

ITALIAN RENAISSANCE



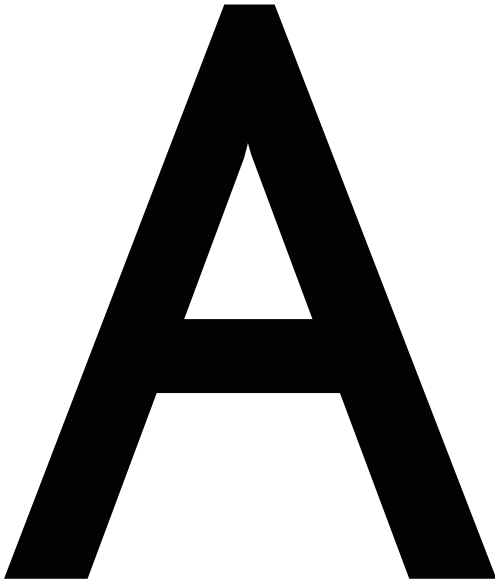


IN 2001, A HORRIFIC CAR CRASH NEARLY COST RACECAR DRIVER

ALEX ZANARDI

HIS LIFE. WHAT IT DID COST HIM WERE HIS LEGS. BUT AGAINST ALL ODDS, THE ITALIAN ICON GOT BACK BEHIND THE WHEEL AND ONTO THE RACETRACK, AND THEN FOUND A NEW PURSUIT: PARACYCLING. WITHIN A YEAR HE'D WON THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP AND THE NEW YORK MARATHON. SO, CHEATING DEATH, ZANARDI WAS BORN AGAIN, MORE COMPETITIVE, MORE AT PEACE, AND HAPPIER THAN EVER.

by **JOSH DEAN**



ALEX ZANARDI CONSIDERS himself lucky. His ability to drive a car fast and efficiently around racetracks has provided him a life he never considered possible when he was running around a small Italian village, the son of the local plumber. He won two IndyCar championships, in back-to-back years, before returning to Europe to challenge himself in Formula 1, the world's most popular motorsport. Along the way, he met his wife, Daniela, in a race paddock, and she gave him his only child, Niccolò, now a healthy, happy 16-year-old. He has two beautiful homes, more money than he can reasonably spend, and the kind of fame in Italy that enables him to go by a single name: Zanardi.

But the thing he feels most fortunate about might surprise you. Alex Zanardi, dashing racecar driver, feels lucky to have lost his legs. "First, let me tell you that the perfect life is not the one where everything is always perfect. You only recognize how good something is if you've been through the bad," Zanardi says, from a chair on the roof deck/lounge atop his beachfront villa, on the Tuscan shore. The view is spectacular. There's ocean to the front—on a clear day you can see Corsica, Elba, and Sardinia—and off the back are the verdant hills of the Maremma coast, where Zanardi pedals his hand bike every morning.

"The perfect life is the combination of great moments and bad ones, and under that point of view, my life is fantastic because I've certainly hit more than one bump," Zanardi continues, smiling because we both know which bump he's referring to, and that's a funny and absurd way of describing a 2001 crash, during a race in Germany, so violent that it tore both of his legs off below the knees. The way he sees it, the accident was fate, and fate is beyond our control. To

lament or regret something that happened is a waste. It's as pointless as fretting over your height, or being born French and not Italian.

"Once you put everything in the right perspective, even bad times can be an opportunity to refresh your appetite, your desire," he says, absently tracing an imaginary circle on the table. "What would we all be without a project? Whether the project is something that you decide to look for or something that destiny imposed on you—like me after my accident—there's no difference. Because after so many years have passed, look at all the things I've done, all of which are more or less directly related to my condition. I'm comfortable in my life. I know that I'm a lucky boy. Losing my legs was one of the greatest opportunities of my life."

ALEX ZANARDI IS 47, which is old for a professional auto racer and even older for an elite cyclist, not that this concerns him in the slightest. Since recovering from the 2001 crash, he's been either a pro racer or an elite cyclist, but this year, for the first time, he is both at the same time. He'd been so busy racing hand cycles in recent years—piling up awards and titles—that he forgot how much he missed motorsports. Then, two years ago he tested a BMW touring car at the legendary Nurburgring. A little over a year later, in January, 2014, he announced he would return to car racing after a four-year hiatus, on the Blancpain Sprint Series. As of early August, he was comfortably acclimated to his new BMW Z4 GT3, outfitted with hand controls so that he can race it at high speeds without the use of his legs.

"I can't say I'm still in the middle of it, but there are still some things I can do in motorsports and paracycling," Zanardi says, "Despite my age, I can still do some stuff."

TK TK TK KICKER

TMusciaeped quiatia
aut faceper feruptat
adis nosamTam
rescipsam estrum et
qui optia cusdam nim
ne ni sae dolorum et
rerum as ma doluptati
consequi omnihitis
illuptas audionse pa

sequam deruntio
demporio eturit
laborrupti tesectate
nulparc hilles eturi
officidus, nis eostTem
ut quas et esequie
aruptas auda denimust,
odi nectatu mendus.

He says this while standing in front of a very small group of photos on an otherwise bare set of walls in the immaculately clean and brightly lit sunken garage under his beach house. There's a shot of himself with his longtime friend and former team boss Chip Ganassi, who brought him to America to race in the first place, and another of him celebrating his sixth consecutive pole, which broke the Indy Car record. There's an unfinished section of the basement next door where Zanardi thinks he might one day put the Indy Car Ganassi gave him last year—the one he drove his first season in America—making good on an old promise.

When he's upright, Zanardi braces himself on a set of carbon-fiber canes that help him balance and walk atop his two prosthetic legs. Contrary to popular rumor, he did not design these legs. "I don't know where that story came from," he says. But he did design some purpose-built prosthetics for swimming. Traditional fake legs are too heavy for water, and to swim with no legs seemed to him both difficult and grotesque: "Although my name is Zanardi, and in my country I can't avoid being recognized and cheered, I didn't want to go in the swimming pool and jump in the water like a bag of potatoes." His solution was to use a special foam designed for lining gas tanks in racecars. It is light but strong and doesn't absorb liquid.

Design is something he enjoys. The villa's garage is empty except for a tidy workbench and a pair of hand cycles he designed with help from an Italian racecar builder near his other home, in Bologna. The one he races looks a little like the motorcycle from *Dark Knight*—era Batman; low-slung and aerodynamic, made from carbon fiber and so light that he can lift it over his head easily with one arm—which you can see him doing



gty.im/
318627

By
Robert Laberge



gty.im/
1287458

By
Mark Thompson



gty.im/
81355097

By
Heinz Kluetmeier



gty.im/
81374692

By
Heinz Kluetmeier



gty.im/
72556840

By
Jamie Squire

in celebration photos after winning a Paralympic gold medal in London in 2012.

A few days before I arrived in Italy, Zanardi won his second World Cup race of the season in Spain, solidifying his position as the world's top hand cyclist. This morning he'd gone out for a long training ride, because the World Championships loom ahead at the end of August. "It's still warm," he jokes, as I run a hand over the smooth, curved side of the bike's cockpit. Zanardi will fly almost directly to the World Championships in South Carolina from a Blancpain Sprint Series stop in Slovakia, with only a one-night stopover in Italy to pick up his bike and see his son.

Driving and cycling each offer Zanardi something different, but he can't say which one he prefers. Auto racing is more viscerally thrilling, but it requires the close collaboration of many people, and a driver is only as good as his car and crew. On the bike, it's all about the rider, and the one with the most power and endurance, physically and mentally, should prevail. Zanardi believes that those who experience prolonged success aren't just phenomenal physical specimens; they're also mentally transcendent, in touch with their own potential in a metaphysical, philosophical way. "I call it the five-second lesson," he explains. "In my young age, I was probably better equipped physically but not so much mentally. I learned that when you feel you've given it all, and you're prepared to say, 'That's it, I'm done,' if you close your eyes and give it five more seconds, well, it may happen that when you open your eyes, the others have given up." Zanardi laughs, loudly. He realizes that this sounds silly, but he is also certain that it's true. "When you understand this, you begin searching for those five seconds everywhere. There's always something more that you can find, some hidden energy inside your body that, if you are curious enough, you can find."

ZANARDI'S CRASH WILL always haunt fans of open-wheel racing. No one expected him to survive. It was just four days after September 11, 2001, and the CART race at Eurospeedway Lausitz in Klettwitz, Germany, known as the German 500, had been renamed the American Memorial. Sponsor names were removed from the cars, and all the teams raced in red, white, and blue livery. Zanardi was leading the race with 13 laps to go when he spun out while leaving the pits and was T-boned at 200 miles per hour by Canadian racer Alex Tagliani, who had no time to swerve out of the way. The resulting collision ripped off the entire front of Zanardi's car, and his legs went with it. In slow-motion footage of the crash, you can see them flying into the air, along with the sheet metal and car parts.

By the time medics reached him, Zanardi was in shock. Blood poured from the stumps that remained of his legs in such volume that it formed pools under the car. His heart stopped seven times on the helicopter that flew him to Berlin, and he lived for more than 50 minutes with less than a single liter of blood left in his body until the doctors were finally able to begin a transfusion.

When Zanardi woke up, eight days later, he didn't remember a minute of the race. His injuries had been so devastating that doctors weren't sure what would remain of his bodily functions, if anything. But other than the fact that he had no legs—and was in excruciating pain—Zanardi seemed to be fine. "I didn't know what exactly had happened, but I had a vague idea," he recalls. "And I was happier than a pig in shit to be alive."

He has said, in past interviews, that he's

not sure he would give up the experiences he's had because of the crash in exchange for his legs; at least, it would be a difficult decision. "When I was a little kid, my dad always told me, 'Listen, life is a great opportunity. It can bring you amazing things that you cannot even dream of. But if you want to make this happen, you have work hard to turn your dreams into objectives that are potentially achievable. So take every day as an opportunity to add something to your life.'" When he was young, Zanardi says, he didn't really understand what his father meant, but this was the message he heard again and again during his recovery.

"When I announced to people that I'm going back to drive a racecar, everyone asked me, 'After what happened to you, aren't you scared to jump into a car again?' This is a very irrational question, because I'm not any



more vulnerable than anyone else. Anything that happened to me in the past can happen in the future whether I drive a racecar or not." He mentions Michael Schumacher, the Formula 1 champion who languished in a coma for half a year after what seemed a minor fall while skiing. "He had also lived an entire life driving a dangerous machine, and then one day he's doing something that we all do, and he bangs his head. It's life."

Zanardi tells me about his friend, a fellow paracyclist who is paralyzed because of a broken neck. "The way he broke it is absolutely amazing," Zanardi says. The man, a devout Christian, had a giant picture of the Madonna hanging over his bed, and one night it fell and broke his neck. "Can you believe this?" Zanardi asks. "It's life."

His friend didn't lose faith. The only way forward after terrible tragedy is to not dwell. Things can always be worse. Zanardi says he'll never forget a man he befriended in the rehab hospital who stayed in for two months after the accident. His daughter had been born with no legs. One afternoon, Zanardi saw the man cradling her and weeping, and he felt compelled to say something to comfort him. No, the man said. I'm fine. His were tears of joy, because the girl had just been fitted for her first-ever prosthetic legs. 'I'm crying because I'm the happiest man on Earth. Today I bought my daughter a pair of shoes.' As he tells the story, Zanardi pantomimes stabbing himself in the chest.

"I looked in the mirror and said, 'You are fucking lucky. You never dare complain in the future, because what more could I ask for? I was 34, with a beautiful family behind me. I had enough money to put macaroni in the pot without having to worry about it.' Which isn't to say that these were easy rationalizations. "I also had great reasons to complain. The day before the crash I was in a hotel suite overlooking the ocean in paradise, and the next day I find myself in the hospital with no legs. It's a big, big fall."

Less than two years later, Zanardi was back in a racecar. He returned to Lausitz to complete the final 13 laps of the race that nearly killed him—"the forgotten laps," as they were known—in front of a packed grandstand just before the running of the German 500. Zanardi hit 190 miles per hour,

a speed so fast that it would have qualified him seventh for the actual race. "I didn't feel like I was out of the car for one and a half years," he told reporters after.

"Especially if you consider that in this time all I've been doing is adjusting prosthetic legs and spending time with my son, and the fastest thing I've driven is my road car. So it was a very pleasant surprise for me, too."

ZANARDI HAS A FUNNY story for how he became the world's best hand cyclist. He was at the World Touring Car Championship in 2007 when a representative from Barilla pasta, one of his sponsors, invited him to New York to talk at a pre-race dinner the company was putting on. Zanardi replied that he would be honored to attend.

It so happened that Zanardi had been flipping through an auto-racing magazine a few days before and had seen a picture of Clay Regazzoni, the disabled Swiss racer, competing in the previous year's marathon on a hand cycle. Zanardi had never ridden a hand cycle, but when the Barilla man mentioned the marathon, Zanardi had an idea. "You know what," he said. "Since I'm coming to New York, I might as well do it."

At that moment, Zanardi didn't know what the thing he would ride on was called. The only time he'd ever seen a hand cycle was a year prior, when he'd bumped into a guy at a gas station who had one on a trailer. That man, Vittorio Podesta, is now a teammate of Zanardi's on the Italian national team and one of his closest friends, but then he was just a man with a peculiar bike. They exchanged numbers, and a year later, Zanardi called Podesta and told him what he'd just done—pledged to race the New York Marathon, on a machine he'd never even sat on—and asked where he might find one. "He said, 'Wow, that's fantastic. We have one year to train, and I will help you!'" Zanardi recalls. "And I was like, 'No, I am talking about this year,' and he was like, 'No, it's not possible!'"

Zanardi finished fourth, although he insists this is actually less impressive than it sounds. He was about 15 minutes behind the winner, and there were really only three elite-level riders in the field, according to Zanardi. But when you consider that he was a complete beginner, it's fairly astounding, and the Italian

papers reacted as such, splashing him across the sports pages and suggesting that he could transition into a contender for the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing.

Zanardi wasn't ready for that. He had, he says, "simply other things to do"—in particular, auto racing. He was in his fourth season on the World Touring Car Championship. But what the bike did was bring exercise—good, hard, aerobic exercise—back into his life, and that felt as important to him as any trophy. "When I lost my legs, I thought I also lost the opportunity to feel a drop of sweat coming down from my head," he explains. It also gave him independence. "This was fantastic because I could jump on that thing in my garage, go for 50 or 150 kilometers, and come back on my own."

The urge to compete, however, is just wired into some people, and over time Zanardi's hobby metastasized into an obsession. He began to enter races, starting small at first. The sport was competitive and filled with elite athletes, but Zanardi realized he had a couple of advantages. First, his disability was perfect for hand cycling because he was literally all torso; unlike paraplegics, he had no legs at all, and that meant less weight to pull. Second, he came from auto racing, where the machine is at least as important as its operator, and his knowledge of weight, balance, and aerodynamics were a huge asset in a sport that had seen very little technology in the design of the cycles.

By 2009, Zanardi was experienced on the bike and began to consider competing in world events. He committed full-time to cycling and set qualifying for the 2012 Paralympic Games in London as his primary goal. In 2011, he won the New York City Marathon and followed that up with a silver medal at the 2011 World Championships. Zanardi says he reached "the peak of my learning curve" just before London, when he won his first-ever World Cup race, in Italy. His competitors, he thinks, chalked that win up to a home-course advantage, and were still underestimating him right up until the point where he blew them all away in London—a victory that was chosen by the International Paralympic Committee as the sports moment of the year.

For Zanardi, the win was a lifetime high, the equal, he says, of his first-ever IndyCar win. He was genuinely ecstatic—for a few minutes. "On that day, I was very happy," he tells me, back on his deck overlooking the Mediterranean. "But at the end of the day, it was a sad moment because it was over. It was the period leading up to that point, every time climbing my hills, doing my training, I was always thinking, *That's where I'm going.*"

A year later, in Canada, (CONT. ON P. 00)

"THE PERFECT LIFE IS THE COMBINATION OF GREAT MOMENTS AND BAD ONES, AND UNDER THAT POINT OF VIEW MY LIFE IS FANTASTIC," SAYS ZANARDI, PHILOSOPHICALLY. "BECAUSE I'VE CERTAINLY HIT MORE THAN ONE BUMP."



(CONT. FROM P. 00)

he won his first World Championship, which means that Zanardi is currently the reigning Paralympic gold medalist and overall world champion, as well as the world champion in the time trial. He has the white jerseys to show for it. “I think it’s a huge thing that he did—to be at the top level of one sport and go to the top level of another is rarely done,” says Ganassi. “But to those of us who know him, it’s not a surprise. He has a bigger heart than anyone I know.”

And Zanardi is back in cars, too, racing professionally for perhaps the last time in his life, and he is doing it because he loves it, and not because he harbors any dreams of returning to the sport’s highest levels. That ship has certainly sailed. In the past, he has told reporters that while he can be nearly as fast as he once was, with the right car setup, his physical condition does present a handicap he can’t overcome at the absolute top level of racing—for instance, in Formula 1. When I mention this, he agrees that he couldn’t possibly race at that level anymore but says that it has nothing to do with his disability. “I’m 47,” he explains, and with age comes responsibilities that you carry as burdens. “You have a boat, you have a nice car, and you have a son driving you crazy. You have a nice house you want to enjoy. You have a dog barking in your garden. You have a lot of things that are fantastic, and they fit beautifully in a 47-year-old man’s life. But you’re no longer a killer machine like in your 20s, when somebody calls and they say, ‘Hey, Alex; we’re testing tomorrow in England,’ and you say, ‘OK; let me put clean underwear in my bag and jump on a plane.’ And your girlfriend says, ‘Hey, you told me you were going to bring me to disco tonight,’ and you say, ‘Fuck off; I have to go drive my car.’ At my age, this is not possible.”

Zanardi isn’t envious of today’s drivers. He thinks that the swollen budgets and the crushing pressures of being a driver at the top level—especially in F1—forces them to shut down their personalities. They simply don’t have time to be charismatic.

At first, Zanardi says that drivers like Sebastian Vettel and Michael Schumacher are simply more talented than him, then he backs away. “No, that would be false if I said this. I never felt I’m the best driver in the

world, but I’ve always felt good enough to be as good as the best driver in the world.” On a given day, he felt he could beat anyone, and that’s all he ever needed to know. “Maybe it’s because I’m Italian. I need to be supported, I need to enjoy what I do, I need to fit in the right environment, I need to gel with the people I work with. And then I can be a fucking amazing machine.”

Certainly, Zanardi showed incredible talent at his best, not to mention gigantic balls. His most famous move came in 1998, when he overtook race leader Bryan Herta in the final lap in one of the most feared corners in all of racing—the notorious “Corkscrew” at Laguna Seca. The move was nicknamed “the Pass” and is still legendary. It was so outlandish, so dangerous, so likely to kill or maim a driver that passing there was subsequently banned; thus, it can never be repeated. “This may sound arrogant, but I don’t think I’ve seen some of the guys we’ve mentioned making a move like I did. I won races when other people would’ve parked the car and called it a day.” He’s especially fond of something Dario Franchitti once told reporters: “The guy would simply ignore he was beaten.” Chip Ganassi, one of the most successful race team owners in history, is unequivocal about Zanardi’s abilities. “He was one of the most talented drivers I’ve ever had the opportunity to work with, if not the *most* talented.”

One knock on Zanardi as a racer is that he never succeeded in Formula 1. But F1 is about having the right car, and he simply never did. I ask him what he thinks of the European bias against NASCAR. He scoffs. “We have this story in Italy where the fox is a very smart animal, but she is not capable of jumping very high. So when the grape is too high for her to reach, she says, ‘I don’t like it.’ She doesn’t say, ‘I can’t reach it.’ That’s why she’s not interested. So I love Formula 1, but I don’t appreciate much when I hear this type of comment. And because often the comment is also ‘Yeah, but the level of competition is very low. It wouldn’t take much for a European team to go over there and kick butts,’ and it’s absolutely false. It’s bloody complicated. When you have that type of attitude, you often burn your fingers. And they would.”

WHEN ZANARDI GAVE UP racing for cycling in 2009, he thought that was probably the end for him as a professional driver. This struck him most profoundly at Monza, where he was testing his car just prior to the final race of the year. At 5:55 P.M., five minutes before the circuit closed for the night, Zanardi’s team called him in, but he told them he wanted to make one last lap. The tires are cooked, he was told. Come on in. No, he replied. He didn’t need to drive particularly fast, but he did need one more lap, because in his mind it could have been his final lap ever on the track he grew up dreaming about. “I just drove around thinking maybe this is the last lap I ever do in my racing career,” he recalls. “This might be the last lap of my life.”

Still, he was comfortable with that possibility. “It was a sweet moment. Also, I was moving onto a very exciting project”—racing cycles. “Even after I retire from both motorsports and paracycling, I will search for an exciting project that will fit into that time of my life. It may well be picking up a fishing rod; who knows?”

That decision is still not imminent, but others are approaching fast. Zanardi fully expects to represent Italy in Rio de Janeiro at the 2016 Paralympics. And even though he’s winning bike races while also still racing cars, he knows that’s not likely a balancing act he can continue if he really wants to go to Brazil with a legitimate shot at gold.

“I know there is a compromise, and I cannot think of going to the games in Rio and approaching the season expecting to be competitive both in motorsports and to win the Paralympic Games. So, if I reach Rio de Janeiro that year”—and a repeat World Championship is probably enough to qualify him—“I will certainly have to stop again, and park the car.”

The question is, Will he be finally parking it for good?

“Who knows? I may decide to have somebody keep the engine warm for me for the following season, or I may decide not to start again, because, of course, every year counts. There will come a day when I will no longer enjoy competing if I cannot be competitive. But so far, things have gone quite well.”