

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Enzo Ferrari and Me

Elisa Leonelli · Friday, December 22nd, 2023

It's very exciting to me that a movie about [Enzo Ferrari](#) was filmed in my hometown of Modena last summer, and that on December 25 [Ferrari](#) will be released in U.S. theaters for everyone to enjoy. Directed by Michael Mann it stars Adam Driver as Ferrari, Penelope Cruz as his wife Laura and Shailene Woodley as his mistress, Lina Lardi.



I will not review the movie and spoil your enjoyment ([click here](#) for trailer), but take you back to April 1979 when I interviewed Enzo Ferrari, then 81, and photographed the Ferrari factory and racetrack.

I wrote an article that was published on *Westways*, the AAA travel magazine. Read some excerpts below.



Come Back a Winner
Text and photographs by Elisa Lenelli
Illustration by William Brandt

WESTWAYS

THE NEW FERRARI is famous all over the world, and the cars and the man who created them have become a legend in their own time. To own a Ferrari is a symbol of success and a way to share the glory of numerous victories in racing car competition history achieved by *Il Cavaliere Rampante*, the prancing black horse on yellow background, the symbol of the small factory from Modena.

During my last visit to Modena, my hometown, I decided to try and meet Enzo Ferrari himself, the old fighter, now eighty-one, that everybody treats with a respect mixed with fear.

With the courtesy of a gentleman from another century he receives me in his office next to the Fiorano racing track, while outside the pilots Jody Scheckter and Gilles Villeneuve are testing the new 312 T4 Formula One cars for this season's Grand Prix competition.

Ferrari has had a lifelong interest in journalism and apparently is curious to meet a young female journalist from his own town. But suspicious and defensive as usual he puts one condition: no pictures of him and no tape recorder. I am disappointed, but the suggestion of the man conquers me and I certainly can't pass up the opportunity of chatting with him, even if the event will go unrecorded.

Enzo Ferrari had three great dreams about what he would do when he grew up: he wanted to be an opera singer, a sports journalist or a racing car driver.

A racing car driver he was for about ten years from 1929 to 1932. He ran under the banner of Alfa Romeo, the Milanese car factory he was associated



Above: Team driver Jody Scheckter (stands on left) discussing the performance of the 312 T4 Formula 1 new car.



Below: A worker tends to an engine destined for installation in a 100 GT.

with for almost twenty years before the war. He scored many victories. It was in fact after winning a race in 1923 that he was approached by the parents of Francesco Baracca, the Italian air ace of World War I. They offered him the cockpit emblem of their son to put on his car for good luck. It was the prancing black horse that became the Ferrari trademark.

By his own admission he was never a great pilot. He was more interested in designing cars and organizing races. In 1929 he founded the Scuderia Ferrari, that functioned as the racing division of Alfa Romeo for many years, until finally after a long intermission due to the war and conflicts about the use of the name, Ferrari started building his own racing cars under the Ferrari name. He is careful to point out that he does not himself design and build the cars. This task has been in the hands of Mario Forghieri since 1962 and of others before him. Ferrari sees himself as the

inspirational force behind his cars.

The fact that he has been a racing car driver himself gives him special insight and valuable firsthand knowledge of the psyche of a pilot. He was especially close to the great Tazio Nuvolari, the red devil, *il munturano volante*, a man of his own generation who suffered the loss of two sons. Ferrari is always looking for a new Nuvolari. He thought he had found his man in Niki Lauda, who won the world championship for Ferrari in 1975. But even he, like many others, eventually deserted the Ferrari colors.

He maintains that the numerous deaths and accidents that have plagued the history of racing car competitions since the beginning are almost always attributable to human error, that the technical error is very rare, and that the drivers would not run if they stopped to think of the danger. Ferrari himself stopped racing after the birth of his son Dino in 1932.

His beloved Dino was raised in the racing environment in touch with driv-

ers and mechanics, and developed an exclusive passion for engines. But fate wanted him to die at the age of twenty-four of muscular dystrophy. At his son's death bed, during the last winter of his illness, Enzo Ferrari was still discussing with him the building of a new car engine, a 6-cylinder 2400cc that made its racing debut the following year. That was the last race Enzo attended in person.

His ambition as an opera singer was thwarted early on by the lack of a suitable voice. But still, like most Italian men of his generation, Ferrari has a great passion for opera. While I was in his office the young sports director, Piccinini, came in to pay his respects to the old man and assure him that he would be kept informed moment to moment of the developments of the forthcoming Grand Prix race in Spain. Ferrari asked him if he ever saw *Aida*. The young man looked confused. "Like in *Aida* I tell you: 'Ritorna vincitor!' [come back a winner]." Like the Egyptian king to the commander of

his army, Ferrari demanded victory. Of course he said it as a joke, but you could tell he meant it.

Enzo Ferrari was born in Modena in 1898. The early years of his life corresponded with the early years of the automobile. It was at the age of ten that he saw his first car race with his father in Bologna. He was hooked. Drafted in the Alpine division during World War I he soon managed to work as a mechanic. After the war, with a letter of introduction from his colonel, he applied for a job at Fiat. He was turned down. He remembers how in that day in Turin he sat on a park bench and cried. Thirty years later, in 1947, after a Ferrari car won the first Grand Prix of Turin after World War II, he sat on that same bench and cried, but this time of joy.

Going back to the journalistic ambition, we could safely say that he has fulfilled it. Besides his early career as a sports reporter before World War I covering soccer games for the newspaper *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, since 1948 Ferrari has published a yearly book for friends and clients on the progress of the Ferrari team, plus many revised editions of his autobiography *Le mie gioie terribili* (My terrible joys). He instituted a Dino Ferrari prize for sports journalism, and finally two years ago he wrote a book entitled *Il Flobert*, that he gave to me autographed as a parting present. It is about all the important journalists that interviewed him or talked about the Ferrari in the course of many years; an encyclopedia of Italian sports journalists with his personal pungent comments about each one. At the end he writes an imaginary interview with the unknown journalist containing his answers to the questions, he says, nobody ever asked him. One final chilling statement from this book gives us some insight on the embittered old man: "If I were born again, I would like to be born rich to avoid experiencing hunger, orphan not to have to cry over the painful memory of lost parents, impotent not to relive the tragedy of having a son and losing him." Perhaps a bit rhetorical, but such is the personality of an Italian man from another century.



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Ferrari 308 GTB 1979

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Ferrari 308 GTS 1979

“His beloved Dino was raised in the racing environment, in touch with drivers and mechanics, and developed an exclusive passion for engines. But fate wanted him to die at the age of 24 of progressive muscular dystrophy.”



Nikki Lauda 1975 Ferrari Formula One 312T

“While I was in his office the young sports director, Piccinini, came in to pay his respects to the old man and assure him that he would be kept informed moment to moment of the developments of the forthcoming Grand Prix race in Spain. Ferrari asked him if he ever saw *Aida*, the Verdi opera. ‘Like in *Aida* I tell you: Ritorna vincitor! (come back a winner).’ Like the Egyptian king to the commander of his army, Ferrari demanded victory. Of course he said it as a joke, but you could tell he meant it.”



Jody Scheckter testing Ferrari 312 T4 1979

“One final chilling statement from his autobiography *Le mie gioie terribili* (*My Terrible Joys*) gives us some insight on the embittered old man: “If I were born again, I would like to be born rich to avoid experiencing hunger, orphan not to have to cry over the painful memory of lost parents, impotent not to relive the tragedy of having a son and losing him.” Perhaps a bit rhetorical, but such is the personality of an Italian man from another century.”



Piero Lardi 1979

Related to the *Ferrari* movie storyline, but not a spoiler, see above a 1979 portrait of [Piero Lardi](#) at age 33. In 1990 he would request and obtain the last name of Ferrari, his father.



Ferrari 308 GTB 1983

In May 1983 an American friend wanted to visit the Ferrari factory, so we went, and I was granted permission again to take more photographs.

You may see the 1979 and 1983 Ferrari factory photos at [this link](#) in the [Elisa Leonelli, Photojournalist](#) Collection at Claremont Colleges Digital Library



Ferrari Formula 1, Long Beach Grand Prix.

In March 1983 I photographed on assignment the Long Beach Grand Prix with Ferrari Formula 1 cars in the race. [Click here](#) for photos.



Ferrari 308 GTE Los Angeles 1983

In 1983 I photographed in Los Angeles for *AutoCapital* magazine the Ferrari 308 GTE piloted by Doug Turner and David Diem that set a cross country record in the US Express race. [Click here](#) for

more photos.

In March 2004 I visited the [Ferrari museum](#) in Maranello, in May 2013 the [Enzo Ferrari Museum](#) in Modena.

As a film critic, I have to point out other depictions of Enzo Ferrari on the big screen: Sergio Castellitto played him in *Ferrari* (2003) by Carlo Carlei, Augusto Dallara in *Rush* (2013) by Ron Howard, Remo Girone in *Ford v Ferrari* by James Mangold, Gabriel Byrne in *Lamborghini* (2022).

Not coincidentally the [Maserati factory](#) is also in Modena, and the [Lamborghini museum](#) in a small town near Modena. That is why this area of Emilia Romagna is nicknamed “Terra dei motori” ([Motor Valley](#)).

Just like Luciano Pavarotti and balsamic vinegar, the Ferrari sport cars are among the most well known exports from Modena.

You may read these articles for more details about my beloved hometown.

[Italian Bread, Modena-style](#). October 18, 2017

[Fresh Pasta, Modena-Style](#), January 17, 2018

[Pavarotti and Me](#), June 26, 2019

Here's a map of *Ferrari* movie locations in Modena (in Italian)

