

# De Angelis:

**ELIO DE ANGELIS COULD NOT ONLY OUTQUALIFY SENNA IN AN IDENTICAL CAR. HE WAS ALSO A VIRTUOSO PIANIST. MARK HUGHES REMEMBERS THIS COMPLEX MAN AND ASKS WHY HE NEVER REALISED HIS POTENTIAL.**

WHEN CONSIDERING THE PRE-REQUISITES TO MAKE the grade in motor racing, few have been dealt a stronger hand than Elio de Angelis, Grand Prix driver from 1979 to his needless death in a testing accident in 1986.

Consider: born on 26 March 1958 into the huge wealth of an old, patrician Roman family, the eldest son in a male-dominated culture where macho pursuits are considered the measure of the man. Father Giulio had once had rather similar ambitions himself – rallying a Lancia Aurelia in the 1950s and going on to considerable power boat success in later years – and was almost certainly the key influence in Elio's early leanings.

Then there was that God-given talent; you don't coolly out-qualify Ayrton Senna in an identical car without an awful lot of that. All that seemed required to light the fuse was ambition, and this too de Angelis had in abundance; though remembered by all as a great gentleman, this was the same man who became so fixated on an F1 drive that in order to win the prestigious Monaco F3 race in 1978, he punted off erstwhile leader Patrick Gaillard in a move as ruthless – and unfair – as any ever pulled by Senna or Schumacher.

So why, then, is he not remembered as a great? Why did he win only one Grand Prix (though the official statistics say two) in an F1 career spanning over seven years? The answers are as complex as the person. This was an ostensibly serene man who could nevertheless explode into a thundering Latin rage; a man who, once out of the cockpit of his screaming Grand Prix car, would soothe away his

time playing concert-standard classical piano music or collecting antiques watches.

At 16, and around the time he was crewing in his father's power-boats, Elio won the 1974 Italian karting championship. Just three years later, his passage never compromised by lack of either wherewithal or talent, he'd graduated to F3 and won the Italian title, finishing second to Didier Pironi in front of the F1 fraternity at Monaco. Stepping down from an ill-judged F2 seat, he went one better in 1978, winning the Monaco F3 event. Using this as his



**Elio gave Shadow its only points in '79 season**

credibility deposit, he'd bought his way into F1 by the start of '79 with the struggling Shadow team. There he impressed enough to be taken on by Colin Chapman for the following year at Lotus, the team for which he won the 1982 Austrian Grand Prix and, officially, the 1985 San Marino GP – but only after across-the-line winner Alain Prost was disqualified for having an underweight McLaren.

For a time it looked as if his career might become



**Austria 1982, the day it all came right for Elio**

intertwined with Ferrari, not Lotus. Giancarlo Minardi had briefly run him as a 19-year-old in F2, with a Ferrari-powered Ralt, and introduced him to the Old Man. "For Elio, Mr Ferrari was the ultimate," remembers his friend and former F3 sponsor Andrea Galligani. "They really hit it off and Elio even tested an F1 Ferrari at Fiorano in '77. Enzo offered Elio a drive in the NART Boxer at Le Mans and Elio asked for money. Ferrari said, 'You are crazy, I give you the opportunity.' They fell out over this and it really bothered Elio."

Never again was de Angelis observed to be anything close to naive or ham-fisted in his effortless rise up the ladder to F1.

"His upbringing showed through in everything he did," remembers Peter Warr, the former Lotus team-manager. "He had an incredible amount of style. He used to like to smoke, he loved J&B whisky. He could be a total shambles in that he could show up and say, 'oh, I'm sorry I've forgotten my helmet' and we would all have to go rushing around!"

# An unfinished symphony



*De Angelis: serene and  
temperamentous, wildly  
ambitious yet often  
uncommitted... a genius  
of contradictions*



*Unfinished Symphony*  
by Peter de Angelis

*Testing the Lotus 95T in Rio during 1984. It was Elio's best season, ending with third place in the championship behind the dominant McLaren pair*

borrowing something for him. He'd then have a lot of the cigarette, get in the car, go out and be half a second quicker than Mansell. Everything he did came very naturally to him and he was very polite, very generous, a superb host."

"In spite of all the wealth he was a very down-to-earth young man," recalls his friend and former Shadow team manager Jo Ramirez. "He liked the simple things in life."

"He certainly knew how to enjoy himself," asserts colleague and friend Keke Rosberg, "but always in a cultured, educated way. He lived life like a true Roman." Was he not a typical Grand Prix driver, then? "Oh I think he was," argues Rosberg. "He played the piano well, which, to be fair, is not typical, but the only other things he played with

were the things that we all played with!"

Yet for all the ease his aristocratic background brought him, it brought with it too, a burden, as his team-mate at Shadow, Jan Lammers now points out: "Being a rich kid sometimes puts a stamp on a person that is just as difficult to get rid of as when you come from the suburbs. He was always a relaxed personality and this combined with the wealth was sometimes translated in the wrong way; people thought he didn't care so much. That's how it looked at the beginning."

He enjoyed a friction-free formative year at Lotus with hardened old pro Mario Andretti showing him the ropes. But the two team-mates who followed Mario to Norfolk – Mansell and Senna – could not have provided stronger contrast in the up and down

sides of de Angelis' easy charm and culture.

Against Mansell – with his working-class Midlands background, naïve, perhaps, in the workings of the world, believing all he had to do was his best and having been taken on as Chapman's protégé despite limited experience – Elio became the focus of the team without even trying.

"Well, against Elio's flair you had Mansell asking for 'another cup of tea and a sandwich, mate,'" recalls Warr, in a comment that betrays truly the scale of advantage de Angelis' background gave him within the team at the time. But there was much more to it than mere social standing.

"Lotus at that time was a small team with a big name," recalls Lotus mechanic Chris Dineage. "We didn't really have the resources to run two drivers



Colin Chapman gave De Angelis his break in 1980. He stayed for six seasons



De Angelis, here at Monza in '81, had the measure of Mansell on the track.



in person Nigel valued his company and calls him "a super human being"

absolutely equally the way they did at McLaren or Williams. So someone, inevitably, got preferential treatment, even though it was totally unfair. With Elio, he would get a group of people around him, and really include them in everything, come and talk with us. Mansell, on the other hand, although he drove the car flat out everywhere, whenever anything went wrong it wasn't his fault. Which sort of rubbed people up the wrong way."

Lotus chief mechanic Bob Dance remembers: "There was always a nice atmosphere around Elio. His girlfriend, Ute, fitted in well with the group, his family was very nice. He was a good spot and would always joke with the lads. He would take us for a run around the circuit in a hire car whenever he could. He was a good team player."

As far as Mansell himself is concerned, today he remembers no animosity towards Elio personally, only towards the regime that clearly favoured him within the team. Sheridan Thynne, Mansell's aide, comments, "Nigel remembers Elio as a super human being. He valued his company. He never felt bitter about Elio's background because Elio wasn't that sort of bloke. There are those from that sort of background who conduct themselves in such a way that they make it clear that they trade on it and value the superiority, which is so far from Elio's character that that didn't arise between them."

Then, after four seasons in which Elio held an indisputed upper hand over Mansell, Ayrton Senna joined the team. Here was someone who was at least as cosmopolitan and sophisticated in his

understanding of the world as Elio. He could even be utterly charming. But allied to that was a steely ruthlessness, previously unseen level of application and dedication. And a stunning talent.

Kenny Szymanski, one of Lotus' tyre men who became a close friend of de Angelis', remembers the omens for the partnership were ominous: "It was in Portugal, at the last race of '84, after it had been announced that Ayrton was joining the team. Elio went over to talk with him and I remember he came back to the garages looking really disgusted. I said, 'what's up with you?' and he said 'it's going to be a hard year next year. I don't know what Ayrton had said to him, but maybe he had laid down the rules, like Ayrton could do.'"

Against this man and his unique mission, Elio ➤



Final season in '86 saw Elio struggling with the uncompetitive Brabham BT55, scoring no points and three retirements before the fatal Paul Ricard test

came off second best in this team where there could be only one number one: "I think he saw quite early that to stay with Senna was going to be pretty bloody difficult," remembers Warr. Now Elio's easy charm and talent were no longer enough, the game had been moved on, albeit by Prost as well as Senna. "I think Formula One at that point was just becoming too sophisticated for someone like Elio," says Warr. "He wasn't the sort of guy who spent a lot of time



Ayrton and Elio: the sparks flew between them

in the car/wan afterwards nibbling through the data." "Maybe he wasn't the most hard-working of all the drivers, but he was up there with the rest of us," considers Rosberg. "But Senna came along and changed the standards."

Indeed it says much for his talent that de Angelis wasn't completely obliterated by the awesome Brazilian, unlike some other team-mates who would try to keep up with his prodigious talent. "Elio was fantastically gifted as a driver," opines Collins. "He's one of the few people to have taken Senna on in

his own team. That qualifies him." In 1985, Elio's Lotus 97T sat ahead of Senna's on the grids of both the Brazilian and Canadian Grands Prix. But it wasn't enough. For '86 Ayrton, only too aware of the limitations of the team, would demand a subservient number two, while Elio move on to his tragically short stint at Brabham.

A rear-wing endplate detached itself from the BT55 as Elio was taking a flat-out kink while testing at Paul Ricard. The car became airborne and rolled. Elio was trapped inside with injuries no more serious than a broken collarbone. Then the engine caught fire and the tragically unskilled as ill-equipped marshals, some in short-sleeved T-shirts, directed their extinguishers as best as their limited training allowed them. Some were spraying the fire from the wrong direction, sending the flame towards Elio rather than away. He died in hospital the following day as a result of asphyxiation, robbed of oxygen in a burning car in an accident from which he should have climbed out and walked away.



San Marino '85: Elio inherited win, Ayrton retired

That his career was cut so short only partly explains his lack of success. "Sometimes he had to be fired up to get the best out of him," remembers Soytronski, "like at Canada when he out-qualified Ayrton. Peter Warr had said something to him which wound him off the clock." But generally, that raw ambition, so evident in that '78 Monaco F3 race, was rarely seen once he arrived in F1. Just the speed and the style.

What of Latin temperament? "You only saw it very occasionally," remembers Bob Dance, "but if he did get annoyed he really lost it." At Silverstone in '81 he was hauled in for a 10sec penalty for a driving infringement. Rather than taking it, he erupted out of the car, screamed at the RAC's Robert Langford and stalked off, leaving his perfectly healthy car in the pit lane. Once he shaved MOTOR SPORT's Denis Jenkinson to the ground in an absecession over something that had been written. And there was a little-known scuffle, too, in the Lotus garages at Kyalami in '85 when de Angelis had to be pulled off Senna for some perceived slight on the circuit.

But this rarely manifested itself in the car. In fact Dance remembers de Angelis as being "extremely mechanically sympathetic," and Collins avows he was "one of the safest drivers of all, not at all ragged."

Which is just one more contradiction in this man whose combative fire, so apparent in his rise to prominence, seemed to disappear once he got them. "I wonder if he was just too much of a gentleman," muses Warr, "just too nice. Perhaps because of his background he didn't have that ruthless streak. He just wasn't that bothered. Such a lovely guy."

Maybe that is his epitaph. □