

ERMANNO ALBORETO

# ALBORETO: GASOLINE IN THE VEINS

*With the contribution of  
Greg Sarni*



FUCINA

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## PREFACE

I am staring at a blank page and I find it hard to begin writing about Michele. Where should I start from? Talk about a party with many other drivers that ended up with everyone all dressed up jumping in a swimming pool?

Or should I tell of the building tension and awkwardness while we were all waiting for him in La Spezia<sup>(1)</sup> on the deck of the aircraft carrier Garibaldi with the admiral and the guard of honour all lined up in full uniform.

Certainly a glorious moment: unfortunately Michele was one and a half hour late.

This because Enzo Ferrari had kept him in his office in Maranello<sup>(2)</sup> talking about trivial issues which went on forever. The Drake<sup>(3)</sup> was well aware of Michele's important engagement and nonetheless...

But that was Enzo Ferrari.

Sometimes he would be as spiteful as a child.

But once there, Michele made up for his delay thanks to his terrific friendly attitude: he started telling jokes and anecdotes, pictures were taken together with sailors and officers, autographs were signed and the icing on the cake were his wheelies on a Vespa all along the flight deck of the battleship.

Sailors started tossing berets in the air and there were thunderous applause by the entire crew.

So many minor and great recollections come to my mind, but I

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NOTE: (1) *La Spezia is a seaside town in Northern Italy which is home to the largest naval base of the Italian Navy.*

NOTE: (2) *Maranello is a town in Northern Italy where Ferrari's headquarters and factory are located.*

NOTE: (3) *Drake is one of the several nicknames that the Italian press gave to Enzo Ferrari.*

would like to dwell on a common project and in order to talk about it, I have to rewind the tape of my memory back to 1985.

That was his year. We all felt it.

The Ferrari “156-85” of the turbo era was looking up and Michele was in a great shape.

I talked the RAI<sup>(4)</sup> executives into launching a sports section aptly titled “RED 27” which instantly became a huge success.

It could have meant a winning bet on the roulette of the Formula 1 circus with the colour and the number of Michele’s car.

A number which was supposed to come up that year... unfortunately that little ball doesn’t always stop where you want to and often our fate doesn’t follow the paths we cherish. It chooses otherwise.

And it was one of these unusual paths that the Ferrari management choose to take when it came to selecting the turbines for Maranello’s engines.

A wrong choice (maybe not just for the turbines) and a wrong timing, since this decision was taken with the world championship already underway and half way into the season.

They decided to replace their current German supplier “KKK” (whose turbines were also installed on the Porche engines equipping McLaren) with the Garret turbines made in the USA.

The outcome was a profusion of white smoke columns spewing out from the back of the car. An endless number of engines were suddenly struck dumb by turbines collapsing with a piercing hiss.

We don’t know whether it was the Big Boss who took this unfortunate decision, since he often had a suspicious mind (and in many cases he was proved to be right); sometimes he was simply driven by hunches or preconceived ideas.

Surely he knew about it: maybe he had even suggested it to one of his collaborators.

I figure him suspiciously grumbling: ... I bet that these *Tugnèin*<sup>(5)</sup> (Germans) are plotting to join forces against us!”

That was not the case.

The abovementioned Germans of “Drei K” would have been

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NOTE: (4) RAI (it is an acronym for Radio Televisione Italiana) is the national TV network in Italy.

NOTE: (5) *Tugnèin* stands for Germans, but it is not a regular Italian word. It is a dialect form spoken around Maranello.

all too happy to rank the Prancing Horse<sup>(6)</sup> among their best achievements: a precious award to be showcased with pride on top of a mantelshef in their best drawing room.

But alas, when there were just six races left to the end of 1985 F1 World Championship, after the Dutch GP in Zandvoort, the lead of Michele Alboreto - who was then at the top of the standing with 53 points - started getting thinner and thinner and little by little his dreams vanished too.

The comeback was in the hands of French driver Alain Prost a.k.a. the Professor, who couldn't believe his luck for such an unexpected gift. He managed to catch up and leave Michele behind and eventually, win one of his four world titles with a lead of twenty points.

Michele Alboreto was then confined to be a vice world champion.

So if we just stick to facts; with no background on what really happened in those years so distant in time now, the final achievement may appear to be quite satisfactory. But in our case, I would rather use Enzo Ferrari's own words to describe how he condescendingly judged any runner-up: "The second one is just the first of the last ones!".

This time we have to agree with him, but we are also positively sure that Michele was not to blame and in any case he never expressed his frustration to Enzo Ferrari.

He had too much respect for the man, mostly because he knew that Enzo Ferrari truly loved him.

I think that Michele was one of the few drivers who got deep down in the heart of the Old Man<sup>(7)</sup>.

Maybe the only one, more than Gilles Villeneuve.

Most probably Enzo Ferrari never spoke to Michele about the technical and strategic error he made. This clause was not provided for in the relationship "Master-Driver" with the latter, according to Ferrari, just "... a useful accessory!".

After some years, Franco Gozzi, the right hand of the Commendatore<sup>(8)</sup>, his preferred advisor and keeper of Maranello's

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NOTE: (6) *Prancing Horse is the animal on the Ferrari logo. It is used metaphorically to indicate the Ferrari car or the factory.*

NOTE: (7) *Old Man is another nickname for Enzo Ferrari.*

NOTE: (8) *Commendatore is an honorary title awarded for services to Italy. In this case it is another nickname for Enzo Ferrari.*

thousand secrets, told me that he had heard more than once Enzo Ferrari sigh out: "...we owe a world championship to that kid!".

Can you hear us, Michele? Enzo Ferrari knew it. So do we.

*Yours Ezio Zermiani <sup>(\*)</sup>*

*(\*) Ezio Zermiani is a very famous Italian sports journalist, now retired. When we talk about Formula 1 racing in the '70s, '80s and '90s he was always there along the grid or in the paddock. He has interviewed all the greatest drivers of that era. He was close to Michele, some would say he had a sort of soft spot for him.*

## INTRODUCTION

I have meant to start writing this book in response to the endless displays of affection and esteem which my family and I receive daily from all over the world. The one who most encouraged me in order to start this work was my friend Greg Sarni, a journalist and a sportswriter for the WBRS 100.1, a Boston radio.

He told me how Michele is still being appreciated in the United States and that he felt there was a need for a story which revealed more about his personal life and what went on behind the scenes in his racing years rather than what sports news or any championship statistics had already told.

Greg has been very helpful since he has provided me with a good lot of fresh material which I have subsequently used for writing this book.

Besides, I would also thank our childhood friend Giuliano Cavalca who has worked along with me during the drafting of this book and the translation into English.

A further spur to bring about this burdensome task was also triggered by the many friends, drivers, riders, team managers, engineers and the like who have met Michele, not only during his racing career, but also in the course of his private life, which unfortunately came to an end too soon.

Yet indeed, these are shows of great fondness and admiration, which after all these years since my brother's disappearance, never cease to touch the deepest chords of my heart.

I am a motor bike mechanic, a man whose hands are often dirty with grease. Therefore my life and passion have brought me close to racing with cars and motor bikes. And as not everyone is aware of, I was the first one of my family to start racing.

My true passion was and still is riding off-road motorbikes and

when I turned fourteen I was old enough to get a riding competition license; while Michele, who was three years my senior, had to wait to be eighteen years old in order to get his driving competition license.

My wish is to speak about the “fire” which had been driving both of us in those days and the very same enthusiasm that I had the luck to share with my brother.

In a more romantic way, I could say this is the story about a young kid clinging to the catch fences of the Monza Autodrome, mesmerized by the racing cars whizzing past him. In his eyes were the quick reflections of a dream that maybe one day would have come true.

I will tell you how that same kid managed - thanks to his driving skills, fairness and stubbornness - to become one of the greatest Italian drivers. Maybe, even the most loved one. As matter of fact, through the years I have come to know that some dads have named their own sons after Michele, simply because they were staunch fans of my brother.

It is no wonder then, if he managed to wind his way straight into Enzo Ferrari’s heart, a man who was known for not being so tender to his drivers and employees. Michele was always bound to Enzo Ferrari without ever letting him down.

A bond so tight that was never to be dissolved, not even when Michele was offered the chance to drive for McLaren, which would have then won the Formula 1 World Championship in 1988 with Ayrton Senna.

I can honestly say that my brother never regretted turning down that great offer. I consider myself very lucky for having personally witnessed this dream come true and lucky enough for not being present during his last tragic day in a racing car.

*the author*

# PART ONE

## OUR YOUTH

My family has just moved from inner Milan to a new housing estate placed in its outskirts looking for a more liveable life, away from the chaos and pollution of the big city.

Rozzano, once a small village at the gates of the Great Milan has grown rapidly between the mid '60s and the early '70s in order to satisfy the request and need for public housing and now it is composed mainly of working class neighbourhoods where people have to commute daily either for work or school towards the main city.

It is just one of the many anonymous suburban areas not so different from the ones surrounding any other industrial city in Europe but my brother and I are just two kids who couldn't care less, since to us this simply meant a new school to attend, new friendships to make and new games to play.

Yes, and what's more exciting for a kid than playing with toy cars!

Michele loved auto racing since his childhood and as many other children do, playing with toy cars was one of his favourite games.

Probably this love for engines and mechanics was passed on to us by our mother, given that in her own family from our granddad to her brothers, all of them have always had their hands stained with grease and motor oil.

A family's passion that has prompted some of our mother's cousins living in South America to set up a racing team and compete in different categories for over forty years while passing on this tradition from father to son.

In those years, our favourite comics book was "Michel Vaillant", where the main character created by Jean Graton in the '50s, was a French driver whose family-run team contested in numerous races in Formula 1 and other driving competitions. He was our hero.

You can guess how proud my brother was when he came to

know that he had been featured among the main characters in some stories of the legendary Michel Vaillant. He was pictured in three issues, that by chance I had found in a comics flea market. # 44 (*Steve e Julie*, published in Italy in 1989), # 50 (*Sfida tra i bastioni*, published in Italy in 2005) and # 51 (*Le caid de Francorchamps*, unpublished in Italy, 2002).

From reading these comics, Michele got the idea to start up his GM team, which stood for Garage Michele and since this team couldn't race alone, he also founded GE (Garage Ermanno) and GR (Garage Roberto). We used cardboard boxes of different colours with ad signs drawn on them so that we could pretend they were our sponsors.

Our races took place mainly at home in one of the corridors or outside in our yard where Michele lectured us on how to best negotiate curves.

By the way, it comes to my mind that even while he was walking, both at home or at the supermarket, he had the habit to follow certain trajectories as if he were actually racing on a track!

I must say that if he hadn't been professional racing driver, most probably he would have become a business man. That's because he managed to own so many toy cars that one day he proposed a deal to me. Since he needed more space for his little automobiles, he had no qualms in banishing my smaller and less important collection in a remote corner of our room. He was only ten years old!

As if by magic, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, Santa Claus brought us a real slot car racing track made by Policar. From then on our competitions became more exciting. Real soon, Michele started to soup-up the electric motors of the slot cars and as if this wasn't enough, he used to spread some denatured alcohol on the turns of the slot track, simulating wet conditions and getting the slot cars to great skids and spins.

In those days, two movies about the world of auto racing had hit the screen. One was "Winning" set on the Indianapolis Motor Speedway starring Paul Newman while the other one was "Le Mans" starring the unforgettable Steve McQueen.

We forced our father to take us to the movie theatre and watch both of them. More than thirty years have passed since that day, but I can still remember how my brother couldn't take his eyes off the screen as if he was afraid to miss even a single frame of the movie.

It is so exciting to think that twenty five years later not only he



Torre del Lago, 1969 - On a sandy beach, the three young Alboretos: Michele, Ermanno and their sister Laura.

managed to race in Indy but even won the 24 Hours of Le Mans! This leads me to believe that if there is a will (and a bit of luck) there is always a way in helping your dreams come true.

Michele had an iron will and he seemed to realize what life had in store for him. How he managed to know it had always eluded me. The first GP that we followed on the spot was the Italian Gran Prix at Monza back in 1969. On that day, Jackie Stewart won the competition driving in a Matra Ford. That was the very first time we heard the whines and the smells of a Grand Prix and we fell in love forever.

Michele had been so impressed by the race that the following week he talked our father into taking us to Monza and drive for a few laps along the circuit.

As years went by, Michele kept alive his passionate love for race cars by reading every sort of motorsports magazine, visiting the Turin International Car Exhibition every year and watching any kind of event which would be held in Monza.

Competitions were taking place almost every Sunday, but in those years money was real tight for him and as sometimes he couldn't afford to pay for the entrance ticket, he used to gatecrash by jumping over the fences of the autodrome.

When he got fifteen years of age and as a gift for passing his school exams, our father gave him his first bike: a 50 cc off-road Moto Guzzi Dingo which now I have fully restored and placed in a corner of my office. That sort of bike was chosen simply because it was the cheapest one available on the market.

Even if his passion was mainly for cars (I was more interested in motorbikes) Michele felt truly happy; I remember that when he started the bike for the first time, he told me "This is my first engine-run vehicle!".

Needless to say, very soon his Moto Guzzi got tuned up. We spent most of our spare time stripping and souping up the engine in our basement.

Those were the times where thanks to cult movies like "Easy Rider" and "On Any Sunday" we were imbued with the spirit of a genuine motorbike culture. Maybe we were not aware of that, but a sense of freedom had already been instilled in us and so was our desire to break away riding with our face to the wind: a thrill only motorbikes can give.

We spent nights on end in tuning our 50 cc motocross bikes.

We were broke, but we managed to get by. Our “fire” spurred us to look for some odd jobs during our school vacations, in order to scrape together some money which we could use for our bikes.

I worked as a plumber assistant, as an electrician and eventually as a motorbike mechanic in the only repair shop around our place. This was my chance to learn the trade which to this day still allures me and it is my current source of living.

While Michele worked for some time at VIMEC namely the firm owned by our uncle Ernesto (our mother’s brother) where he used to work on one of the three existing metal lathes in what was then just a modest workshop. Today VIMEC has become an important and renowned company which manufactures crude oil pumping valves and exports them all over the world.

After having filed and drilled every conceivable metal part on our bikes in order to loose weight, we would all gather on Saturday afternoons and Sunday mornings to a former borrow pit used for the construction of our local bypass. This was an area which - left to its own devices - had become a small forest and we proudly and aptly referred to as “Il Boschetto” (the thicket) and had illegally turned into a motocross track.

This is where our first legendary races on dirt bikes took place. I refer to them as legendary because we challenged each other in competitions that were fought to the bitter end. Of course this meant going back home with scrapes, bruises, traumas and a few stitches here and there.

Some of us were keen to go a bit overboard and play it rough, but it was all part of the game! Our races were always an event where you could buy or swap second hand spares like in a real flea market. We were always looking for a carburetor, a shock absorber or any part which could perform better. Nowadays, most of the kids do their buying and selling on the internet, while at the time, we did ours on our motocross track.

And the next week our circus would start all over again! This was a beautiful period of our lives since it enhanced our love for motor sports. As our parents would concern, they had long stopped complaining and would just guess - once we got back home in the evening - which would be our next fractured bone.

They were happy all the same since their sons were growing up away from drugs and delinquency that in the forthcoming years would have been rife in our area.

One day, while watching one of the many motor events which were regularly held in Monza, he met and became friend with Gattafoni, a driver who used to race with a super tuned FIAT 500. Michele became his mechanic and so he got a free pass for entering the autodrome.

As he was following the races along with his new friend Gattafoni, sometimes he had to be on the circuit on the Friday. But he usually managed to cut school devising any sort of bizarre illnesses as an excuse. Obviously our parents knew nothing of it.

Nevertheless, he kept on studying hard and when at last he graduated from his technical high school as a mechanical engineer, our father gave him a brand new dirt bike: a Mondial Sachs 125 (after years of searching high and low in local vintage markets I have finally managed to find one which I am currently restoring.)

Another bike for Michele! He enjoyed it for a couple of years but he was eagerly waiting to become of age and get his driving license.

By the way, only a few people know that he failed his first driving test. This because during the examination he would double clutch while shifting gears and then the examiner shouted at him "Hey, where do you think you are, at Monza?" So a month later he had to repeat his examination, holding back his racing instinct and behave like a taxi driver in order to get his permit.

When he finally became of age, he devised any possible excuse to drive an automobile and even with his temporary driving permit he used to "train" with our mother's car, a Citroen Ami 8. Whenever he could put his hands on the Citroen, he would rush to Monza and drive along the circuit.

It was really amazing watching him and his Citroen on the Parabolica curve in Monza where the bodywork would bend so low as to scrape the tarmac.

By working part-time as an errand boy he managed to buy his first car. It was an old Simca 1000, coloured in racing green and in mint condition. This car had belonged to an old priest and once brought home, we spent hours on end searching all over the car for every holy pictures the old man had placed in every nook and cranny. Weeks went by and still some of these pictures could magically materialize from under the floor mats or in the spare tire compartment!

Anyhow, he was very happy with this car since it was a rear-wheel

drive and as we have always claimed, “real cars must be rear-wheel drive”. Its engine, though, was a bit “choked” and so Michele tried to “liven it up” and as a result, a few months later the old Simca gave up its ghost.

Michele’s ability in keeping alive the fire born in his youth was great. It is no wonder then if as a grown-up man he still enjoyed some sort of boyish enthusiasm. And this same enthusiasm has always been with him, even after he had become a famous and successful Formula 1 driver.

As a car enthusiast, he owned quite some of them. Besides a Ferrari 412 (a personal gift he treasured most as it was from Enzo Ferrari himself) he also had a Ferrari GTO, a Ferrari F40, a beautiful 1978 Mercedes Pagoda, an AMG-tuned Mercedes SEC 500, a Jeep Cherokee and a Ford GT 40.

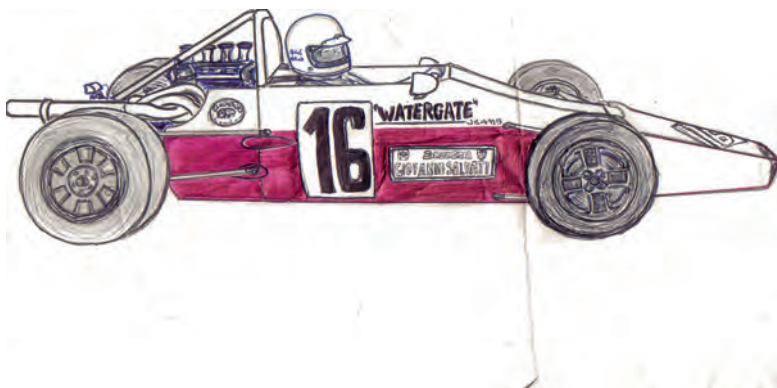
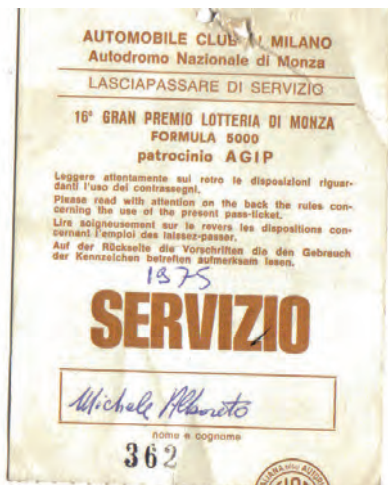
His last one was a 1981 Chevrolet Corvette. He was in the USA for the 1996 Indy where one of the race sponsors, a well-known local car dealer, had given it to him as a settlement. Obviously it was a vintage car and surely needed a general check-up, but Michele was so won over by this dusty Corvette that he got it shipped immediately to Milano.

Once back from the USA, he brought it to my workshop and told me “We absolutely must fix this old and beautiful lady, so get going!”. He stubbornly insisted on me restoring his Corvette. Most probably, he couldn’t accept the fact that time was passing by, both for him and his new American lover.

To me, this was a new challenge since I had never placed my hands on an American car. But the gauntlet had been thrown down! So I managed to get its service manual and see what I could do. Michele had already told me about the problems affecting his black Corvette. Its powerful engine was running rough since only seven cylinders out of eight were firing (this is a V8 4700 cc).

I started working on it and although I had replaced the spark plugs and cleaned the carburetors yet one of the eight cylinders wasn’t firing. At that stage, I checked the valves and I realized that one of the camshafts was completely worn out. Therefore, the valves couldn’t work properly and it would have been impossible for that cylinder to run fine.

I phoned Michele and told him: “Hey, sure Indy wasn’t one of your best results but the Corvette you got there from that Indy car dealer didn’t fare better!”.



Above, Michele's entry pass for Monza when as a "trainee mechanic" began to assist the drivers and started to breathe the air of champions.  
 Below, a drawing by Michele of his Formula Italia managed by Salvati Team.

As a result, we decided to completely overhaul the engine. Then the brakes and finally the shock absorbers so it could be safely driven. It took me about eight months to finish my work, since every part I checked out had to be replaced. The outcome, though, was excellent and the car eventually ticked like a Swiss clock.

Michele had decided to change its colour. So he had it painted metalized light blue with a long big red stripe which crossed all the top part of the bodywork. This because he intended to replicate a car that he had seen competing in Daytona while he was there racing on a Lancia Beta Montecarlo Turbo in 1980 with his team mate Riccardo Patrese.

Restoring that car was a great source of satisfaction to me. It is still working to this day and our cousin Roberto bought it from Michele's wife, a few years after my brother untimely passing away.

Even though he had made it big in auto racing, his passion for motorbikes was still great. He owned a KTM 250 MX, a Ducati F1 750 and an Harley Davidson Dyna Glide Low Rider which had been painted blue and yellow in order to match his crash helmet. He was very fond of his Harley since it was a recollection of the movie "Easy Rider" that had impressed him so much as a kid.

He was keen on attending Harley-Davidson rallies together with our cousin Roberto, who also owned one. Some times, Michele would ride to one of these rallies with his daughter Alice. She was always happy and loved being with him...

## PART TWO

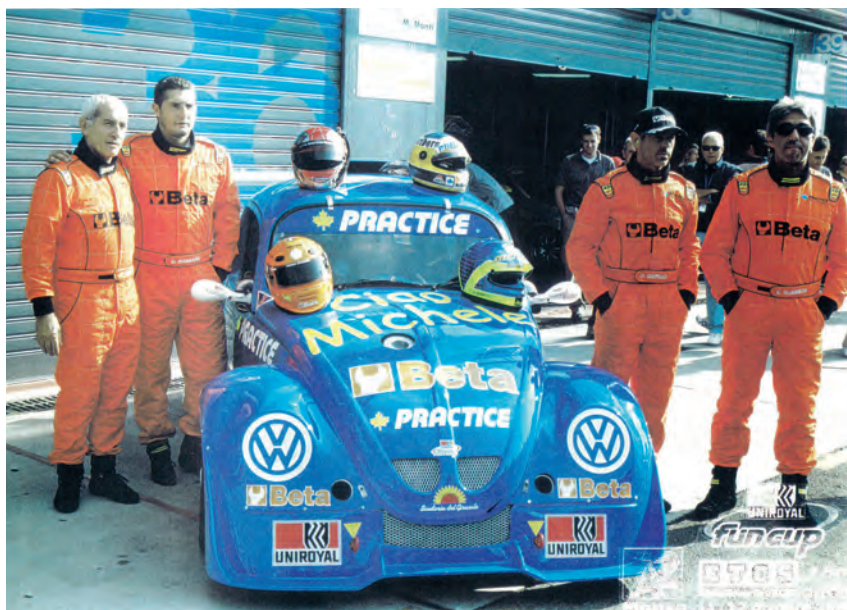


The journalist Greg Sarni, friend of Michele.

It's with a great pleasure that I have added to this book in memory of my brother Michele some recollections of the people who have been close to him and whose words are now a tribute to his persona. These are words which will help us understand his geniality and the appreciation that he has affectionately received not solely during his racing career, but above all as a man of integrity.

My American friend Greg Sarni is a multifaceted character who enjoys reporting on his web site the accounts of all the exciting events that every Sunday take place on the raceways in the USA and all over the world.

As a journalist and event promoter he has conducted several interviews regarding Michele. Therefore I have deemed appropriate to place them at the end of the second part of this book. Once again these interviews are an acknowledgment of my brother's sympathy and his enthusiasm for this world.



Above, 2003 - from left: the friends Pippo Bianchi, Daniele Massaro, Dindo Capello and Ermanno next to a funny tuned up Beetle during a “four hours” race in memory of Michele.

Below, 2008 - Davide (Ermanno’s son) driving a Formula Predator.

## MICHELE, THIS IS HOW I REMEMBER HIM...

**Laura Alboreto** (Michele's sister)

My brothers' recollections are like images seen from a distance. Those are the flashbacks of a younger sister who had watched - with utter curiosity and without understanding much of it - a world made of engines and enthusiasm.

Michele and Ermanno, two boys only three years apart, who since their childhood have shared games and a love for anything which had to do with motor bikes or cars. This passion was really born with them and I think that the Italian saying "*avere qualcosa nel sangue*" (to be in the blood genes) is really true.

I - being the younger sister - had just a role as a spectator.

I clearly remember when as kids they used to shoot with a super 8 camera their scale car models and then assemble each and every frame so that they looked like real moving vehicles. A tiresome work which would keep them busy for a full day. Those films are still around somewhere, as well as the ones where they are riding off-road bikes or vying each other on a ski track. I reckon that their watchword had always been one: competition.

And you should have seen how painstakingly they managed to turn into a real circuit the rooms and the corridors of our home. Michele used to place chairs and obstacles everywhere and they took things so seriously that they pushed each other so to simulate cars running off the circuit. Or when it was my turn to simulate the sound of the engines by switching on and off the floor polisher.

Although at the time, I had no particular enthusiasm in taking part to their mise-en-scene; today, I must say that these are the memories which I cherish the most because thanks to them I can claim to have witnessed a dream come true.

I have always been terrorized by races and speed and as I got older, a distance of some sort got between me and them. For this reason, I have written in these pages that I was simply a spectator.

On the contrary, Ermanno has shared Michele's world by following him in many of his adventures revealed in this work. Most of them I got to know myself by reading this book.

When we are kids, we think that adults have stopped playing. Then we find out that's not true and we keep on playing and dreaming even when we are grown-ups. Both my brothers have remained kids at heart surrounded by friends, who to this day, still hang out with Ermanno and who are the same teen agers they used to be, except for some little weight around their waists...

Michele was always a very serious man when he was attending public appearances but he was extremely funny and witty in his private life; while Ermanno has always been less "diplomatic", even though he was very creative and you can say that he never backed down from any challenge or any difficulty life would put in front of him.

Both of them had the same light which shines in the eyes of children when they get a new toy. That same light which instantly turned on when they chatted about races, challenges and technical issues or what went on behind the scenes of the races.

Their conversations are other remembrances which make me smile.

That's why the different episodes told here in this collection of memories by Ermanno are extremely precious. They are narrated in a way that only a family member - with that unique relationship that both of them enjoyed - can tell; way different from what friends, colleagues, journalists and fans can see as outsiders.

These are very personal facts which to my opinion have indeed a priceless value. Nothing will ever cancel any voice, sound, fight, hardship, catch-up, joy and arguing which have made Michele's dream come true. A passion born with him and accomplished together with his younger brother.

I am happy to have shared with Ermanno the chance to live with a man who having received such a wonderful gift, was capable to cherish and nurture it.

Michele made it big and that's why today so many people still remember him not only for his racing talent but mainly as a role model who gave respect to what life had given him.

The only flaw was that it ended too soon.

But I am sure he would have said that it was worth it.

# ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ATLANTIC OCEAN

by Greg Sarni

## **My first time in Europe and Monaco Grand Prix**

The idealistic pursuit of living a life which allows for fame, fortune and fun is usually reserved for fictional Hollywood characters. To do so while competing in the top series in the World of Motorsports, as the last Italian born driver chosen by Enzo Ferrari to drive his race car, is to be Michele Alboreto.

His life story is compelling for so many reasons. A high level of achievement on a path to success is one thing, but to do so with grace, class and humility is a rare accomplishment. To be a hero is common, but a tragic hero plays on the heart strings of humanity like a 12 bar Blues song.

If you are lucky enough in life to meet one person whose passion and philosophy of living approaches your own, you are lucky to have found a friend forever. I have had the good fortune to meet and interview some legendary champions such as Andretti, Villeneuve, Mansell, Rainey, Polen and Schwantz. They are all great men and talented racers, with varying personalities and approachability. However on August 16, 1996, it was as if two worlds collided. The impetus for the encounter began a decade earlier.

The train from Nice to Monaco runs through the mountain tunnels along the Cote D'Azur. Enough time to listen to one side of Assorted Artists Volume 30, the mixed tape I recorded back in Weilerbach, Germany at Brother Rick's house. Peter Gabriel was singing Red Rain as the train emerged back into sunlight from the tunnel, my eyes adjusting to the bright blue waters of the Mediterranean.

My first job in radio had recently come to an end, but I still had the urge to put music together. As John Lee Hooker sang, "If it's in you, it has to come out". Rick had been teaching school in Monterey,

California, but moved to Europe to teach kids on military bases and this was my first trip to visit him. I found it ironic that I finally got to “The Riviera” to find out that is not what they call it there. I guess it would have been a tough sell for General Motors in 1963 to introduce to America the brand new Buick Cote D’ Azur.

Maybe the allure of Formula One was set in motion by the Saturday Matinee showing of James Garner in Grand Prix. It could have been the ABC Wide World of Sports delayed coverage of Jackie Stewart swooping through the streets of The Principality that called out to me. Or the 1973 postcard of Surtees driving the white Honda which Rick had sent, which read; “Even the garbage trucks look fast today”. Later that day, in the marine supply store on the outside of the Rascasse turn, I would buy my own souvenir postcard of the number 27 Red Racer of Michele Alboreto.

Those seven syllables rolled off the tongue like a seven course Italian feast and represented the hopes and dreams of Italians from Milano to Montefalcione. Mi-chel-e Al-bor-et-o; a hero of Italy, for those of Italian descent and tifosi the world over.

The flight to Europe stopped in Iceland, presumably so we could buy sweaters. There was also something about refueling the old DC 8. Iceland Air didn’t even have their own terminal at Boston’s Logan Airport. But when you’re on a budget, you take what you can get. To this day the Finn Haddie was the best airline food ever and this coming from one who isn’t a big fan of fish. Maybe it was because it was served by the most beautiful stewardesses ever. I remember gazing intermittently between their eyes and the wild blue yonder out the port hole window and seeing no variation in color. By the end of the flight it was me who was serving them orange juice in the galley.

There was no sleep on the overnight flight to Luxembourg. Rick met me at the airport and somehow the trip back to his home in Germany went via the Spa-Francorchamps race course. The track was still part of public roads in 1987 and the Bus Stop chicane really was a bus stop! Still jet lagged and sleep deprived, we took the train from Luxembourg through Germany, into France and to the Mediterranean coast in Marseilles.

The anticipation and excitement of the adventure and a lack of sleep had me giddy. I remember laughing hysterically about traveling so far to the race, but having no reservations for lodging or even tickets to the race. We were confident and carefree, secure in the fact that nothing can go wrong when you pursue your passion. Reality

however, teaches youth some cruel lessons.

Race day tickets were sold out. Disappointment and disbelief were tempered by the fact that we were able to get great seats for qualifying, just before the swimming pool chicane. A trip down to the beach and a swim in the Mediterranean went a long way in soothing the disappointment. It was different and somewhat exciting to see topless women on the beach. A good degree of the excitement was tempered by a segment of the bathers who I wished had kept their tops on. A sign as we left the sand explained in French and illustrated for those who didn't speak French, that it was unlawful to go shirtless on the streets of Monaco. This was indeed foreign soil, other side of the World upside down thinking.

We still had to find a place to stay for the weekend, so we got back on the train and headed west to Nice, where we could find lodging that had a better chance of fitting our budget. Rooms or pensions as they are referred to in France are rated by stars. I think our money only bought us two of the celestial objects. One star for each of the tiny beds in the tiny room. As I opened the shutters on the second floor overlooking the street, I noticed there were no screens in the windows. Rick explained to me that it was standard practice in Europe and that the population peacefully coexisted with flies and other wildlife that cared to join you in your room.

The busy street was right next to the entrance to the train station and looking back at our lodging choice now it must have been because we were so tired that we just walked into the first place when we got to town. Nice is a fairly big city and with it comes the usual ills of society; such as homelessness and prostitution. A certain contribution to our reaction to these issues was definitely more of a fact of not thinking straight than a genuine crass attitude toward the downtrodden.

One of the first sites I spotted as an observer from the second story perch was a group of homeless men and a monkey. This wasn't a small spider monkey. It was a full fledged baboon, half as big as the man whose shoulder it was perched on and the same color as his military green jacket. This place was really starting to trip me out!

We washed the Mediterranean salt and sand off our tired frames and walked down to a café for some refreshment and an opportunity to practice some of our High School French. Luckily, beer is beer in just about every language! *Un autre bier c'est vous plait* just became "ENCORE" as the evening grew older.

Michele Alboreto benefited in the attrition of the race, moving up to the final spot on the podium.

Half of the twenty four starters didn't take the checkered flag in Monaco on May 31, 1987. It was Ayrton Senna's first of six Monaco victories and the first for a Formula One car using active suspension. If it appeared that Alboreto was lucky to have been gifted the podium through attrition, luck was repaying him for the string of turbo failures in 1985 that had cost him the World Driver's Championship.

Happy that my hero had done well in the race, we began our long journey back to Germany. Just to get to the train station we had to wait behind crowds. I had never seen a cop stop pedestrians before, but the Gendarme with the whistle would only let so many into the station at once. While waiting shoulder to shoulder amongst the race fans, I wondered if the privileged drivers, departing by helicopter or within walking distance of their Monaco tax shelters, realized what the Formula One faithful endured to witness their exploits. For me it was back on the train and then the plane to America.

## **Riding at full throttle to interview Michele**

It was the first year for the Indy Racing League in 1996, American Open Wheel Racing's first year of a Civil War. Since my interest was road race circuits, my allegiance in the split lay with CART. But the passion for the sport overcame my preference and I was anxious to cover the race on Loudon, New Hampshire oval for a very good reason. Michele Alboreto, two years removed from his Formula One career was now driving the number 33 entry for Team Scandia!

I contacted the press officer for the team and arranged an interview with the Italian racing hero after practice. I put on my Ferrari T-shirt, which I had bought in Montreal in the late 80s at the Grand Prix of Canada. It was a favorite souvenir, which featured the helmets of Alboreto and teammate Gerhard Berger. As I was already running late for the interview, I remembered back to the souvenir postcard that I had purchased at the Grand Prix of Monaco in '87; the one with Alboreto on track in Brazil.

The desire to be an impartial and professional motorsports journalist was squashed by the autograph seeking boy inside me,

anxious to take advantage of the opportunity to demonstrate a loyalty to a hero's career and our common heritage. I rifled through a filing cabinet of racing memorabilia and finally found what I was looking for. But now the interview was in one hour and the Speedway was an hour and a half away!

I jumped on my 1988 Ducati F1 and headed North to meet the Ferrari F1 driver. I am glad that I don't wear a watch and my bike doesn't have a clock. As a matter of fact, I don't remember even looking at the speedometer or rev counter. I was just concentrating on the dual tasks of getting there on time, while keeping a watchful eye for speed traps.

When I arrived in the paddock I rode to the Team Scandia camp and there was the man from Milan, enjoying lunch in the hospitality area. Not wanting to disturb his meal, I casually dismounted the Ducati, betraying the adrenaline rush from the eighty miles that had just whisked by in less than an hour.

Before I could assemble my tape recorder and notebook and even before I had my helmet off, Alboreto had jumped up from the table and made his way to meet me, or more accurately, the motorcycle! I had hoped that riding my prized possession would endear me to a driver who I admired, but was not expecting this level of reception.

"It is the same bike I have back home in Italy"! He had never seen a dual seat F1 or Biposto as it is known back home in Italy. He was pouring all over the machine, even going so far to check the VIN! He was actually quite right when questioning this model.

Ducati F1 production ceased in 1987. Ducati North America had leftover F1B models in its New Jersey headquarters and decided to certify the remaining bikes for road use. A restricted exhaust, sourced from parent company's Cagiva Alazzurra model was installed, along with turn signals, foot pegs and the dual seat from the Santamonica F1. They dubbed the bike a 1988 Ducati 750 F1S. It was street legal in all US states but California.

I introduced myself and told Michele that I was there to interview him and he invited me into the motor home, where we could talk in relative silence. (Motor homes are not completely sound proof and support series were on track for a portion of the interview). As I asked the questions that I had prepared and Michele took the time to carefully answer my questions, I was struck by his willingness to expound on issues and tell anecdotal stories about Enzo Ferrari and Ayrton Senna.

I couldn't help but remember an incident two years prior when F1 Champion Nigel Mansell was racing for the Newman Hass CART team. I had simply requested a celebrity ID for my radio station from the driver. A rude and boorish press officer for the team jumped between us and screamed at me that I had to pay people if I wanted them to do a commercial.

After completing the list of questions about his racing career, I asked Michele the same question, if he would mind doing an ID for my Blues radio program. Not only was his response, the complete opposite of what I received from the Newman Hass entourage, his enthusiasm caught me completely off guard.

"You luva the Blues, I luva the Blues. You have Ducati, I have Ducati"! I quickly reminded him that he lived in Monaco and I lived in Massachusetts; end of similarities! We had a good laugh and he signed my postcard, "To Greg, with friendship".

Later I would find out that our lives had many more similarities. From our love of dirt bikes in our youth, right down to the fact that we both suffered dislocated shoulders growing up. Maybe it was these similarities that transcended cultures and language and is the basis for friendship. Or as I have come to find out by talking to others about Alboreto's attributes, his personality endeared him to almost everyone he came in contact with, including his competitors.

## **Radio Transcript of Greg Sarni's WBRS Interview of Team Scandia driver Michele Alboreto NHIS 8/16/96**

*Welcome to New Hampshire. You've had a long and storied career in Formula One and Sports Cars and now oval track racing. Could you compare the different driving techniques that you use in an open wheel car on an oval to let's say, the World Sports Car Ferrari 333SP?*

Ah, first of all it is a monoplate, so the limit of the car on an oval is much higher than the one of sports car. The sports car is made for long distance racing so everything is building up to resist, even 24 hours, like in Daytona, like in Le Mans. The oval car is made to be very quick for a short time, so everything is on the limit, the suspension and the aerodynamics and everything. So the limit of the monoplate is much higher. But it is much more difficult also to drive!

**Allan McNish** (British racing driver)

*You mentioned to me at Laguna Seca that Michele Alboreto endorsed your talent as a driver at a low point in your career. Do you feel like you owe somewhat of a debt of gratitude to him for that?*

I think Michele was a very honest person. And you're right, he did, he stood up for me, spoke in my behalf and he had no reason to do that; and also within Audi as well. I remember one situation, now I won't go into detail, but certainly I was out on a limb a little bit and he was the one that went to Dr. Ulrich and he fought my corner for me. At that moment, I appreciated Michele Alboreto deeply.

*How much of that endorsement would you say helped your career in the eyes of others, in particular, Dr. Ullrich and how much did it affect your confidence on a personal level?*

In terms of the confidence, it helped a lot because Michele was a legend when I was growing up. I remember watching him in Grand Prix and his career as well. We don't need to go into the details of that, but also with regard to Dr. Ullrich, I think when anybody with his stature speaks positively about you, the other person listens and takes note. And if Michele Alboreto spoke or Wee Willie Johnson, from down the street spoke about Alan McNish, who would you listen to? In that respect it is difficult to quantify the benefit and the positive effect it had. But there's no question about it; it was a massively positive event.

My racing with him in 2000, we finished a very close second here (Sebring) and also a couple of other races that I did with Michele and winning at Petit in 2000 as well. I learned a heck of a lot of how to drive a racing car and learned a heck a lot of how to be a gentleman.

*Now did you learn by watching or did he offer up tips on techniques to you personally or did you just observe?*

Observe and listening to someone with an open book philosophy.

*You also mentioned to me that Michele reminded you a lot of Giacomo Agostini, in the way he carried himself, the way he dressed, did you know that Agostini was a friend of Michele's Father?*

I knew that they knew each other, but didn't realize that they were close.

year before, in a pretty much a dogfight battle and to know that he had passed away was a real, real shock. It shook everybody at Audi Sport, really shook everybody.

*Well, he should be remembered for the person he was, above and beyond his talent as a driver.*

Class.

**Emanuele Pirro** (Italian racing driver)

*Do you remember the first time that you heard of Michele Alboreto?*

Yes I do, it was when I started motor racing with the Formula Fiat Abarth in 1980. Michele was doing F3 with team Euroracing (I will be driving for them 2 years later). As he didn't race kart I didn't hear about him before then. He was rated as a very talented, serious and committed driver without a rich family behind him. He proved that you can make it without your own backing.

*When was the first time that you two met?*

I met him in Daytona for the 1981 24 hours. My first ever race outside Italy. After having won the F. Fiat Abarth 2000 championship I got a works contract to drive for the Lancia Martini Team and Michele was one of the drivers. I just got 19 then and was the most "junior" of them all, I won the race and Michele was very nice and complimentary with me.

*Did it change your perception of him once that you knew him personally?*

Not really, he was a very serious guy, much more than me and few others. I remember we went on the beach in Daytona with a Camaro to make some power slides and donuts and he (wisely) didn't want to take part! Also he was the only one with his girlfriend there so he didn't take part to the night girls "hunting" as the rest of us... yeah the good old days!

*Michele was the last Italian born driver for Ferrari. Do you think that Italians felt a greater affinity for him than his teammates, Arnoux, Johansson and Berger?*

Don't forget Ivan Capelli. I don't think the Italians had more

don't come with a load of baggage, either a fucking nut case father or family, which most of them do unfortunately. (laughter)

*It's like the Little League Coach having to deal with the Father!*

I had a horrible experience with that and I don't necessarily think it's worth it. I have a young girl in Finland now that I've just started working with that seems very, very promising; Hopefully, I've put together a good package for her this year. That could develop into something and that would be good.

I get asked, I mean no joke, probably once a week to manage somebody. It's such an enormous amount of work, just the first three or four years to get them to the point where they can start even earning any money. If you take even ten super promising guys, if one of them make it, it's a big result.

*You're living in California now, do you get back to Sweden much?*

Not very much, no unfortunately not. This summer I'm hoping I'm going to be able to take my children over there too.

*Michele loved Blues music, what kind of music do you listen to?*

Lately I don't listen to music at all! When I lived in London, I was into music like there was no tomorrow, now I just like silence.

*That part of getting old you know; watch out!*

(laughter) Maybe it is, I don't know. When I'm in the car, maybe some chill music, something nice and mellow.

**Dindo Capello** (Italian racing driver)

*Do you remember the first time you met Michele Alboreto?*

Yuh, I will never forget, because I was almost 18 then. A guy, trying to find a way to race a car and I was in Milano walking down from an office from a guy who was involved in Motorsports and a friend of mine suggest me to talk with this guy to get some advice how to start, with which car...

*What was his name?*

It was Simone Vullo, Mario Simone Vullo, He was, I know, like eh, not manager, a best friend of Michele and stepping down, coming

*came from; Music and Motorsports. He was a big fan of the Blues, what type of music do you like to listen to?*

I know that he was a very big fan of Blues music, because at his funeral there was Blues music. I like many different kind of music. I like Rock, but I like many Italian songs. We have also a few really good Rockers; Italian Rockers.

*Zucchero?*

Zucchero yes, but we have Vasco Rossi. When he make a concert he has more spectators than any of the biggest name in the world. I like his music and I was growing up with his music and now, even 30 years later he is still doing great songs. I am no expert, I like many different types of music, but in my iPod I have 700 different songs, but all different kind of songs.

**Tom Kristensen** (Danish racing driver)

*Tom, you paired with Michele in 97 in a Porsche to win Le Mans. How well did you know Michele before becoming his teammate?*

I didn't know him personally before I became his teammate. But I can say the way that I came to the team, only a few days before the actual race with him and Johansson. He was very, very good at giving me confidence. I was leading the Formula 3000 Championship and I was then assigned as a young driver to get experience. And he gave me a lot of confidence, he didn't tell me what to do, but I asked him a lot. And he taught me a lot about, let's say not taught, let's say, he explained to me a lot of things what I had to do, how to do it, but only because I asked him.

He was not the guy who pushed you or said, Tom listen, no not at all. He was very generous with that and was extremely an extremely, eh, great, great man. Extremely gentle. Always really resting within himself. Nice personality; always caring. So, of course after that further on when we drove with Audi as colleagues; not in the same car, but as colleagues with Audi as well. But that first year, it gave me lot, because basically it kick started my career. Because we went on to win Le Mans and I went a few tenths faster than him in the race to make the lap record. So in my debut win at Le Mans and also with a lap record during that year. It owes a lot to him and being with a team like Joest. He was very, very calm and a nice, nice man.

**Wolfgang Ullrich** (Austrian engineer, Head of Audi Motorsport)

*How did Michele come to be a member of the Audi team from the beginning? Did he seek a ride with you or did you seek him?*

No, we approached him. We approached him because we had been looking for a personality with a lot of Sports Car experience. We needed a personality that could fit our team to Audi. And uh, yuh, he is a very special man. And this we learned very fast. And he was helping us to meld and jell the team together. And he was making all of his knowledge available to all of us, helping us to improve very fast. He was a big asset to the team.

*Allan McNish mentioned to me that Michele spoke out on his behalf, endorsing his skill as a driver when few others believed in him. Is this a typical story about Michele Alboreto?*

I mean he was always available to give everything he had to all the others and this was his general approach.

*How instrumental was his work with the team in the development of the R8 and the success of that car?*

He was very important for us during these ways, he had the most of experience in Sports Cars, he helped us to bring drivers in that also had some experience. He was a key factor in the development of the R8.

*I'm sure that his passing was very devastating on the whole team and made for a difficult situation. As the leader of the team, how did you handle that, with the other drivers in particular?*

We handle it the way that we said, "We all go for him". And this made us strong.

*In his honor, absolutely. I am sure that it's a lesson that nobody wants to learn, but could anything be learned out of such a tragic thing like that, maybe to make the car stronger or more safe?*

I mean we had always tried to have the car at the highest level of safety, the quality, for the team for everybody. We made the car available for all of the investigations and we have seen that there are certain issues that could be improved and this has been coming back into the rulebook.

*That is a good legacy for him.*

**Giacomo Agostini** (Italian multi-time world champion Grand Prix motorcycle road racer)

*Signor Agostini, I understand that you and Michele Alboreto became friends during his career. Do you remember the first time that you two met?*

I can't remember exactly when we met, but I think it happened while we were both practicing in Monza.

*You both experienced the common emotion of the expectations of the country of Italy and its passionate fans. Did you ever discuss with Michele the pressure involved with those expectations and how to handle that?*

We have discussed about it on several occasions and we have understood that when you are a champion and your supporters get accustomed to your victories it then gets difficult to explain to them that now and then you can lose too.

*Alan McNish mentioned that he followed your career in racing and also admired Michele's talent. In fact, he drew a comparison to your off track personalities. After meeting and getting to know Michele, do you feel that your personalities were similar?*

I reckon that our personalities were quite similar, not too ebullient and very close to our own fans.

*You both raced for strong willed team owners; Michele with Enzo Ferrari and you with Count Agusta. How was it that both you and Michele were able to relate to these team leaders, while many others had difficulty in doing so?*

Maybe because Michele and I had a certain respect for our employers (Enzo Ferrari and Count Agusta). We understood that we had to be grateful to them and that we also had to accept their decisions.

*I heard that you've also done some off-road riding for fitness, as Michele did and I know that you also went riding together. How did he get on with the bike?*

We went off-road riding together on different occasions both when we used to go to the country and visit our friend Ermanno Ronchi and also when he came to visit me in the Valli Bergamasche. I would say that even on bikes Michele was quite confident.



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