four to five deaths every year." Seppi just couldn't sit still, so he entered Formula 1 races, Formula 2 races and prototype races (Porsche). He was a racing driver body and soul, and would not even take a break after returning to Fribourg, where he

had his businesses, his car repair garage and a display hall for Porsche and Alfa Romeo.

What kind of driver was he? "A virtuoso always on the offensive," is how Jacques Deschenaux described him. "Every time he sat behind the wheel of a good racing car he notched up success after success! He was the greatest long-distance racing driver in history when it came to prototypes, a distinction he possibly

Siffert's charisma. He was one of a kind. He could cast a spell over people. He was a real, approachable hero." Motor races have thrilled Men Lareida ever since he was a child. At the age of 37 he was a fan of the other Swiss Formula 1 great, Clay Regazzoni of Ticino, but had heard his grandmother talk about the legendary Jo Siffert although he himself had never seen him. "It's really a very American story: About

a man who started out with nothing and then, on his own, managed to make his dream come true. Even though the ending is tragic, I think we need these kind of stories. Having the courage to take risks is a good thing. Whatever you take on, you have to do it with zest and zeal!" When talking to relatives of Jo Siffert, Men Lareida noticed something that he considers very rare: He never once heard a negative word!



Joe Siffert with friends after a race in 1967, and (below) on the film poster.

shared with Jacky Ickx. His last year in Formula 1 was going really well, with a victory in Austria and second place at the Grand Prix in the USA only a few days before his accident. People said he was a world-class driver. He gave you the impression that, with a good car and a good team, he could have become world champion someday!"

Jo Siffert, to whom his friend Jean Tinguely dedicated a fountain at Schützenmatte in Fribur, was a successful person, a leader surrounded by friends who helped him reach his goal. So great was his fame that the director of the movie "Le Mans" (starring Steve McQueen) asked him to supply the vehicles to ensure the success of the project. Siffert was a true national hero. "A charming gentleman and a charmer," in Rob Walker's opinion. Jo Siffert can justifiably be described as a legend. Just like a hero from Greek mythology, he accomplished great deeds before the gods decided to intervene on October 24, 1971.

"He could be compared to James Dean," thinks Men Lareida, director of the movie "Jo Siffert, Live Fast – Die Young." "But I don't think there's ever been another athlete with Jo

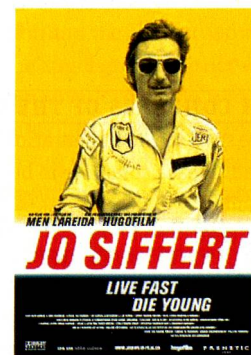
SIFFERT'S TRACK RECORD

- 1957-59: Motorcycle racing (1959 Swiss champion in the 350ccm class) and sidecar races
- 1960: Debut in Formula Junior
- 1961: (unofficial) European Formula Junior champion
- 1962: Formula 1 debut, 96 GP races driven until 1971, two victories (1968 at Brands Hatch, England, and 1971 in Austria). Three victories outside of the championships (Syracuse 1963, Enna 1964 and 1965), best season: 1971, fourth place in the driver championships
- 1968/71: Official Porsche driver for sports car prototypes. Porsche won the International Manufacturers Championship from 1969 to 1971. 14 world championship victories: 24-hour race in Daytona 1968, 500-mile race

JO SIFFERT IN THE SPOTLIGHT

- "Jo Siffert – Live Fast, Die Young" was the only Swiss film shown at the 2005 Locarno Film Festival. Using wonderful original records, it portrays the epic story of this legendary racing driver. Witnesses of his unstoppable rise reminisce on his life: mechanics Jean-Pierre Oberson

and Heini Mader, his family (sister, wives, children) and his friends including his biographer Jacques Deschenaux. The 60s-style pop music in this film was specially composed by a friend of director Men Lareida. The split-screen technique used to divide the picture into multiple win-



dows adds a strong dynamic feel to the production and is reminiscent of hit films of the 1960s.