



WHY THIS MAN IS KEY TO F1'S FUTURE by Mark Hughes

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## BERGER!

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Nobody can take that away"*

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Mini's stolen  
Monte, 50 years on  
Driven: Jaguar's  
first race winner



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104



26

66



115



90

74



84



50



# CONTENTS

VOLUME 92 / NUMBER 3

## FEATURES

**15** NIGEL ROEBUCK'S REFLECTIONS  
Mourning two real racers; does F1 need more bhp?

**23** F1 FRONTLINE WITH MARK HUGHES  
Mercedes GP team principal Toto Wolff describes balancing design, drivers and politics

**66** INTERVIEW - GERHARD BERGER  
How to combine serious racing with sheer fun

**74** LUNCH WITH... JUAN PABLO MONTOYA  
The multi-discipline winner relaxes over a steak

**84** TRACK TEST - BIZZARRINI 5300GT  
One man's attempt to leapfrog Ferrari's GTO

**90** THE 1966 MONTE CARLO FIASCO  
Have 50 years changed the chief actors' attitudes?

**96** IN THE SPOTLIGHT: MARINO FRANCHITTI

**98** DIETER QUESTER  
An Austrian who has raced for more than 50 years

**104** TESTED - JAGUAR SS100  
Coventry's first winner, from long before Formula E

**110** PRIVATE VIEW: 1967 BRITISH GP

**115** ADRIAN REYNARD COLLECTION  
Race car builder reflects on the cars that made him

**122** BOOK EXTRACT - 1927 LE MANS HERO

**126** DATA TRACE: JORDAN F1

**NEW FEATURE 178** FINISH LINE: MARTIN BRUNDLE  
Norfolk or the Maldives? This ex-racer enjoys both

## REGULARS

<b>6</b> MATTERS OF MOMENT	<b>47</b> DREAM GARAGE
<b>10</b> MONTH IN PICTURES	<b>48</b> ROAD CAR NEWS
<b>34</b> MAT OXLEY	<b>50</b> ROAD TESTS
<b>35</b> HALL OF FAME	<b>58</b> LETTERS
<b>36</b> INTERNATIONAL NEWS	<b>61</b> YOU WERE THERE
<b>37</b> GORDON KIRBY	<b>64</b> SUBSCRIPTIONS
<b>38</b> OBITUARIES	<b>129</b> SIMON ARRON
<b>42</b> BOOK REVIEWS	<b>133</b> GORDON CRUICKSHANK
<b>44</b> HISTORIC NEWS	<b>137</b> DOUG NYE
<b>46</b> AUCTIONS	<b>140</b> PARTING SHOT



Track test Bizzarrini 5300



POW  
*without*





# FER glory

The ingredients looked promising and its creator had a fine track record – with Ferrari, no less – but Bizzarrini's GT achieved little in period. Almost 50 years after its last Le Mans start, *Motor Sport* tried an unsung warrior

writer ANDREW FRANKEL  
photographer JAYSON FONG



**I**T WAS, I THINK, GERHARD Berger who observed that a racing car can only be said to have enough power if it is able to spin its wheels in every gear and at every point on the track. I believe at the time he was referring to Formula 1 cars at the height of the turbo era in 1986, but right now as I try to steer my way around Donington he could as easily have been talking about this Bizzarrini.

A combination of somewhat elderly tyres, that curious emulsion of rainwater and Avgas that always coats Donington during the off season, a perhaps sub-optimal set-up for these conditions and a 5.3-litre Chevy V8 offering at least 450bhp are fast leading me to conclude that the Bizzarrini does indeed have enough power. More than enough, in fact. Throttle down on the straight causes instant wheelspin in third, so short shift to fourth, press again and hear the revs head north once more as aged Dunlops give up the unequal struggle against the pincer movement of oily Tarmac and Detroit iron.

It's funny at first because every turn of the wheel seems to require an equal and opposite turn a fraction of a second later, but the moment I try to ride it out I'm aware of first elbows and then shoulders being press-ganged into aiding the wrists to tackle the exponentially expanding job of rounding up the ever so beautiful but inconveniently fast moving tail. There are no belts in here and I'm in someone else's very valuable racing car. I can't remember ever needing to do this before, but the most appropriate course of action is really quite clear: quit, while everything is still pointing in the right direction. I drive slowly back to the pits, but still find myself grabbing armfuls of left lock through that well known right-hander called Coppice. I park the Bizzarrini, flick off the master switch, sit in silence and wonder what on earth I have let myself in for.



THERE IS PROBABLY NO SPORT MORE littered with the corpses of what might have been than motor racing. In this world of 'what if', ruled by the unholy triumvirate of 'coulda, woulda and shoulda', anyone could have won anything if only they'd had the car, the team-mate, the weather, the tyres... the talent.

But in the history of our sport, there can be few cars indeed that failed so spectacularly to deliver on their potential as the Bizzarrini 5300. Indeed if you laid out its raw materials, then had a quick squint at the CV of the man who created it, one word would leap instantly into your head: winner. But it never won a major race, at least not until decades later when its

potential was finally unlocked by the wizards who inhabit the modern world of historic racing.

Giotto Bizzarrini will celebrate his 90th birthday in June, the same month which also marks the 50th anniversary of this, the best of the *competizione* Bizzarrinis, racing at Le Mans for the one and only time in its life, of which more in a moment.

But before he ever became involved in the cars that would eventually bear his name, Bizzarrini made three other contributions to our world and they will stand as testament to his talents far better than his cars ever did. As a chief engineer at Ferrari in the late 1950s, he helped turn the elegant but unwieldy 250 Tour de France into something rather more agile and the result, the 250SWB or short-wheelbase, needs no further introduction. Its replacement the 250GTO was his brainchild, but Bizzarrini was frustrated by the conservative pace of Ferrari development: for all its beauty and success, the GTO was entirely evolutionary, featuring an engine designed in the 1940s and a leaf-sprung live rear axle whose configuration dated back to the earliest days of the automobile. No longer able to tolerate Maranello politics, he left, along with the likes of Carlo Chiti and Romolo Tavoni in the so-called 'Palace Revolt', before the GTO was even launched.

Briefly Bizzarrini became part of the ill-starred ATS F1 project before falling out



THE STORY OF BIZZARRINI THE CAR, AS opposed to the man, started in 1962 when he was hired by Renzo Rivolta to work on a new GT car for the Iso firm – most famous for its Isetta bubble cars – he now controlled. The resulting Iso Rivolta was innovative in the way its torsional strength derived not just from its platform chassis but the body bonded to it. But its influences were not just Italian. It was powered by an American Chevrolet engine Bizzarrini first experienced in an English car. This was thanks to Nuccio Bertone, whose styling house was working on the body for the car that would eventually be known as the Gordon-Keeble. Bertone lent Bizzarrini the car and, while he didn't care much for it in general, he was blown away by his first exposure to Detroit iron. Indeed for its power and response he rated the V8 more highly than Enzo's V12s. The Gordon-Keeble also convinced him of the need for a De Dion rear axle, while after the 1961 launch of the Jaguar E-type, all-round disc brakes were deemed essential.

The Iso Rivolta was beautiful but did nothing to slake Bizzarrini's thirst for a car that could be raced. Rivolta could see demand for a proper sports car, but a racer? In the end he agreed only if one were derived from the other. Which is why at the 1963 Turin Show, there were two versions of the new Iso Grifo: the stunning A3/L road car on the Bertone stand,

## “LAMBORGHINI DECIDED TO BEAT FERRARI AT HIS OWN GAME AFTER BEING LEFT TO STEW OUTSIDE THE OLD MAN'S OFFICE”

with Chiti. He then started his own Autostar design and engineering consultancy, in which capacity he designed an engine for another person who had good cause to be disgruntled with Ferrari. This was a tractor manufacturer named Ferruccio Lamborghini who, if the story can be believed, decided to beat Ferrari at his own game after driving to Maranello to complain about his car and being left to stew in silence outside the then not-so-Old Man's office. Bizzarrini's V12 made its debut in 1963 in the Lamborghini 350GT and would in various guises go on to power every single V12 Lamborghini until the launch of the current Aventador. And while it became something of a 'Trigger's broom' by the end, the motor almost doubling in size by 2010 with no single part surviving from first to last, its lineage back to the 350GT is direct and unbroken.

and Bizzarrini's brutal A3/C racer on Iso's stand, the car completed so late it appeared *au naturel* without so much as a lick of paint to cover its modesty.

Both cars were instantly successful, the road car gaining praise in the press around the world, the racer performing extraordinarily given how new it was, how little money was used relative to what Ferrari was spending and the fact that, unlike the GTO, it really was based on a standard production car. Key to its speed was not just the beefy 5.3-litre V8, even then giving close to 400bhp, but also its location so far back in the chassis that if you looked under the bonnet you'd see space for a 10-litre V16. At least.

Racing started in 1964 at the Sebring 12 Hours, when an A3/C qualified in the top half of the field before gearbox problems left it





Ground-hugging Bizzarrini boasts strongly rear-set 5.3 Chevrolet under its curvaceous glassfibre bodywork - a powerful recipe that had no time to gel



Watch a Bizzarrini 5300GT in action around Zandvoort's sweeps... and relish a glorious soundscape

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last but one at the flag. But at the Le Mans test, a Grifo was a sensational ninth-fastest overall, a mere 0.7sec behind the only GTO taking part. In the race it started 15th out of 55 and, despite losing two hours to braking woes, came home 14th overall, beaten in the over 3-litre prototype class only by two purpose-built Ferrari racers.

Racing in 1965 became more chaotic as the relationship between Bizzarrini and Rivolta started to break down, but not before the A3/C showed what it could really do at Le Mans with a less troubled run, namely finish ninth overall and win the over 5-litre prototype category, albeit helped by the fact every other car in the class retired. It's worth remembering it finished a single lap behind AC's own Shelby Daytona Coupé, the car that had ended the reign of the GTO in GT racing.

Sadly, Rivolta's cool business head and Bizzarrini's wild engineering ideals were never likely to make comfortable long-term bedfellows and by the end of that summer the situation was irretrievable. Bizzarrini quit, changed Autostar's name to Prototipi Bizzarrini and a new marque was born, supplied with parts bought in from Iso. He renamed the A3/C the Bizzarrini 5300 and pressed on regardless.

Early the following year he launched the 'GT America' which was visually similar, but crucially featured elegant double-wishbone rear suspension. Had he just left it at that, the future might have been rather different. Instead, driven by his unquenchable desire to push boundaries, he embarked on a brand new mid-engined racing car, the P538.

What you're looking at, then, is the *competizione* or Corsa version of the GT America, and the only right-hand-drive Bizzarrini or Iso racer ever built. And if you think of what it offered in 1966, it must have been a quite stunning proposition. Its engine now had 420bhp, and was positioned to offer a similar polar moment of inertia to a mid-engined car. It was light enough given its power: at Le Mans this actual car with its glassfibre body was weighed by the ACO at 1194kg, despite all that iron in its nose. And at last it had properly independent rear suspension, as far from the cart-sprung live rear end of the GTO as you could imagine.

But you need more than a seemingly state-of-the-art design to succeed in motor racing; you also need time and money to develop it and a crack squad of engineers and mechanics to transport to, prepare it for and look after it during race weekends. And this Bizzarrini sadly lacked. Even in the Iso days, money was so tight Bizzarrini drove the A3/C to and from Le Mans himself in 1964. Now on his own, it was even worse. This car made its race debut at Monza and, having shown reasonable potential in qualifying, a lack of wet-weather rubber meant it was not even

classified at the finish. It was then entered for the Targa Florio and hit a Fiat 500 on its way to the start before succumbing to head gasket failure on lap two.

At Le Mans in 1966 it at least had a world-class driver in Sam Posey and initially showed quite strongly before being disqualified for twice straying over the pitlane boundary line. Sam recalled it thus: "The driver sat low down on the floor, there was a nice big hood and great power, the car was very predictable with some understeer and the steering effort was very reasonable. Overall it was a damned good car and I would love to have driven it the entire distance in the race. The biggest problem was lack of development and it really needed a proper team to run it." There was another problem, too: all the attention that had been funnelled into the mid-engined car, which lined up for the same race almost seven seconds a lap slower than the coupé and retired with steering arm failure within half an hour of the start.

Still undeterred, the indefatigable Bizzarrini was back in France the following year with this front-engined coupé, now fitted with a big block 7-litre Chevy – you can still see where the body under the bonnet was cut away to fit it. With 5.3 litres the car was reputedly good for 190mph on the Mulsanne, so this one should have cracked 200mph. But Bizzarrini was never to find out: the poorly prepared car was slung out by the scrutineers, never to race again in period.

Bizzarrini went bust in 1969, whereupon the car was put into storage before emerging in a very dilapidated state in 2003. It was fully restored a year later and is now to be sold by Fiskens. But another car, actually an Iso Grifo A3/C with a De Dion rear end, did finally prove the design's potential when Mark Hales and Richard Attwood won back-to-back RAC TT Celebration races at Goodwood in 2003-4, against world-class opposition including GTOs. "The car was very standard," says Hales today, "but it had been well set up. While it was quite loose and struggled to get its power down, it actually had a very nice balance."



EXACTLY THE SAME CAN BE SAID OF this car today, even with Bizzarrini's independent rear end. Once we had taken some static photographs on the Melbourne Loop and the track had dried some more, I put my heart back in my throat and settled in for another session. Spotting a dry-ish line around at least most of the track I tried to gain a sense of what this car was really like to drive.

First you must get over the theatre: the impossibly low-slung driving position and insane ergonomics that place the rev-counter quite brilliantly in front of your non-existent passenger. There's the blue-collar thunder of the Chevy too and, of course, its implausible thrust.



Old tyres and a slippery surface brought Berger's definition to life, with wheelspin in every gear



Sift through that little lot and you'll find something of the car beneath. It tracks arrow straight at high speed and, while it still slides everywhere, it felt more hobbled by its tyres and the surface than inherently treacherous. And when I asked for some air to be let out of the tyres and for the Konis to be softened somewhat, especially at the rear, I ended up having a hoot. And while I still respected it, over a few laps I learned to trust it. It was a highly expressive car with, in these conditions, none of the understeer Posey mentioned, but also very responsive: so long as you applied the correct remedy, it reacted consistently and reliably.

It would have been a hot, physical car to wrestle around Le Mans let alone Monza, so goodness knows what it would have felt like in Sicily on the Targa Florio – like a large, sweaty stallion galloping around a dog track, I imagine. But I learned enough that day at Donington not merely to suspect, but to believe sincerely that had Bizzarrini been able to develop his design in period, we'd not now be looking at a footnote in race car history. An interesting footnote, but a





“IT WOULD HAVE FELT LIKE A  
**HOT, SWEATY STALLION**  
GALLOPING AROUND A DOG TRACK”



footnote nonetheless. Indeed had he done so I think there is every chance Bizzarrini could have made his dream come true, and shown that he could build a better, faster racing car on his own than the one he was asked to create by the well organised and resourced Mr Ferrari.

‘Woulda, coulda, shoulda.’ That’s all the wishing required to make the difference between a true icon of the sport and a fascinating curio. 📷

*Many thanks to Fiskens ([www.fiskens.com](http://www.fiskens.com)), where the Bizzarrini is currently for sale, and the staff of Donington Park for all their help*

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