

THRILLS, CHILLS AND SPILLS AT THE U.S. GRAND PRIX

By Bruce Pringle

WATKINS GLEN, N.Y.—Mike Keavney stood outside his tent, shivering in the rain that was turning his campsite into an ankle-deep mudhole. But Keavney, a 28-year-old tavern owner from Pennsylvania, was smiling. "Where else can you see anything like this?" he asked.

Less than 100 yards from the spot Keavney had picked as his weekend residence, screaming cars became blurs as they descended a hill on a narrow stretch of race-track. It was the final qualifying session for the next day's Grand Prix of the United States, an annual automobile race that attracts the attention of sports fans around the world.

Millions watch it on television. Perhaps 100,000 defy the frequent harshness of October weather in upstate New York to see it in person.

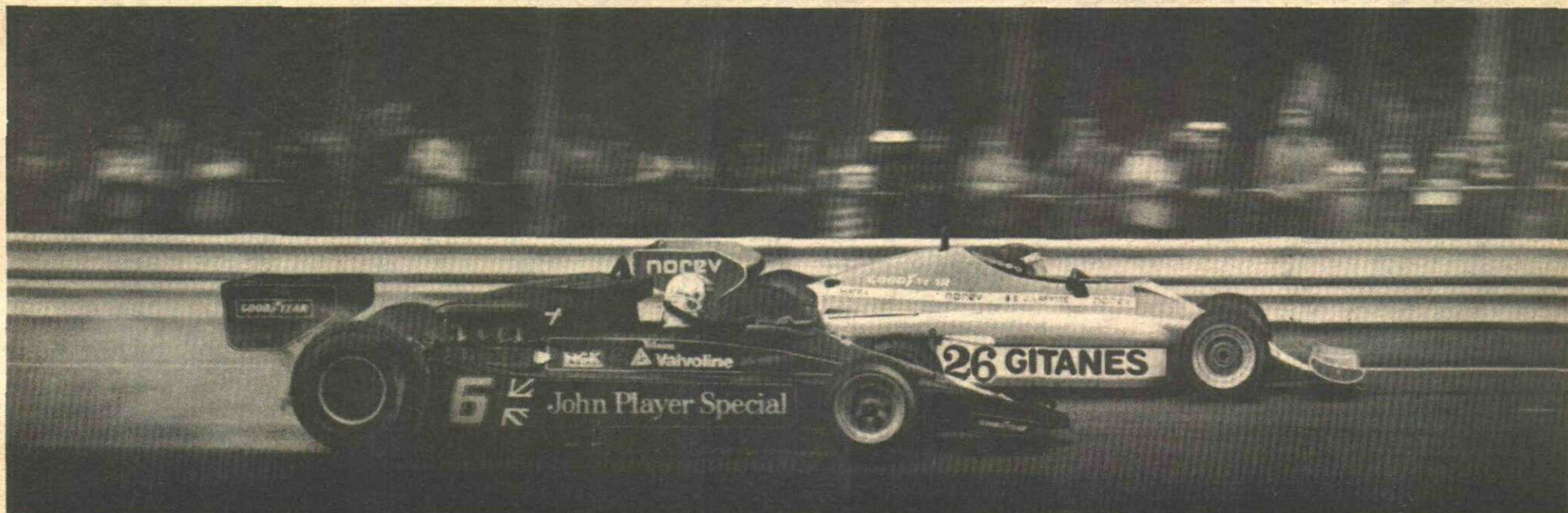
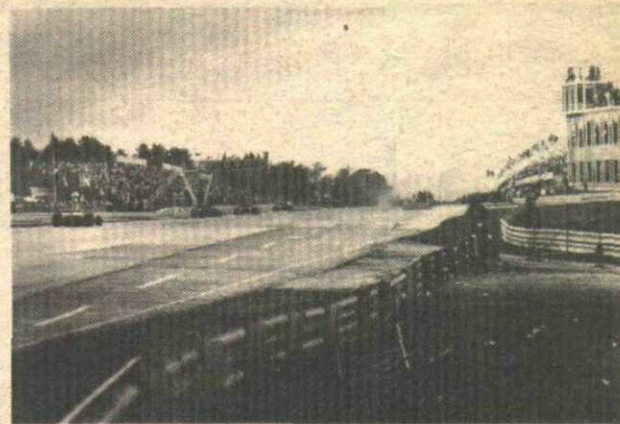
"Just like a spectator in any sport, I guess, I dream of being out there competing," Keavney said. "But I'd be scared to death to try this. Before I came here for the first time, Woodstock was the biggest thing I'd ever attended. But it didn't top this. Anyone with enough talent can play music. But Grand Prix drivers need more than talent. They need heart."

Struggle to survive.

Grand Prix drivers may well be under more pressure than any other athletes. Theirs is not only a struggle to win, but to survive as well. On a tour that takes them to five continents, they compete less than 20 times each year; yet rare is the season in which one of their members does not die in a crash.

Grand Prix race courses, in fact, are designed to tempt death. Unlike the flat oval layouts on which most American car races are held, Grand Prix tracks are twisting collections of hills and valleys that tolerate only the slightest human or mechanical failure. The intricacy of the course, each

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Photographs by Mel Evans Jr.