

CORRENTI DELLA STORIA

ALBERTO ASCARI
(1918–1955)

Last month's essay (February, 2017), dealt with the life and work of Enzo Ferrari, who was both a race-car driver and owner/builder of high performance automobiles. He also founded and ran the racing team of Scuderia Ferrari. This month's essay is about one of that team's most successful and famous drivers, Alberto Ascari. He became a very close friend of Ferrari, so much so that after his tragic death in a racing accident, Ferrari was terribly distraught and decided from then on to avoid making close personal friendships with his drivers.



Alberto was the son of one of Italy's great pre-war drivers, Antonio Ascari. He went on to become one of Formula One racing's most dominant and best-loved champions. He was known for his careful precision and finely-judged accuracy that made him one of the safest drivers in a very dangerous era of auto racing. He was also notoriously superstitious and took great pains to avoid tempting fate. But his unexplained fatal accident—at exactly the same age as his father's (36), on the same day of the month (the 26th) and in eerily similar circumstances—remains one of Formula One racing's great unsolved mysteries (*see below*). During his short nine-year racing career, Alberto Ascari won 47 international races in 56 starts. His two Formula One World Championships attest to his ranking as one of the greatest drivers in European history.

Alberto was born in Milan, Italy on July 13, 1918. His father, Antonio Ascari, was a talented Grand Prix motor racing star in the 1920s, racing Alfa Romeos. When Alberto was 7 years old, Antonio was killed while leading in the French Grand Prix at Montlehry on July 26, 1925. Despite this tragedy in the young boy's life, Alberto had an interest in racing and decided to become a racing driver like his father.

It began four years later, when Ascari borrowed a neighbor's motorcycle and “raced” around a previously quiet Italian piazza. By 1936, having run away from school twice because he found it “boring,” Ascari permanently left school and with the help of his mother acquired his first motorcycle. He made his racing debut that same year, but he failed to finish his first race. Just six days later, however, on a repaired, finely tuned motorcycle, he won his first race at Lano. For the next three years, he gained some renown as a motorcycle competitor, becoming a member of the Bianchi motorcycle factory team.

His first auto race was the 1940 Mille Miglia, and his car—known as the Tipo 815 (*right*), was in fact the very first Ferrari, although it did not yet carry that famous name. The car was built by Auto Avia Costruzione, a company founded by Enzo Ferrari, who had been a close friend of Alberto's father, after his falling-out with Alfa Romeo. He took the lead in the race, but had to exit because of a seized valve. He finished ninth later that year in the last Tripoli Grand Prix and raced in another event before World War II forced him to curtail his activities until 1947.



When Italy entered World War II, the family garage, which was now run by Alberto, was conscripted to service and maintain vehicles of the Italian military. It was during this period that he also established a lucra-

tive transport business, supplying fuel to army depots in North Africa. His partner in the enterprise was a fellow racing driver, Luigi Villoresi (*right*). (On one transport crossing, the pair survived being capsized in Tripoli harbor along with a shipment of lorries). Since their business supported the Italian war effort, this made them exempt from being called up to serve during the war.



In 1940 Alberto married a Milan girl, Mietta, and they had two children. The boy was named Antonio in memory of his grandfather and the girl was named Patrizia. Given his family responsibilities (he was a devoted husband and father), he was prepared not to race again, but Villoresi persuaded him to continue.



So, Alberto resumed racing in 1947. He bought a 4CLT Maserati (*left*) from the new owners, the Orsi family, for 5 million lire. (He managed to scrape together 3 million lire, with Villoresi helping with some of the remaining 2 million). Alberto and Villoresi raced successfully in races in Northern Italy, and he became so popular and successful that his Milanese fans nicknamed him “*Ciccio*” (“Chubby”).

Formula One regulations were introduced by the FIA (the governing body of motor sport racing) in 1946, with the aim of eventually replacing the pre-war Grand Prix structure. During the next four transitional years, Alberto was at the top of his game, winning numerous events around Europe. He won his first Grand Prix, the Gran Premio di San Remo in 1948, and took second place in the RAC International Grand Prix the same year, at the Silverstone Circuit in England. He won another race the following year, the Gran Premio del General Juan Perón de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires.

His biggest successes would come after he and Villoresi signed for Scuderia Ferrari in 1949. The team boss, Enzo Ferrari, the close friend of Alberto’s father, had followed Alberto’s successes for several years and worked to sign him to the Scuderia. With the Ferrari team, Alberto won three more races in 1949.

The first Formula One World Championship season took place in 1950, and the Ferrari team made its World Championship debut at Monte Carlo with Ascari, Villoresi and the famous French driver Raymond Sommer on the team. The team had a mixed year—their supercharged Tipo 125 was too slow to challenge the dominant Alfa Romeo team, so Ferrari began working on a 4.5-liter car. Much of the year was lost as the team’s 2-liter Formula Two engine was progressively enlarged, though when the full 4.5 liter Tipo 375 arrived for the Gran Premio d’Italia (the final round of the championship that year) Alberto gave the Alfa Romeo team their toughest challenge of the year before he was forced to retire from the race because of car problems. He then took over his teammate Dorino Serafini’s car to finish second in the race. After this, the new Ferrari won the non-championship Gran Premio do Penya Rhin.

Throughout 1951, Alberto was a threat to the Alfa Romeo team, though initially he was undone by the unreliability of his Ferrari auto. However, after winning at the Nürburgring and Monza races, he was only two points behind the lead driver in the championship standings, Juan Manuel Fangio, going into the climactic Gran Premio de España. Ascari took pole position, but a disastrous tire choice for the race saw the Ferrari unable to challenge, and Ascari finished 4th, while Fangio won the race and the driver championship title for that year.

In 1952 the World Championship season switched to using the 2-liter Formula Two regulations, with Alberto driving a Ferrari Tipo 500 car. He missed the first race of the championship season, the Swiss Grand Prix, because he was qualifying for the Indianapolis 500, which at the time was a World Championship event. He was the only European driver to race at Indy in its 11 years on the World Championship schedule, but his race ended after 40 laps because of a wheel collapse, without having made much of an impression. After returning to Europe, he won the remaining six rounds of the Championship series (the Belgian, French, British, German, Dutch and Italian Grands Prix) to clinch the world title. In addition, he won five non-championship races, and he recorded the fastest lap in each race. He scored the maximum amount of points that a driver could earn since only the best four of eight scores counted towards the World Championship. (Fangio had missed most of the '52 season after he crashed in the Gran Premio dell'Autodromo di Monza in June).



In 1953 he again overpowered the opposition, winning five times and cruising to a second consecutive World Championship title. Following a dispute over his salary, Alberto left Ferrari at the end of the season and switched to Lancia for the 1954 racing campaign. However, since Lancia's newest model was not ready for most of the season, Gianni Lancia allowed him to drive twice for Maserati (sharing fastest lap at the RAC British Grand Prix) and once for Ferrari. Alberto did at least get to win the Mille Miglia driving an earlier Lancia sports car model, while surviving the dreadful weather and a throttle spring failure that was temporarily replaced with a rubber band. Finally, when the new model, the Lancia D50, was ready, Ascari took pole position on its debut and led impressively early on (and set the fastest lap) before retiring with a clutch problem.



The 1955 season was greatly anticipated, promising a full season of competition between Alberto driving his new Lancia D50 (*left*) against Fangio's previously dominant Mercedes. Alberto started the season promisingly. His Lancia took victories at the non-championship races in Turin and Naples, where the Lancias took on and beat the hitherto all-conquering Mercedes. However, he was forced to exit in the world championship event, the Gran Premio de la Republica Argentina. Alberto finally gave Lancia its first Grand Prix triumph in the Valentino Grand Prix. He quickly followed that with a victory in the Naples Grand Prix. Things were looking favorable for Alberto and the Lancia team.

Then, in the following race on May 22, 1955, the Grand Prix Automobiles de Monaco, Alberto had a terrible accident. Late in the race, just as he was moving into the lead, he crashed into the harbor, plowing through bales of hay and sandbags after he missed a chicane (i.e. a movable barrier sometimes placed before a dangerous corner to reduce speed as cars pass in single file). Because of some distraction, he had approached the chicane too fast, and chose the only way out, which meant that he was forced to drive his D50, moving at 110 mph, through the barriers into the sea, narrowly missing a small barrel-sized iron bollard by about 12 inches. His car disappeared into the Mediterranean and sank, marked only by an oil slick, a stream of bubbles, and steam. It was an agonizing few seconds before Alberto's pale blue helmet appeared bobbing on the surface. He was hauled into a boat before the frogmen could get to him. Fortunately, he escaped with nothing worse than a broken nose, bruises and shock.

Just four days later, on May 26, he went to Monza to watch his friend Eugenio Castellotti test a Ferrari 750 Monza sports car, which they were to co-race in the Supercortemaggiore 1000 km race (having been given special dispensation by Lancia to race once again for Ferrari). Alberto was not supposed to drive that day, but decided to try a few laps just before going home to lunch with his wife. In his jacket and tie, shirt sleeves, ordinary trousers and Castellotti's white helmet (he had left his "lucky" blue helmet at home), he set off. As he emerged from a fast curve on the third lap, his wheels locked and the car skidded, turned on its nose and somersaulted twice. Thrown out onto the track, Alberto suffered multiple injuries and died a few minutes later in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. The crash occurred on the Curva del Vialone, one of the track's challenging high-speed corners. The corner was later renamed in his honor as "Ascari Curve." (It has subsequently been replaced with a chicane, now called "Variante Ascari").



Motor racing fans from all over the world mourned his loss. His death was considered a national tragedy. All of Italy mourned the loss and on the day of the funeral in Milan the whole city fell silent, as a solemn procession carrying

Alberto Ascari moved slowly through the streets lined with an estimated one million silent mourners dressed in black. It required 15 carriages to carry the profusion of wreaths and flowers, and in the hearse, drawn by a team of plumed black horses, his familiar light blue helmet lay on top of the black coffin. Telegrams of sympathy were received from the heads of three foreign nations. Black drapes hung from the front columns of the Church of San Carlo al Corso, along with a huge inscription: "On the Last Finish Line, meet, O lord, the soul of Alberto Ascari." At his funeral the Piazza del Duomo, the bustling center of Milan, was packed with people. Normally one of the noisiest squares in Italy, it was so quiet that day that the telephones could be heard ringing unanswered in houses near the square.

His distraught wife Mietta Ascari told Enzo Ferrari that "were it not for their children she would gladly have joined her beloved Alberto in heaven". His death is often considered a contributing factor to the withdrawal of Lancia from motor racing (although the company was also in considerable financial trouble, needing a government subsidy to survive). Three days after his funeral, Lancia officially suspended all racing activity, and in July they handed six Lancia D50 cars, engines, blueprints and spare parts over to Enzo Ferrari.

UNUSUAL SIMILARITIES IN THE DEATHS OF FATHER AND SON

There were several similarities between the deaths of Alberto and his father, Antonio. Alberto died on May 26, 1955, at the age of 36. Antonio Ascari was also 36 when he died on July 26, 1925. (Alberto was only four days older than his father's age when he had died). Both were killed four days after surviving serious accidents and both died on the 26th day of the month. Both had crashed fatally at the exit of fast left-hand corners and both left behind a wife and two children. In addition, both had won 13 championship Grands Prix.

THE FINAL WORD

Alberto Ascari was a great driver, one of the greatest European Formula One racers. He was also a charming man both admired by his peers and idolized by a legion of admirers. His illustrious heritage helped, as did his superlative driving skill, but his winning and his personality also contributed to his huge popularity. It was easy to like a hero who was so obviously no prima donna, the driver with the plump physique whom his Italian fans nicknamed "*Ciccio*," and whose open and friendly disposition was apparent from his genial smile.

Even his idiosyncratic superstitions were endearing, an entirely human response to the dangers of racing. He avoided black cats like the plague, had a horror of unlucky numbers and never allowed anyone else to handle the briefcase that contained his racing apparel: T-shirt, his lucky blue helmet, his goggles, and his gloves.

Ascari was most at his best when he was in the lead of a race, or close to it, and he was unlike most drivers in that he appeared not to give of his best when further back. As Enzo Ferrari later recalled, “When leading, he could not easily be overtaken—indeed it was virtually impossible to overtake him.” To have him on your tail was a truly unnerving experience as well. The knowledge that he would have to find an opportunity to pass seemed always to worry him.

He was not a relaxed driver. With his mouth set and his eyes concentrated, he seemed to whip his car along; his sensitive hands constantly manipulating the steering wheel. When he was really in a hurry, he took his bends in a series of dicey jerks rather than in one controlled slide.

He seemed to be almost driven by inner fears, especially by the fear he had felt at the death of his father when he was a young boy. He was a chronic insomniac and prone to stomach ulcers. Enzo Ferrari, who knew that Ascari was deeply devoted to his family, once asked him why he didn’t demonstrate his affection to his wife and children. “I prefer to treat them the hard way,” Alberto said. “I don’t want them to love me too much. Because they will suffer less if one of these days I am killed.”

Such an eventuality seemed most unlikely for a driver who always strictly observed self-imposed safety margins, who studiously avoided exceeding the limits of his car or himself, and whose relaxed and smooth style looked so effortless as to suggest he would have plenty of skill in reserve to correct any rare mistake. Unfortunately, fate caught up with him on a race course, doing what he loved doing most.



Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: Formula 1 Championship Drivers website; International Motor Sports Hall of Fame website; Grand Prix History website; and Wikipedia.
