



IMSA PHOTOS

Zanardi: Simply Unstoppable

By JOHN JEPPESEN

At first, it looks like a routine pit stop and driver change. The Rahal Letterman Lanigan BMW M8GTE stops on its marks. The door opens and the driver promptly sits on the ground. Huh? Then the fresh driver climbs into the cockpit and the guy on the ground pulls himself up, slides his thighs under the roll cage door bar and helps the driver buckle in. Observers are simply slack-jawed by the scene.

What's going on?

It's Alex Zanardi doing what he loves — racing cars flat out. A horrific Indy car crash took Zanardi's legs in 2001, but not one iota of his spirit. He returned to the U.S., driving one of Bobby Rahal's BMW race cars fitted with hand controls, during January's Rolex 24 At Daytona.

Zanardi needs no introduction. He was a standout the minute he turned a wheel in anger in one of Chip Ganassi's Indy cars, winning three races and six poles in his rookie season. He was flamboyant beyond measure.

His legendary pass of Bryan Herta in Laguna Seca's famed Corkscrew



was just one of many examples of brilliant race craft.

Some people think the victory doughnut is a NASCAR phenomenon, now almost mundane. Nope. Zanardi's were the first and best, making two concentric circles forming a figure-8.

Zanardi's CART performance piqued the interest of Formula One team owner Frank Williams. He signed a deal but the CART brilliance didn't translate to Formula One. Zanardi and Williams called it quits after one season.

Itching to get back to his halcyon days, Zanardi returned to CART but everything cut to black with the crash at Germany's

Lausitzring that would have ended most everyone's competitive careers.

Not Zanardi; he spit fate in the eye thinking "that's all you got?" He just changed the game and took to hand cycling, a Paralympic competition that is driven by arm power.

In his indomitable fashion, Zanardi won his first gold medal during the 2012 Summer Paralympics, where he also claimed a silver medal in the individual time trial. He came back in 2016 to win another gold and silver in Rio de Janeiro.

In addition to his Paralympic feats, Zanardi joined BMW Team Italy-Spain in 2003, winning three World

Touring Car Championship races in a hand-controlled BMW before retiring in 2009.

Zanardi's inner fire and resolve is immediately apparent.

"I'm just smart enough and wise enough at my age. I am not in the same place as I was in my mid-20s, maybe I was better from a physical point of view," he asserts. "I have different instruments these days. I've learned a lesson. I've gone through many difficult things. There was something I really wanted to do very badly in life and the execution of my project was not that perfect, not that precise. Only (sic) womens are perfect."

The guy is simply unstoppable.

"So you can do things to best of your ability," Zanardi explained. "And whenever it's time to perform you are as good as the work you have done up to that point but you cannot deliver something that magical that day. And whether it is sport or motorsports, hand cycling, rehabilitation getting out of a hospital bed you are able say the most important thing is your life."

That attitude has played out in remarkable ways.

“There’s no real difference, you know. Try to imagine a procedure, try to establish what are the priorities, try to organize them in a list with the most important ones are at the top,” he noted. “What is the first thing you have to focus on? Then you take just one step at a time and you use every single day to make a step. It could be a big one or a small one, it doesn’t really matter. It’s a step forward and sooner or later you will get there. And I think with this matter you can only just prepare yourself to the best for a sport even when you can turn something, which at the very beginning didn’t look that positive, into an opportunity.”

Results matter, Zanardi says.

“Look at me, look at all things I am doing these days because of my condition. What happened to me became an opportunity,” he said. “I just go around in my wheelchair in the paddock and people call me hero because I go around the paddock in a wheelchair with a racing suit on. That’s not to say when I start the engine, take off and I go out and go around the circuit and people go crazy simply because the expectation for a guy like me would be impossible to do such a thing, but it’s not. I’m not the only one proving this. I’m just a very exposed guy doing particular things like I do. That is the main difference, my exposure, the fact that what I do is noticed.”

Ganassi has perspective on Zanardi’s life.

“I don’t think anything surprises me with Alex anymore,” Ganassi said. “From his accomplishments in an Indy car with us, to the ranks of

Formula One, and then on to gold medals, and now the Rolex 24. What can you say about him that hasn’t been said? He embodies everything good about the human spirit. I look forward to watching him compete later this month in Daytona. He’s a guy that everyone pulls for.”

Jimmy Vasser and Zanardi were teammates with Chip Ganassi Racing and have formed a special bond.

“We were pretty competitive against each other at the beginning. Obviously working together to grow Ganassi’s team,” Vasser said. “He’s a fierce competitor. While I was falling in love with him as a human being and friend, I was getting my ass kicked on the track.”

After Lausitzring, Zanardi was different and unchanged at the same time.

“He had plenty of character before the accident and I don’t think anyone was surprised on how he has handled it,” Vasser said. “I was there shortly after he woke up (in the hospital). I really thought I was going there to support him. I soon realized that he ended up being the one consoling me. You often wonder why things happen in the world. It was him and he showed everybody the right way to react. Anybody else wouldn’t have been able to handle that.”

Rahal is Zanardi’s new boss.

“He (Zanardi) has a great personality, a great joy of life and is a great race car driver. He’s one of those guys that have spirit that is so powerful that you would be hard pressed to know there was anybody racing at Daytona. It’s all about people’s interest in his story. Alex is just a super guy and like I said, a hell of a race car driver and an even better person.” ■



IMSA Champion Michael Johnson

Alex Zanardi was not the only driver using hand controls during the Rolex 24 At Daytona.

Michael Johnson put the Michelin Pilot Challenge series drivers on notice with a “give-no-quarter” drive during last year’s race at Connecticut’s Lime Rock Park, winning by the closest margin in IMSA history.

Johnson, 25, races for JDC Motorsports. Team principal John Church is “all in” with his budding talent. “It’s a unique situation. It gives us the opportunity to do technical things that are fun and satisfying,” says Church. “On top of that he’s a great kid, great family, fun people and that they are committed to do, to deal with his disability that isn’t holding him back. . . . It’s all about having fun and to see the smile on his face you know you’re doing your job.”

Johnson has been racing since he was a toddler.

“I’ve been racing ever since I was 3,” Johnson said. “I started racing motorcycles when I was 3, my dad got me started. I broke my back in 2005 when I was 12. I got back racing in 2007 in karts. I started racing cars in 2009.”

Johnson’s father, Tim, has been an anchor through it all. He was yards away after his son crashed. The track was wet and the bike hit a rut, dug in and hit the fence. The horrified father recalls: “I immediately ran right to him and the first words out of his mouth was ‘I can’t feel my legs.’ I tried to calm him down and his next words were: ‘Don’t make me quit racing.’

He didn’t.

And for the next 13 years Johnson has won races and championships in karts, formula cars and now in IMSA. Like Zanardi, Johnson is simply unstoppable.

Johnson says his wheelchair is irrelevant. “Once I get in the car I’m the same as everybody else,” he said. “When I get out of the car I just hop in a wheelchair instead of walking away. I don’t see myself as being disabled. I’m just a normal person.”

— John Jeppesen

