

MIND OVER CATASTROPHE

The loss of both legs might crush the soul of a lesser man, but for ex-F1 star Alex Zanardi, it was just another tough obstacle to overcome



Alex Zanardi has achieved much in his career, as a race driver and latterly as an athlete. He overcame a massive accident in a US Champ car which cost him his legs and went on to claim Olympic gold. His biggest asset, though, is one that cannot be seen: his strength of mind. In the first of a two-part special, psychotherapist and sports mind coach, Linda Keen, gains a fascinating insight into his racing, winning and approach to life in general

Photos: BMW Group-Sport & Gary Hawkins

Last November, American chat show host David Letterman, said at the end of his interview with the Italian athlete and racing driver Alex Zanardi: “You don’t have legs but you are not handicapped.” What an understatement...

Letterman was interviewing Zanardi at the completion of his first-ever Ironman Triathlon at the famous Kailua-Kona event in Hawaii last October, when he crossed the line 272nd out of 2187 finishers. The Italian’s challenge comprised a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile cycle ride and a 26.2-mile marathon run. A feat of endurance even for a fit and able-bodied person such as McLaren Formula 1 driver, Jenson Button, but with no legs Zanardi had to compromise by utilising a wet vest to keep his body afloat for the swimming section, then took to a self-developed hand-cycle for the biking segment. In a superhuman feat he completed the Ironman on an Olympic wheelchair, and crossed the line in 9 hours, 47 minutes and 14 seconds. He tweeted triumphantly at the finish: “What a feel: thousands of people cheering you at the line and the speaker shouting: ‘Alex Zanardi, YOU are an IRONMAN!’”

And if you’ve never heard of the ex-Formula 1 driver and double CART champion through his motorsport endeavours during the ‘90s and early 2000s, then unless you slept throughout the 2012 London Olympics, you must have heard of the Olympian double gold medallist.

The great survivor

Zanardi’s is an exceptional story. Here is a man at the age of 48, who continues to challenge himself mentally and physically, not only in motorsport and para-cycling, but in every area of his life. The Ironman Triathlon is just the latest in the achievements of this unique human being.

And yet this affable Italian is lucky to be alive. Following a relatively inauspicious Formula 1 career in the early ‘90s, Zanardi switched to CART, culminating in two outstanding titles with the Chip Ganassi outfit in ‘97 and ‘98. These titles resulted in Zanardi being recalled to Formula 1 with the Williams team, a relationship which lasted just one season before Alex returned to his happy hunting ground in CART, where he landed a drive with Mo Nunn’s team. For most of the 2001 season, Zanardi was pretty unsuccessful until a race in Germany’s Lausitzring when he found himself in the lead with 13 laps to run. A final ‘splash and dash’ pit stop saw Zanardi exit the pits before spinning broadside across the track and into the path of another car. The resulting horrific side-on impact saw Zanardi lose both his legs and most of the blood in his body. How he survived is anyone’s guess, but survive he did.

What followed afterwards can only be described as a miraculous recovery and comeback: in 2003 Zanardi was behind the wheel again to finish those 13 laps of the Lausitzring, achieving lap times which would have qualified him in fifth place for that fateful race.



Smiling in the face of adversity – Alex Zanardi’s extraordinarily positive mental attitude has seen him win Olympic gold despite the loss of his legs in a motorsport accident



Above: Zanardi raced this high-tech handcycle around Brands at the 2012 Paralympics and came away with two gold medals

Return to racing – cars and hand-cycles

People like Alessandro Zanardi are a rare breed. He can only be described as a super-achiever with a mind-set to match and I was interested in what we can learn from his mental attitude and approach to life. I had the privilege of interviewing him in his role as BMW Ambassador at Brands Hatch last year, when he was competing in the ROAL Motorsport BMW Z4 GT3 in the Blancpain Sprint Series. Having spun out of the qualifying race into the gravel at Clearways, from last place on the grid in the main race Zanardi charged through the field to finish an impressive fifth. It was a great result and he was clearly delighted with his performance.

Prior to this, the last time Zanardi had been at Brands Hatch was when he won two Olympic gold medals and a silver in para-cycling. How did he reflect on his return to the Kent circuit?

“I was very happy to be at Brands Hatch simply because it’s a place I love. Considering that it was my second race ever after four years of nothing other than cranking my hand-cycle, I was very much looking forward to that race to boost my motorsport campaign.

“I don’t want to underline this too often, but for sure having no legs makes this slightly more complicated compared to others... And the position is it’s very tough now, because the GT championship used to be basically a field for – pardon the

expression – ‘old farts’ who had done their best, already delivered what they could in the past and just because they were addicted to racing, they’d still find a nice hobby for the weekend.

“But these days, with escalating prices and the difficulty in finding good drives in Formula 1 or other competitive categories for professional drivers, even young and very talented kids are looking at GT racing as an excellent way of keeping themselves on hold for better opportunities in single-seater racing and Formula 1. You have to be at the top level if you want to compete for championship points, let alone a race win. So fifth place in consideration of everything I’ve said – and despite all the troubles I have to overcome – starting last in race two and finishing fifth is an achievement.”

Going back to that amazing Olympic Games feat at the Kent track in 2012, what did Alex recall from the Paralympics?

“It was fantastic at different stages. When they announced that our venue was going to be at Brands Hatch, at that point ironically, I’d just discovered that I’d raised the level of my game sufficiently to qualify for the Paralympic Games. I mean, it was no longer a doubt. At that time I was already competing at an international level with honest results. I finished second in the time trial in the world championships in 2011 and when it was announced that the venue for the Paralympic Games for cycling was going to be

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at Brands Hatch, I said: ‘Wow, this is a sign; it’s a holy sign that it is going to be MY Paralympic Games.’

“Technically it didn’t mean much because you still have to crank the bicycle up a hill and knowing the circuit doesn’t make any difference. Nevertheless, it was certainly psychologically in my favour for my Paralympic campaign.”

Mental grit

I was lucky to be at Brands Hatch with my family when Alex won his second gold medal. It was a day I will remember forever, seeing these amazing athletes who’d overcome physical adversity through mental toughness. But it seemed that many people were there to support Zanardi; did he feel that?

“Oh wow, yes I did. Not that I deserved to be known, to be popular, because let me tell you that I got to meet marvellous people in this new sporting adventure of mine. I met fantastic people who are life winners, and to be at that level in Paralympic sports, it really means that everything that can happen to you in life is well behind you, because otherwise you wouldn’t be there.

“The level is very high and it takes time and

dedication. If you are someone who’s still spending half of his day, every day, wondering why this happened to me, how am I going to live with no legs or whatever, this type of attitude unfortunately is not going to serve you any good at any level, and especially in a competitive sport like para-cycling where the level of competition, as I said, is incredibly high.

“All the guys who are involved in this game, all have personal histories, personal stories that are at least as good as Alex Zanardi’s. Of course, the main difference is that, for sure, these guys did not have the same exposure I had through my life. When I finally ended up winning the Games, why was that result great? It’s simply because people at home watching realised I was not racing on my own; it was not just Alex Zanardi being great among a group of idiots; it was exactly the opposite. Zanardi was great because he was able to challenge and win against great competition, and so to be there in London was already a great achievement for me.

“Everybody knew that when I won. But I knew that before then, because I knew what I had to do just to be there. In London, once it was finally for real, it was great but honestly, I didn’t feel the importance of the occasion as much as, for instance, all my team-mates

Inset picture: Zanardi behind the wheel once more, this time in a BMW Z4 GT3 with hand controls, in which he raced in the Blancpain Sprint Series

from the national Italian team. At the end of the day, life and what I did in my sporting career allowed me to perform despite the feeling of the importance of what you're doing, which can often really play against you."

The importance of focus

"Yes, it was fantastic to be involved in the Paralympic Games, it was fantastic to enter the Olympic village. But I was able to control my emotions and reduce everything to a technical gesture much more than my opponents. This is probably because I was once in Michigan International Speedway with 200,000 people in the grandstand. I was sitting on pole position waiting to start my engine, with Mariah Carey singing the national anthem and F16 fighter planes from the navy flying by and the speaker calling, 'Gentlemen, start your engines', and then the cheer of the spectators was louder than the roar of the engines! I mean, to drop the visor of your crash helmet and regain the focus it takes to drive a clean and an efficient race, is something that you cannot buy from the grocery store.

"You have to pay with mistakes in favour of your passion and down the road you will gain the experience it takes in order to be able to control all these emotions and be able to perform despite what's happening around you. And so that's probably where my experience of a racing driver played a very, very important role of what I was doing there [at the games]."

I remember watching Zanardi on the grid for his para-cycle race and as the race started so quietly — after all Brands Hatch is a race track — he looked to

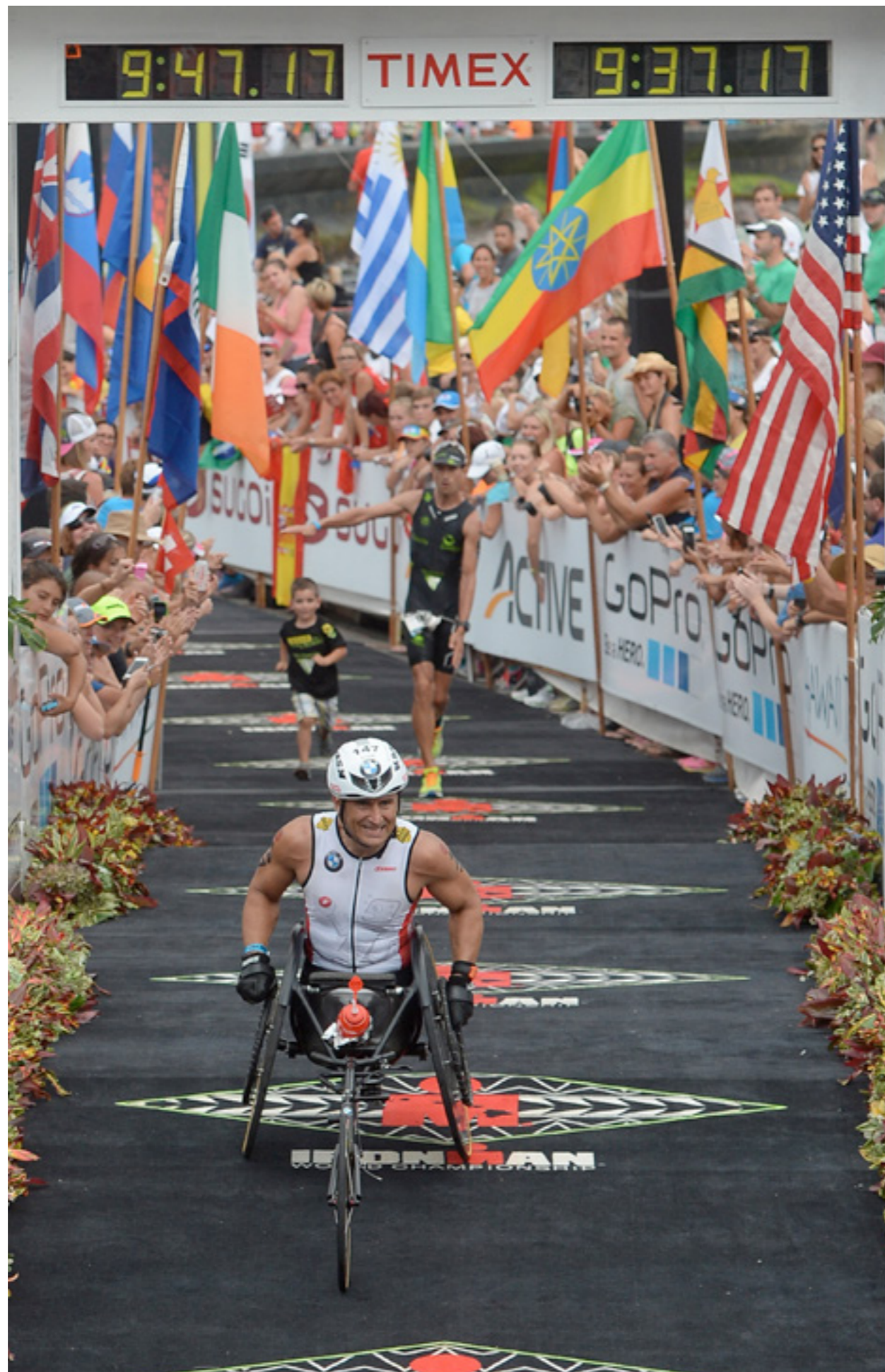
"The speaker called 'Gentlemen start your engines' and then the cheer of the crowd was louder than the roar of the engines; (in the face of that) to drop your visor and regain the focus required to drive a clean, efficient race, is something you can't buy from a grocery store"

all intents and purposes like someone out on a Sunday afternoon ride, chatting away to the guy next to him as they set off. How did he manage to be so composed at such a time and what was going on in his head? Alex says that preparation is the key to success.

"On one hand, I was very confident in what I'd done up to that point. Everything was perfect for me, even in the timing of the Games. I had no doubt in my mind about, for instance, what material to use in one race or the other. I had tested everything very meticulously. I knew which wheels to use, I was very happy with my hand-cycle and my positioning with the crank measurements, with all the things that were big doubts just a few months before the Games.

"Although winning was not really like a 'must', I knew I could win. Prior to that point honestly, I was chasing the others, and the chase ended just before the Olympic Games, so I knew winning was an option. And even if you don't win, you don't get punished you know... Winning's nice, but at the end of the day the others are there too and you have to accept the idea that they may do a better job and be at the same point in preparation.

"I knew I'd done my homework very well and I was just anxious to find out how this would correspond in



Far left: elation at completing the Ironman triathlon in Hawaii last year. Zanardi was 272nd out of 2187 starters: his finishing time is on the board

comparison to the others. It's as simple as that. I tell you, it would have been a big disappointment to find out that the best I'd worked for up to that point wouldn't have been enough to at least bring home a medal. I was not entirely sure but pretty confident at least."

Belief in the power of the mind

Mind coaching is much more fashionable now than it was, and a great many top-level sports people see it as part of their training. So the burning question for me; with all Zanardi's natural attributes, had he ever had any mind coaching during his career?

"No, actually, I didn't, and although it appears pretty obvious and clear today, it was not that way when I was in my 20s and I wish it had been. I would definitely not have crashed the same number of cars

"Quite honestly, I have found myself in that situation in the past where I was not good enough to do this job. In Formula 1 in 1990 I was making mistakes, and every time you make one you restart much further back from where you were. And this means having to work just to get to the same point where you were before"

and probably won many more races, but in those days nobody would talk about those sort of mental programmes and mental coaching. We just had to basically find our own way ourselves. And let me add that actually you could see that people were making many more mistakes than they do these days.

"These days, kids jump on karts, and they look like they're ready to deliver. So yes, I do not doubt at all the benefits of such a programme; it's simply that they were unavailable and nobody talked about it anyway. The only coaching I had was from my dad, who did a fantastic job in one way but, of course, he too was no expert."

It appears that Alex used his instincts and innate ability then, but what did he do to control his nerves and keep his mind clear when he raced?

"At the very beginning I was very confused. I had very confused ideas about how to do this and that's why I was making a lot of mistakes because I thought I had to do something. I had to adopt a certain procedure in order to feel confident, in order to be able to deliver to the best of my ability without making mistakes. I thought I had to come up with something special, something magical in order to achieve that sort of condition. Whereas it's different these days; I have that sort of condition which comes from the simple fact of knowing that other people are there, as

talented as me, as wishful of getting the same result I'm aiming for, and you have to respect that.

"You also have to respect that once you have done your best, you just have to cash whatever is possible that day. And this means that if you are fifth that is probably enough. If you try to go for fourth you're going to crash and go out. That is the main difference between a guy who has raced many times and a beginner.

"A beginner can become very clever if you give him a winning car, because if he's talented and he's got a good car underneath him, once he's in front he's going to be happy with that. He's going to have a very steady and clean race. But if you give him a car that's only good enough for 20th, and he's going to try to get into 10th place, that's not possible and he's probably going to crash the car.

"And in those days, I have to tell you, all the talented guys were crashing a lot because there was nobody there telling them: 'Listen, today, you can only be as good as your car. Don't try too hard, be prepared for an opportunity if it comes but you cannot create it by pushing any more because you could crash.'

"Yes, for sure, mental coaching at this level is very important. By making too many mistakes, you don't only crash the cars you're driving, but you can also destroy your self-confidence or — very cynically — this could be a big loss of an opportunity and a big loss of talent if you're not able to control that problem. And quite honestly I have found myself in that situation in the past where I was not good enough to do this job.

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To be continued... In the next issue of *TrackDriver*, Zanardi discusses the difference between his life in Formula 1 and CART, and his ultimate challenge — finding the motivation to rebuild his life following the crash in September 2001 that cost him both legs, returning to motor racing with BMW and becoming a Paralympic Gold Medallist and Ironman.