

MIND OVER CATASTROPHE

ALEX ZANARDI PT II

In the previous issue, psychotherapist and sports mind coach, Linda Keen, began the first of a two-part interview with former CART champion and Paralympic gold medallist, Alex Zanardi, to find out what makes this amazing athlete tick. In this issue, she continues the personable Italian's story and brings us up to date with his astonishing achievements in motorsport, Ironman Triathlon and the preparations for the 2016 Paralympic Games in hand-cycling

Zanardi in the Long distance triathlon in 2015 Kona, Hawaii

It probably couldn't be said that Zanardi really set the world alight during his career in Formula 1, but that changed when he travelled across the Atlantic to race in CART. What made the difference then?

"Well, the main difference was that Ganassi gave me an unbelievable machine to drive. Up to that point the team had not been one of the best; I would call it second best, but it was not like Penske or Newman-Haas, which would be like driving for Mercedes, Ferrari or Red Bull in F1. In those days Ganassi had won a couple of races with Michael Andretti but nothing other than that and to drive for them was considered to be a great opportunity for a newcomer, but maybe not the place where top drivers would try to go. However the team had just reached a new level over that winter."

The Ganassi team had undergone several changes in Honda engine, Renault chassis, Firestone tyres,

management restructure and crucial decision-making, so when Alex arrived on the scene, it was all systems go. While he is quick to share the credit with the changes within the team, surely some part of this change in fortune was down to Zanardi himself?

"As a rookie to join Ganassi and win a lot of races quite rapidly made me cash, let's say, credits and merits, which were probably not entirely mine. Probably other people in my shoes would have done the same job with that car but I was in it. The third aspect, which is probably the most important, is that I was almost in my 30s; I was 29. I'd already made enough mistakes, and through my own mental coaching I was definitely ready to deliver. And the best opportunity of my life arrived at the perfect moment in my life."

Two CART titles followed, however his final year in CART in 2001 didn't work out exactly as he'd planned

and culminated in the horrendous accident in Germany in which he lost both his legs. It almost claimed his life. If Zanardi had been a determined character up to that point, the challenge he faced following his gruesome accident on September 15th 2001, was nothing by comparison. With less than a litre of blood left in his body after losing his legs, by the time he reached hospital his heart had stopped seven times. Zanardi's survival was nothing short of a miracle.

MIRACLE MAN

In the days and weeks following the crash, how did he deal with the realisation that he'd lost his legs and what actually motivated him to start looking for his next challenge?

"I know for sure that what I've learned is the best way to put your problems behind you — whatever it

is that you have to overcome — is to make a list of priorities. What is the number one problem, what is number two, number three and so on and try to focus on the main one first. Once this has been solved you can then say, okay, what's number two now. But you cannot solve all the problems in one go; it's impossible. It's very unproductive as well.

"That was something that I learned in sport at the beginning of my racing career when I wanted it all. I wanted to be a race winner from the evening to the following morning and that was not possible and that's why I made mistakes.

"After the accident I knew I could not go and play with my son the following day and return home. I had to basically help my body to recover; I had to get rid of all the wires and tubes and pipes that were keeping me alive. And then once that was done, I had to be in



Left: Zanardi won two CART titles with Ganassi. Left, at Laguna Seca, 1997. Right: winning celebrations after the Miller 200. Below, ill-fated in the Mo Nunn Racing's Reynard-Honda

a condition to leave the hospital, go home and start my rehabilitation. I had to see if walking on a pair of prosthetic legs could become a better way for me to live in comparison to a wheelchair.

"While all this was happening, I was often asked, would you ever get back into a race car? My answer was pretty obvious; I said of course I would! If it comes to the day where I will be technically able to do it, I would have no problem to try and drive the car again to the best of my ability.



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"I could see scepticism in the eyes of people listening to that sort of an answer because they thought in their minds that just the idea of driving a race car again would make me shit my pants! It was not the case. Okay something bad happened to me but so what? Because I had an accident it doesn't mean I'm going to have another one. It's possible but it's not a direct consequence of having had one before.

"A lot of my recovery was basically related to my sporting experience; it was experience and growth in my life that helped me to overcome all the problems I had after my accident. Then another factor is probably just character, the way I am, being a guy who is very optimistic, a guy who has always tried to see the glass

half full rather than half empty. And I said, well, let's see what I can get out of it. What I got out of it is one of the greatest opportunities of my life. Through losing my legs, if you consider these days all the things that I do that are directly related to my new condition, I have a fantastic life. It probably means that losing my legs was probably — if not the best — at least one of the best opportunities of my life."

And get back into competitive motorsport he did, back with BMW in the European Touring Car Championship. That must have been some challenge?

"It was a challenge but probably at the time I was ready and everything was right, but before things were not right. How could I think of driving a race car if I wasn't able to go to the bathroom on my own for God's sake? Once those problems were solved then I was able to meet with some friends at BMW and I was asked if I'd be interested in testing the car? I said, 'Well, it's like

asking the cat whether he likes the mouse!"

After two successful tests, ROAL team boss Roberto Ravaglia and Zanardi went to

BMW Italy with a proposal.

"They brought Munich into the discussion, because it wasn't that simple, you know. It could have been very easy to see how we could cash a lot of glory and credit for winning a race with BMW helping a double amputee to achieve such an amazing result. But try to imagine that instead of winning, I would have had a big crash as a result of our attempt. There would have been a lot of people saying, 'Well why did you guys try to do that? It was obvious that would be the outcome.' I discussed my proposal with them and they took some time to think about it. Finally they said, 'Yes, we're going to be with you in this amazing attempt and yes, we believe you can do it.' And so that was the start."

At the end of the 2003 season Zanardi made his return to racing in a specially-modified ROAL Motorsport BMW 320i, taking an inspiring seventh place at Monza. In 2005 the team stepped up to the WTCC and by 2008/9 he was winning regularly, but in 2010 Alex stopped racing cars again.

"I never thought in my life one of my interests would be to try to qualify for the Olympic Games, and when that came into the equation, the only way I could achieve that was by dedicating more time to it. Racing cars and hand-cycles were no longer compatible, and I had to make a choice."

Of course two gold medals in London 2012 at Brands Hatch was the result of his new hand-cycling challenge but in 2014, Zanardi was back with his friends at BMW and was behind the wheel again, this time in a BMW Z4 GT car. Already at that point however, he was talking about defending his Olympic crown in Rio in 2016. Would he continue to do both?

"Good question! I'm no longer driving as a racing career, I'm driving for pleasure and being with people that I enjoy being around in BMW, which is like my family. They asked if I'd like to race in the Blancpain series and I looked at the car and for me the BMW is by far the most sexy of all the GT cars. I said, 'Wow, I'd love to test that car' and I enjoyed it so much, I said, 'Okay'."

Racing in the seven-round Blancpain GT Sprint series suited Alex perfectly in 2014, thus fitting in with his other extensive commitments. It's become massively important to him that he can now combine his passion for racing cars with para-cycling.

"At the beginning this was impossible because I had to learn a lot and dedicate a lot of time to para-cycling, but now I can manage



to do it in a much more efficient way. We only live one time and we want to try and enjoy it."

ROAD TO RIO

Last year the indomitable Zanardi continued his preparations for the 2016 Rio Olympics in earnest but first he had to qualify. It was no surprise that the 49-year old and the Italian relay team successfully defended their world championship title in the team relay event at the UCI Para-cycling Road World Championship in Nottwil, Switzerland. On their way to the gold medal, they completed six laps of the 2.9-kilometre circuit in 31 minutes and 13 seconds, covering a total distance of 17.4 kilometres in the process and crossing the finish line with a clear advantage of 1:11 minutes ahead of the USA team. On a personal level, Alex backed that up with gold in the MH5 category road race while also successfully defending his world title in the time-trial. He now has a total of eight para-cycling world titles to his name.

Reflecting on the world championship, Alex recalled: "The time-trial was a great race but the road race was even better, because until the line it was absolutely unpredictable. I did not plan to come into the stadium second; I had planned on entering it in first position. As a matter of fact I planned to cross the last hill leading by myself, but my young competitors are just amazing and it was a fight until the last metre of the climb. Then downhill it was a crazy run towards the end. Afterwards it was clear that it would be decided between me and Dutchman Jetze [Plat]. Over the last two kilometres it was a race where you needed to keep a cool head. We both sprinted to take the last corner going into the stadium and he managed to get in front of me. At that point I thought I had lost the race, but then I said to myself: 'Hey Alex, you are a racing driver. Just focus and take advantage of the last opportunity'. This opportunity came up shortly before the last corner.

Above: Double Gold winner at the 2012 London Olympics. Below: Zanardi raced the "by far the most sexy of all GT cars" - the BMW Z4, in the 2014 GT Blancpain GT Sprint series



I just went for it, and when he went to move over to get the best line I was there. I had already taken the inside and the race was won.”

EIGHT PARA-CYCLING WORLD TITLES

Notching up three more world titles was made all the more remarkable as he'd literally just competed in his first ever 24-hour race at Spa-Francorchamps in the BMW Z4 GT3. It was the first time a disabled driver had competed in a 24-hour race at this level when he shared the cockpit with ex-Formula 1 driver Timo Glock and touring-car champion Bruno Spengler. They were running in the top 10 before being forced to retire the car with an hour to go.

“I was really, really happy with that week. To compete at Spa-Francorchamps with Timo and Bruno, then to go to the world championships and win three gold medals – that is just an amazing experience.”

Last September in the BMW BERLIN-MARATHON, Alex finished the 42.195 kilometre marathon distance despite the fact that the chain on a borrowed and unfamiliar hand-bike broke during the race. He joked: “I started



Main image: UCI Para-cycling Road World Championship 2015, Time Trial winner, Zanardi. Above: BMW Berlin Marathon 2015. Below: 24h Spa preparation, BMW Z4 GT3 roll-out



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with a hand-cycle and finished with a wheel chair, because I was pushing the wheels to complete the last nine kilometres. Obviously this is not a BMW.” From there it was another shot at the Kona triathlon in Hawaii where he completed the total distance of 226.255 kilometres in a time of 9:40:37 hours, seven minutes faster than 2014. This was despite arduous conditions with strong winds and extremely hot temperatures.

It's clear that preparation is vital to Zanardi's key components for success and he feels that if you prepare correctly, the mental challenge is the same for both sports.

“There is a psychological implication in that in para-cycling you can afford to make a mistake. You can perhaps underestimate an opponent or make a mistake and still correct your actions over the distance of the race. You have a lot of time to do that and still go home with a gold medal, whereas in motorsport it's dramatically different. I know that for sure, because in the qualifying race at Brands Hatch in 2014 I made one small mistake and that was it. That race was arrivaderci. Luckily for me it was not the main race and in that feature race I drove very well and everything went smoothly. But you cannot always count on starting last and gaining so many positions. In a motor race you know how critical it is not to make mistakes; not to lose everything.”

We've heard about sportsmen and women being in the zone. Is this a state Zanardi is familiar with? He agreed he had but this state for him was again related to his preparation for an event.

“I'm still a long way from being in the zone but still I'm much closer than I used to be because I've learned that you cannot force things to happen. You can steer things to happen in being well prepared, to have the best starting point and then the best way to deliver is just to remain focused on your capability, what you can control. You cannot control the others. In some situations you can control what the others are doing psychologically and I think this is the most interesting and intriguing aspect of motorsport.”

Now, with the benefit of hindsight and years of experience, what advice would Alex give a young driver starting out?

“Wow, if I could put my brain into a new machine! I would try to share all the things I've learned, and give the best coaching I could. But that person would have to listen to you because it's not the answer that is going to fix the problem; it's the right question which will ultimately lead to the right answer. You need curious patience to help, so even the best coach can only be as good as the kid he's coaching. Yes, it would be a lot of fun for me to do this with the right kid.”

BIMBINGAMBA'S COOL KIDS

When he talks about his other commitments, Alex is deeply involved in using his para-cycling as a platform for his charity work. He has set up his own charity, a project called Bimbingamba, Italian for 'cool kids'. This came about through his own rehabilitation during which time the team working with him became his friends.



“One day I just threw in the idea of creating a group to provide prosthetic limbs for kids all around the world who do not have access to them mainly due to financial problems. From the launch of the project we've been able to ensure many kids have operations, which has more than doubled because they grow up and come back for new prosthetic legs or arms. I'm very proud of that project which is huge in terms of deepness, in terms of value, and some of the things we do are quite remarkable in my eyes.”

Now that he's definitely on the road to Rio in September, his priority is to prepare for the 2016 Paralympic Games and the defence of his Olympic title.

“Even if I prepare well, I don't know whether my effort will be sufficient to win again, but this is the way I'd want to prepare for the Olympic Games. Although motorsport will be secondary I will remain – I hope – a proud ambassador of the BMW brand. I may still do some testing and maybe also some racing early this year and I can see myself ending my professional career with the BMW jersey. It's a company that has values that I share and friends that I want to continue to see. And this is too precious to let it go.”

Alex Zanardi's continuing achievements are quite remarkable. Here is a man with presence, who has taken life and all that it has thrown at him by the scruff of the neck and never allowed himself to be beaten. He is also human through and through, with a story which would motivate anyone. I'm certain he will continue to do so while claiming many more awards along the way. Oh, and by the way, I wouldn't bet against him winning gold in Rio either...



Image: Gary Hawkins

Linda Keen is a psychotherapist (MBACP Registered) working in private practice in East Sussex, and a sports mind coach. As a qualified NLP Master Practitioner, she has worked with many racing and rally drivers, as well as kart racers and other sportsmen and women for almost 20 years. Linda delivers a unique model which combines relaxation, mind control and winning. She is available to work with groups and individuals, can be contacted on +44 7745 121790 and frequently uses Skype for sports people outside the UK. www.lindakeen.com