

DE ANGELIS : UNPOPULAR... CURRENTLY



Elio De Angelis is a sporting man who enjoys many different pursuits, including water skiing in Sardinia.



A nice day, a beautiful girl, happiness isn't necessarily shadow-shaped.

It was a gorgeous day in Sardinia on August 15. But Elio De Angelis didn't care. He took no notice of the swimming pool he was lying beside, nor the offshore powerboat anchored nearby, nor the Mediterranean, nor anyone for that matter. He was wrapped up in his own little world. He was reading.

It was two days after the Austrian Grand Prix and the Italian newspapers were full of the race, some of them giving over whole pages to reports. Elio read from one to the next without frowning. After a few minutes, he looked up and made a face. « Incredible, » he said. « In all the papers that I've just read, there are just four lines about me in one Rome daily. I sometimes ask myself what I've done to journalists for them not to like me. »

That's Elio De Angelis's problem, he's not popular as he would like to be. Nature has given him everything: intelligence, wealth, good health. But there's one thing lacking currently which upsets him. In spite of what he's done, he's not respected. Elio reckons that his efforts and worth aren't appreciated. Instead of congratulating him and encouraging him, people tend to talk vaguely about what he's doing, as though he hasn't really accomplished anything.

How did Elio De Angelis get into Formula One? One often hears the following explanation. « His father bought him three different types of Formula Three car so that he'd always have the best. And he always had a spare, so he wouldn't worry about crashing a car. He didn't do much in formula Two in 1978. And he's in Formula One because he bought his drive. »

Elio owes a lot to his father, who helped and encouraged him through the lesser Formulae, in fact from his karting days. Mr De Angelis himself still races Class One powerboats, but comes along to a number of Grands Prix. Curiously, he encourages his older son, but doesn't want his younger son Roberto, already a good kartist, to take up full-time racing.

« It's true, I'm rich, very rich, » expounds Elio. « Or at least, my family is rich. But that's not exactly my fault. I think that I've proved that I can drive quickly. It's not money that makes me drive quickly. It's been useful, certainly, I wouldn't deny it. But my current position in Formula One has nothing to do with money. I've signed a contract with Don Nichols on my own merit. »

So why does he think that he's unpopular? Is De Angelis, from Rome, a victim of the traditional North-South discrimination which has been going on in Italy for years, even in the press? That's one of his theories. It's hard to believe. There are certainly more profound reasons.

One could reproach him for the occasional lack of honesty. « Yes, » says Elio with a smile or irony. « I know what that dates from. In Belgium, my brakes were fading, I went off the track after crashing into Giacomelli. I explained to people that I didn't have any brakes, but the photographs afterwards showed my tyres smoking and black marks on the road, which could prove that my brakes were still working. But that doesn't mean anything. You arrive at the chicane very quickly. Perhaps my wheels locked up, but at the end of the braking area, and that was too late. I couldn't avoid the accident. And an accident

sibly more accidents than me, and worse, he was driving competitive machinery. But now Villeneuve is Villeneuve. »

So Elio De Angelis is having his first year eventful perhaps, but always promising, in the Shadow team. He certainly hasn't the best equipment with the overweight and dated DNS. « I'm getting used to coping with problems, » he says. « Last year the DNSs didn't have a very good season. Stuck and Regazzoni sometimes had a hard time to qualify. I knew before I'd even driven the car that I would only be able to gain experience, and possibly get one or two good results eventually, with some luck. But I didn't have any choice. It was my only chance of getting into Formula One last winter, and I didn't want to miss the opportunity. »

Was the drive with Shadow a promotion? It was really a lifeline for him which he hung onto after trying for much better drives. His hopes had been much higher. During the preceding months, he'd successively seen his hopes of going to Ferrari, Brabham and Tyrrell dashed. They were three top teams with whom he'd been in discussion, but the deal was never finally made. At the last moment, something upset each deal.

Ferrari! « That didn't come about even before the end of last season, » he says with a sad look in his eyes. « I drove a Formula Two Ferrari-powered Chevron. I was summoned to Fiorano to drive the 312 T3. I was fast enough, very close to the lap record at the time. I was led to think that I might drive the car in Formula One, although it was very vague. At the same time, in Formula Two, things weren't going too well. It wasn't that the engine wasn't as powerful as the others, but that we didn't have everything going for us. Goodyear didn't like us that much because Ferrari were using Michelin tyres in Formula One. I never had qualifiers in Formula Two. Furthermore, I felt that someone high up at Ferrari wasn't putting the development into Formula Two. Halfway through the season, I could see that my chances of getting into Ferrari and Formula One were evaporating. So I asked them should I think of myself as a Ferrari driver, or something else? They replied that the latter would be suitable. So I decided to leave. »

TYRRELL : A CONTRACT FOR NOTHING

While continuing the Formula Two season in ICI's Chevron-Hart, Elio at the same time continued his search for a good Formula One drive. That's how he started talking to Brabham and Tyrrell almost at the same time. « I was so close to getting a Brabham drive, » says Elio. « I was higher up the list than Piquet. Parmalat wanted an Italian driver. Furthermore, I had Niki Lauda's sup-



between two Italian drivers, well, that's a big story, someone has to be to blame. »

ACCIDENTS... NORMAL

De Angelis is naturally rather cold and distant, and together with his privileged social position, may count against him in his relationship with the people within the Formula One circus. Or perhaps jealousy has something to do with the way people regard him. Perhaps the way this young man (21) has got into Formula One makes people irritable as much as it makes them dream.

But the cynics are making the most of it currently. « De Angelis crashes a lot, too much, » they say earnestly. But they don't take into account his more meritorious performances with scarcely competitive machinery from which he wings the best. « Spins are normal when one is a young driver, » explains Elio. « When Gilles Villeneuve started, he had pos-



Elio's father, Gullio De Angelis is a well known powerboat racer. The machine does 75mph on water and has 1000 bhp. Elio drives.



Elio scours the Italian press the day after a Grand Prix. He feels ignored by them in comparison to other Italian drivers.

port. He came here to Sardinia and told me - you remind me of when I was 20 years old. But I found out after the Italian Grand Prix that they didn't want me. Reason - not enough experience, Ecclestone told me. - However the story goes that Parmalat preferred to invest in a Brazilian driver in order to help their South American market.

There was still the Tyrrell deal for De Angelis. And it was all agreed upon when it came unstuck. - Thanks to Jackie Stewart, I met Ken Tyrrell. Ken offered me a contract for three years. - Have you got an A licence for driving in Formula One, - he asked me. I had the licence and showed it to him. I signed Champagne, drinks. Everything was fine. He told me I'd be World Champion in 1980. Briefly, I believed it myself. I was going to drive a Tyrrell in the last two Grands Prix of the season -

Then everything collapsed. - First of all I received a telex from Tyrrell saying it was impossible to enter a third car at Watkins Glen and Montreal. By the end, Mister Ken told me - the rules have changed. I'm not certain that your licence will be renewed - in spite of telex from the President of the Italian Federation confirming that I would have the right licence, Tyrrell wrote to me - had to take an immediate decision and I wasn't sure that your licence would be renewed. I'm not doubting your capabilities, I still believe in you and I will follow your progress with interest. That was it, finished. -

To Elio, it was a tragedy. - I was more than disappointed - he remembers. - When you dream of something for years, and that dream just fizzles out at the time it should come true, it's hard to bear. I was stunned for a month. I was going to have a good car, good tyres, good engines, I was going to work with experienced people. Everything was great in my life, and then it disappeared. It was then that I discovered who were my friends, because a lot of people just didn't believe me. -

No Tyrrell, no Brabham, no Ferrari - just the bitter aftertaste of hopes dashed. But at least he'd been in close contact with Formula One teams, and that in itself was flattering. - I think I was made offers partially because of my win in the Monaco Formula Three meeting, and partially due to the race at Misano Formula Two the year before. I led it in front of drivers like Arnoux and Pironi -

After bidding for the top drives, Elio lowered his sights a little and offered his services to Don Nichols of Shadow. He signed him at 3,000 dollars for eight races. Danny Ongais was meant to drive in the other races. As everyone knows, negotiations broke down between Nichols and the Hawaiian which allowed De Angelis to go Argentina and take part in his first Grand Prix.

The young Roman drive, a newcomer to the game, was right in there at the start. In

Unfinished Symphony
and Elio de Angelis Williams

the first races he attacked with spirit, in spite of his unfavourable position. It wasn't surprising. De Angelis had often showed the same sort of attack in the preceding years, even when he was in the reserve Italian ski team.

Formula One didn't overwhelm him. He put everything into it. His Shadow didn't always stay on the track, but all the same, he finished third on two occasions. The 3000 dollars were quickly spent, but Don Nichols was encouraged by what he saw. He signed his young protegee to a three year personal contract. For Elio it was a personal victory. He'd bought a half drive, and been offered a whole one.

« Don Nichols believes in me strongly, » says Elio. « It's fantastic. Each time I do a good time, he gets ten years younger. When I qualified between the two Ferraris at Silverstone, his face lost



Elio De Angelis in Sardinia, Bruno Giacomelli at Brescia with his parents. Two different social backgrounds, but a common aim: a career in Formula One.

a whole 20 years. If he could find the money, he'd build a good car for me, as Williams has built for Jones. But the main problem with the team is lack of money. We don't do a lot of testing, and our equipment is out of date. »

The future? They say that Alfa-Romeo is interested in his career. But Elio eludes the question. « I've still got a two year contract with Shadow. » But they say that if Nichols doesn't get a good sponsor for next year, he'll quit Formula One. « That's a risk, certainly, » admits his driver « but I hope he'll find one. »

His youth and attack, in any case, are in De Angelis's favour. There's no reason why he shouldn't be one of the top drivers in Formula One. But even he worries whether he'll be a popular champion, that's for the future. But that's not important, for when Elio wins, there will only be admirers. □

Eric BHAT

