



Alessandro Zanardi: the story

The beginning with the kart

Alessandro's sporting career began, like most European drivers, in the karting as consequence of a tragic and dramatic event in his life: his sister Cristina 15, a promising swimmer, was killed in a car accident.

At time Alessandro was near the age when he could obtain the driving licence for motorbikes and his parents- Dino and Anna-, devastated by the death of their daughter, were worried also for the safety of their restless son on the busy roads.

A day, whilst walking with his father near Bonini's workshop -mechanic in Castelmaggiore, Zanardi's hometown- Alessandro saw his friend Glauco working on a kart.

Seeing the interest that Alessandro was taking in the kart, Glauco suggested to Alessandro's father, that some of his son's energy might be channelled towards racing on a kart circuit.

Since that day Alessandro was focussed on the kart, he was so determined to build his own kart that he stole some water pipes from his father –he was a plumber- and also four wheels from a dustbin.

For Alessandro this was the beginning of a new adventure, he was motivated by the passion to fight in the kart races, passion echoed by his father who acted as his mechanic and manager.

Two friends of Alessandro, Dante and Massimo bakers in Castelmaggiore, were also passionate about kart racing; in order to be able to go to the track on Sunday, they were always obliged to bake twice as much bread on Saturday. They were, however, deadly tired by the time they arrived at the track so they named their team "Team Sfighè" - Unlucky Team-.

As time went by, Alessandro's name became known in the karting also because of a curious episode happened during a round of the European Championship.

With one lap to go, when he was in the lead, he was involved in a collision with another driver whose name was Corsini.

Both drivers went off and Alessandro could easily get back on the track and still retain the lead because he had an advantage of 28 seconds at the moment of the impact. Unfortunately, Corsini's father that was near the accident site, managed to prevent him from returning to the race tripping Alessandro up.

Even to this day Alessandro believes that the winner, a then unknown Michael Schumacher, must have laughed like mad at the episode!

FORMULA ONE : THE DEBUT

The adventure in F1 began suddenly and without help in 1991 when he was asked by Jordan to replace Michael Schumacher, who had been hired by Benetton.

Eddie Jordan did not have the budget to finish the Championship so to raise money he had a bet with a bookmaker, that Jordan would have at least ten points by the end of the Championship.

This was achieved during the first part of the season so Jordan decided that they could take a "fast driver, rather than a "rich driver" for the rest of the Championship.

Alessandro's F1 debut was about to begin ... it was strange the way that Alessandro was hired by Jordan, he was at Le Mans for an F3000 race and he could not be found when Jordan phoned him at the circuit and for this reason it was decided to use the track loudspeaker to try and locate him.

His debut took place in Barcelona where he only had free practice to test the car, despite this he finished ninth in the race on the Sunday.

His father, knowing that his presence would be a distraction to Alessandro, decided not to tell him he would be there!

Unaware of this, Alessandro was surprised to see someone making gestures to him as he returned to his box on the slowing down lap, he soon realised that this person clinging halfway up a pole waving wildly, was his father Dino!

Alessandro had hoped to remain with Jordan for the season 1992 and in fact completed their winter testing, however they decided to hire Modena in his place and ten days before the beginning of the Championship Gugelmin arrived with a huge sponsorship deal so he took the second seat at Jordan.

Alessandro desperately wanted a drive and contacted Ken Tyrell with whom he had signed a pre-contract five days before the beginning of the championship but this attempt proved to be useless because Ken Tyrell decided to hire De Cesaris.

The only way to remain in Formula One was to accept the role of test driver at Benetton and Alessandro spent many hours waiting for a call from Benetton to begin his role as test driver for them.

Fortunately this situation changed, when the regular drivers Brundle and Schumacher were both unavailable, he began the tests on the active suspension.

During a winter test at Le Castellet circuit he impressed the technicians at Benetton so much that he was asked to do a GP simulation in place of new driver Riccardo Patrese.

His result was 0.2 seconds faster than Schumacher and this performance was noticed by Peter Collins of Lotus (on the right) that invited Alessandro to drive for them.

Alessandro was later to regret this decision because it would have been better to remain at Benetton even if only as a test driver.

Joining Lotus in 1993 was a negative experience for Alessandro as it was a pale copy of the team who won the World Championship in the 70's.



Sadly the incident prevented him from finishing the season.

Recovered from the injuries, Alessandro started the season 1994 as test driver for Lotus, he replaced Pedro Lamy in the Spanish GP after that Pedro had suffered an accident during free practice at Silverstone.

Unfortunately financial problems forced the Lotus team to close, leaving Alessandro unemployed.



During the Friday morning practice for the Belgian GP, at Spa's Radillon the active suspension failed, at a speed of 270 km/h (170 mph) the car skidded first to the left hitting the rail and then back across the circuit coming to a stop on the right hand side.

At first Alessandro remained unconscious, and was thought to have suffered damage to his legs, this was not but due to spinal concussion, he was taken to hospital in Liegi.

A NEW WORLD : THE USA

1995 was a bad year for Alessandro since he competed in only two events in the British GT championship , although he won the class at Silverstone.

Luckily at the end of the year something happened that changed his career, Reynard's commercial director remembered that "fast guy" who had driven very well for them in F3000, five years before.



He called Alessandro and offered him the chance to test a Champcar on the oval at Homestead, this was for the Chip Ganassi team and there was the possibility of competing in the Indy Car Championship in 1996.

Although he was not the only driver to test the car, he was the fastest, he gained the support of Mr. Ganassi (maybe because Chip is of Italian origin) and was subsequently offered a three year contract.

The contract with Target Ganassi Racing gave to Alessandro everything to stay at the

at the top and make his name, team, chassis, engine and tyres.

In 1996, his first year in the USA, Alessandro proved to Chip Ganassi that he had made the right choice in signing him.

From the first race he was in the fight for the title and starting with the race in Portland - at the beginning of the second half of the season-, Alessandro had a fantastic run of form, starting from the first row in each of the last eight events.

His achievements included five pole positions, three victories, two second places and a third place, with those results he closed the season third in the overall standings winning the "Rookie of the Year" award.

Most memorable was the last lap pass on Bryan Herta at the Corkscrew in Laguna Seca, that was a fantastic move forever remembered as "The pass".

For Alessandro the season 1997 was definitely the highlight of his career obtaining five victories and four pole positions and notwithstanding some people were envious of his success, he won the CART.

During the year there were some memorable overtaking moments but the most beautiful and exciting exploit was the victory in the Medic Drug Grand Prix of Cleveland when he fought back to win against all odds: he was given a double penalty -a stop and go and then he was demoted to 22nd and last place- but still came through the field to win the race.

The third year at Ganassi Racing did not start well, the first two races were on the ovals of Homestead and Motegi and were not brilliant for him since he was third at Homestead and retired at Motegi. In the third event on the street circuit at Long Beach there was contact between two drivers at the Hairpin, the track became blocked and Alessandro found himself one lap down in 18th position.

Rather than becoming angry over the incident, he began a fantastic recovery regaining the lost lap with a smart pit stop strategy.

With a succession of fantastic overtaking moves, the last one being Bryan Herta (on the photo), he went on to win the race.

This victory can be considered the most important of the season, it showed that Alessandro was still the strong fighter of the previous seasons and he lacked none of his motivation to win.



After the thrilling win at Long Beach, with other six victories and fourteen podiums (a record for the CART championship), he went on to win the Fedex Championship Series, all this without a single pole position during the season.

After a fantastic period in the USA, Alessandro felt ready to return to Formula One, this time hired by a top Grand Prix team: the Team Williams.

FORMULA 1: THE RETURN

It had been five years since Zanardi had been a competitor in F1 with the Lotus team and now he was now thought to be one of the most competitive and exciting racing drivers in the world.

Expectations of him were high, not only because he was joining a top team –Williams– but because of the three winning seasons in the CART championship, in short it seemed that here were all the ingredients to do a good job, not enough to win the title, but at least to gain a victory in one or more grand prix.

Right from the beginning however things were not easy, the differences between a F1 car and a Champcar forced Alessandro to drive in a way not matching his natural style.

Things did not improve and innumerable engine failures (engine blown in Brazil during the qualifying, right) made the situation worse, not helped either by poor technical assistance.

His engineer was inexperienced and did not offer Alessandro proper support during his return to F1 and also the ambience within the team did not help Alessandro show his full potential.

At the Belgian GP Alessandro was forced to use the T car and was surprised by its completely different set-up: the T car had been set-up for his team mate Ralf Schumacher.

During the race at Spa Alessandro did a good job following easily the pace of his team mate, just a few tenths of a second behind him in sixth place.

It was only an error of the team during re-fuelling that forced him to return to the pits losing him the chance of sixth place and one point.

It was at Spa that he demonstrated that he was able to match the pace of his team mate, he did it also at the following Hungarian GP and would show this very well at Monza.



In Monza Alessandro seemed to be the same driver we loved in CART, very fast in every session he qualified fourth fastest -at left after qualifying- two tenths ahead of Ralf.

At the start he made a fantastic move gaining the second place at the first chicane and then remaining third for many laps until his car suffered a failure once again.

The floor of the Williams began to come loose and Alessandro was forced to slow down losing many positions and ending up seventh.

Ralf, although always behind Alessandro during the weekend, managed to take the second place going on the

podium.

At the end of a very disappointing season Alessandro and Williams achieved an agreement announcing that their collaboration arrived to a friendly end, the career of Alessandro in F1 was definitively over.



2000: A SABBATICAL YEAR

During the first days of January 2000 Alessandro released an interview, he said he would not return during the 2000 season as he wanted to spend more time with his family.

Although he said he would be keeping a watchful eye on the world of motorsport, he felt the need to rekindle his passion and motivation.

There was then a period of silence with no news of Zanardi.

During the first days of July however he was called by his good friend Mo Nunn, his former engineer at Ganassi Racing.

Mo Nunn had started his own team and asked Alessandro if he would test the car at Sebring for a couple of days (right) in order to obtain some useful feedback for the forthcoming races, since the regular driver Tony Kanaan hurt his arm in an accident and wasn't in a position to drive.

Many were speculating about the possible return of Zanardi as a substitute for Tony Kanaan in a few races, however this was not to be as Alessandro felt he had not trained sufficiently to take part in a competitive race.

Towards the end of the year his name was linked to many CART teams for the season 2001.



IN THE CART CHAMPIONSHIP AGAIN

When it seemed too late for him to get a drive and all the top CART teams were filled, Alessandro decided he wanted once again to return to racing.

During December 2000 his former team mate and friend Jimmy Vasser seemed about to sign for Mo Nunn Racing but at the end this deal fell through and Jimmy went to Patrick Racing leaving the seat that Alessandro accepted immediately and very happily.

The return of Zanardi caused great excitement and big sponsors as Pioneer Electronics were easy to find and also the engine supplier Honda was very happy to recreate the winning collaboration that led Zanardi to win the 1997 and 1998 championships.



The decision to return was taken by Alessandro just in time to get a seat for the season 2001 but it was a bit late to create an experienced crew accustomed to work together, this fact would have had a big influence on the results.

In fact the big problem that Zanardi was obliged to face it was the inability of his crew to find an effective set-up during the qualifying when it's necessary to work under pressure.

For this reason Alessandro was very often obliged to start from the back of the grid, and this is not what a driver want especially on a street or road circuit.

Sometimes the team did a good job with the set-up for the race and this allowed to Alessandro good performances especially on the fast ovals and also in some other circuit.

Anyway the first three races of the season were very hard and it was a pity the cancellation of the race at Texas Motor Speedway due safety concerns since he was the sixth fastest of the grid.

To confirm the good feeling of the team with the ovals he obtained the 7th place at Motegi after a good race spoilt by a very high consumption of fuel that forced him to a splash-and-go near the end of the race.

At mid season he did a couple of very comforting races, The Marconi Grand Prix of Cleveland on the Burke Lakefront Airport -he did another fantastic recovery gaining the second place before to suffer a puncture that pushed him to the final 13th place- and the Molson Indy at Toronto when he closed the race at 4th place starting from the 24th place of the grid.

LAUSITZRING: A SAD DAY

At mid september 2001 the first European CART race was planned on the Eurospeedway at Lausitzring, a fantastic event that was spoilt by the abominable attack to the Twin Tower at New York and to the Pentagon, the moral was not at the top also because the bad weather.

Due to the continue rain the qualifying session was canceled and the starting grid was based on the overall standing, a pity since both MNR drivers -Zanardi and Kanaan- were at the top of the warm-up the day of the race.

Started from the 22th place and after a cautious first half of race Alessandro began to gain position after position until to reach the lead, for the very first time in 2001 he seemed to enjoy the race.

At the 142th lap the fact that changed the result of the race and his life, as a leader of the race Alessandro went inside the pits for the last refuelling but, leaving the pit-lane, he lost the control of the car ending the consequently uncontrolled spin exactly in the middle of the track.

Unluckily at the same moment Alex Tagliani was arriving at a full speed -more than 300 kph, 185 mph- and the crash was terrible -on the right- and Zanardi's Reynard-Honda broke in two parts near the cockpit leaving the legs of Alessandro heavily injured and exposed outside the chassis.

The immediate intervention of the fantastic Simple Green Safety Team directed by the DR.Olvey and Dr.Trammel was decisive to save Alessandro's life since they reduced the huge bleeding.



Immediately Alessandro was airlifted to the Krankenhaus Berlin-Marzahn, a clinic specialized to treat patients with serious injuries to the limbs, when he arrived there the doctors observed that only a liter of blood remained in his body.

The doctors performed an emergency operation on him but unfortunately both the legs were too heavily damaged to be saved so it was necessary to amputate both.

The first days after the operation were very critical because he was in danger of life due to possible infections and, to let him rest without problems, the doctors decided to keep Alessandro in a medically induced coma for a few days.

Luckily his constitution was strong enough to let him to go out of danger and a huge encouragement went also from his wife Daniela constantly near to Alessandro and after a few days also from his child, Niccolò.

Little by little and after many operations his recovery was achieved and at the end of october, one month and half after the crash, it was allowed to him to return at home.

THE SECOND LIFE OF ZANARDI

Returned at home, one of the first things Alessandro thought to do was changing his driving license to be in position to drive his BMW 530 station wagon with manual controls (on the left), with that car he drove from his home at Montecarlo to Imola(Italy) to be visited by his friend Dr.Costa, a trip 500 km (311 miles) long!



Paradoxically, after the crash, Alessandro became more popular than in the past because during many interviews it was evident an incredible wish to walk again with the prosthesis, a remarkable self-irony and the wish to put above all the beautiful things he has got left (family, friends and fans) instead to complain about what he has lost.

At the beginning of December 2001 finally it was possible to see him in public again during the "Caschi d'Oro" celebration when he was amazing one more time being able to stand up from the wheelchair causing a deep emotion (on the right with Dr.Costa -left- and the physiotherapist Panizzi -right-).



The year 2002 saw the rebirth of Alessandro since he was able to walk again unaided, because he was able to put Niccolò on his shoulders and because he returned in the USA to attend to some CART races, to give a huge hug to the crew that saved his life and to greet his American friend and fans one more time.

To confirm his willpower Alessandro confirmed that a day he could return to the racing

THE RETURN TO THE RACING

The passion of Alessandro for the racing will never go off and he proved it in 2003.

After a "one-and-a-half year long pit stop", he made a sensational return behind the wheel of a 750hp Champ Car at Lausitzring when he completed those 13 laps he was not able to finish in September 2001 because of the huge accident.

A single seater modified with special throttle and clutch manual controls allowed Alessandro to perform an incredible show (on the right), his fastest lap would have allowed him to jump from the fifth place of the grid in the Champ Car event on the same track a few hours later.



Meanwhile Alessandro found the inspiration to write his autobiography that was published in Italy at the end of June, the book immediately obtained a huge success and was also translated in English and German.

If the return at the wheel of a Champ Car was a sensational event, what happened in middle October could be considered even more sensational.

Since the beginning of Summer there were insistent rumours about the possibility that Alessandro could drive a BMW 320i during the last event of the European Touring Car Championship (ETCC) in Monza and at the end it happened.

A huge crowd of more than 30,000 ran up to Monza to see him drive a BMW 320i with special manual controls and he was able to repay his fans with a fantastic second race that he finished in 7th place.



At the end of the year the amazing news: Alessandro signed a contract to race the complete ETCC 2004 with a BMW 320i of the BMW Team-Italy Spain managed by the former touring car ace Roberto Ravaglia.

Also a driver experienced like Zanardi can find problems driving a touring car after so many years spent driving single seaters so the season 2004 was like an apprenticeship for him so he closed the championship at the 15th place with 8 points.

The 2005 was born with more expectations because Alessandro was more accustomed to the touring cars and also because the European Championship became a World Championship (WTCC).

Continuing with the BMW Team Italy-Spain he opened the season gaining points at Monza like he did in the past two years and started to show good performances like at Imola when he was fighting for the third place until he was pushed out ending the race at the 6th place.

The big step forward of the season it was the adoption of a mechanical throttle manual control that allowed him, finally, to have a quick response from the engine.

With the new throttle his performances were mazing and in the last 8 races of the season he obtained points in 7 with as higher point the wonderful victory at Oscherleben followed by the third place at Istanbul.

In the 2005 Alessandro took part also to the Campionato Italiano Superturismo driving the same car of the WTCC but with 2004 specs winning the championship.



He took part also to the European Touring Car Championship ending the competition at the third place winning the first heat.