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Gianpiero Moretti – Witness to the Times

May 20, 2011 by [Louis Galanos](#) [7 Comments](#)

By Paolo D'Alessio and edited by Louis Galanos

Gianpiero Moretti is the last real “gentleman driver” of our times. During his 37-year career he took part in hundreds of races and drove over 40 different types of cars creating a long-lasting bond between himself and Porsche as well as Ferrari with whom he lived some unforgettable moments of his career as racing driver and businessman.

This is how Mister Momo, as he is now known, recalls those days and speaks about them, saying, “I have observed the Audi and Peugeot cars that have raced this year at Sebring: beautiful cars indeed, a spectacular fusion of technology and aerodynamics, but there is no comparison to my Ferrari 512 S of 1970!”

So says Gianpiero Moretti, the last gentleman driver whose name is forever linked to two legends of high calibre in worldwide motor racing namely, Ferrari and Porsche.

For decades he was an ambassador for Italy in the world (even though he has a Swiss passport) for the Italian way of living, Italian cars, Italian culture and the cult of beauty.

Today, at the threshold of 70 spring seasons and having hung up his helmet a dozen years ago, Moretti watches the racing world that was his world for four decades with the same passion. He knows he has left his mark in history as well as unforgettable memories with those who knew him or worked with him. He knows he played an essential role in the races which, in those days, were more important than Formula 1 today, but he has no regrets towards the racing environment that, over these last years, has changed so dramatically.

His career began long ago in 1961, when he first got into the driver’s seat of a Lancia Appia Zagato to race both on track and in the uphill races. The then-political-science student at the University of Pavia showed how good he was at the steering wheel of a race car. He caught the attention of ASA builder, Giotto Bizzarrini, who even asked him to become their official driver for uphill races. However, nothing ever came of this offer mostly because he had two souls, that of racing driver and that of businessman.

Even though he belonged to a high-class Milan bourgeoisie family, Moretti didn’t want to be financially dependent on his family and so, right from the beginning of the sixties, he started work building steering wheels

for racing competitions. The insight that he had to reduce the diameter of the steering wheel and make the hand grip more ergonomic soon turned his part-time job into a real business.

The height of this transformation took place in 1964 when Enzo Ferrari, in person, ordered a leather steering wheel to be mounted on John Surtees' 158 F1. "I started working with Ferrari," recalls Moretti, "thanks to Eugenio Dragoni, then sports director of Cavallino, to build a leather steering wheel for the Formula 1 single seater. The steering wheel turned out to be a huge success and to top it off, John Surtees won the world title in 1964 using that steering wheel. From that moment on he became the official supplier of the steering wheels that Enzo Ferrari mounted on his cars. "The Drake* (Enzo Ferrari) was a person of habit who wanted only wooden steering wheels with small handgrips."



Cockpit of John Surtee's Ferrari 158 before the 1964 Italian Grand Prix at Monza. Photo: Grand Prix Photo

In 1966 the business underwent a drastic change when Moretti founded MOMO Sas (the first two letters stand for "Moretti" while the second two letters stand for "Monza") which became to all intents and purposes the official supplier to Casa di Maranello. The Drake, who already understood the importance of "Made in Italy" at the time, decided to replace all the old English Les Leston steering wheels with the new national product. Soon the young Milanese company started supplying Dino, and other Gran Turismos of Cavallino. Trips to Maranello become ever more frequent and it was during those years that a friendship developed with Piero Lardi, who years later became known as Piero Lardi Ferrari. It is a friendship that continues today.



Gianpiero Moretti and Piero Lardi, who years later became known as Piero Lardi Ferrari. Photo provided by Paolo D'Alessio

All racing drivers share the same deep passion for the 'reds of Maranello' but this dream only came true in 1970 when Ferrari started work on the 512 S two-seater prototype. In order to participate at the World Sportscar Championship, Casa di Maranello had to produce at least 25 models: some were used at the Scuderia modenese while others were sold privately. And it was with one of these 5-liter monsters that Gianpiero Moretti made his worldwide debut at races that count.

Moretti speaks frankly of his experience at the 1970 24 Hours of Daytona, "Only now do I realize how reckless and irresponsible we were back then: before participating at the Daytona 24-hour race in team with my friend Corrado Manfredini I had done a mere three laps of the Modena race circuit at the wheel of the Ferrari 512 S. This being the minimum necessary to verify that everything is in working order but surely not enough to prepare oneself for such a hard race. We had no more time and even if we were behind on preparation we decided to head for Daytona anyway taking along only three mechanics. Luckily, once we arrived there, the guys from Ferrari gave us a hand. However, we learned the hard way what it meant to participate in a 24-hour race."



Manfredini – Moretti Ferrari 512S that raced at Daytona in 1970. Photo provided by Paolo D'Alessio



Gianpiero Moretti at the 1970 24 Hours of Daytona. Photo provided by Paolo D'Alessio



Manfredini – Moretti Ferrari 512S that raced at Daytona in 1970. Photo provided by Paolo D’Alessio

As it was logically expected, the adventure of the pair Manfredini – Moretti with the Ferrari number 30 ended long before the conclusion of the race due to problems with the suspension. After this debacle at Daytona the team, with their 512 S, skipped the 12-hour race at Sebring as well as the 1000 kms at Brands Hatch in order to prepare themselves better for the race at Monza.

However this race literally risked going up in flames when during a private test a fire seriously damaged the prototype. By working day and night the men of the Scuderia Picchio managed to put the prototype together again and at the race in Monza Moretti finished in ninth place before the Jurgen Neuhaus – Helmut Kelleners Porsche 917 K. It was an accomplishment almost as important as the birth of his first child one day earlier.

Moretti remembers the Ferrari 512 fondly, “That was a great car, potentially better than the Porsche 917. It’s just a pity that it was not that reliable and the frame was a bit too ‘loose’ but I am sure that if Ferrari had developed it like they should have instead of throwing themselves body and soul into building the 3-litre two seater (312P), it would have given us great satisfaction.”

At the 1970 24 Hours of Le Mans the team of Moretti – Manfredini lasted just 180 minutes finally withdrawing with transmission problems. In September Moretti achieved the team’s first important victory with their 512 S on an international level by taking first place in the Fuji 200 miles at Japan with a two lap lead over Moto Kitano in a Nissan R380 Mk. II.

According to Moretti, Enzo Ferrari’s reactions were always unpredictable, saying, “The race wasn’t valid for the World Championship, but it was still a status success for Ferrari considering that that year Ferrari hadn’t received any great satisfactions with (motor) sports. And yet, after that on my arrival back at Maranello, while I was convinced that I would receive a glorious welcome back all I got from the Drake (Enzo) were a few witty comments. He was more interested to hear all about the oriental women and especially about the legendary Geishas of whom so many folk tales were told.”

Moretti continued, “In fact the old man was like that, take it or leave it. I remember the first time I met him at his office, the room was in semidarkness, and he was wearing big dark glasses, this stately figure peering over at me from behind dark glasses. And while I was there looking at him feeling intimidated, what did he do? He pulled out a handkerchief from his pants pocket, brought it to his mouth to wet it before polishing the glass top of the desk. He was one of a kind.”

The union of Moretti – Ferrari continued on the race track in 1971 with the “M” version of the 512. This was a much better car than the 1970 version, which the gentleman driver from Milan used during a few races with team mate and countryman, Herbert Muller. He then became a car builder himself, which according to him was his only choice at the time.

In 1972 Momo assigned the task of designing two sports cars to the engineer Giorgio Valentini. One was a 2-liter with an Abarth engine and another version, destined for the Inter Series, was mounted with the same V12 5-liter as the Ferrari 512 S. Two cars which were very interesting from a technical point of view, but at the same time very difficult to put together. The end result was that they were too complicated for a private team and too sophisticated.

It was during this time that Moretti gave up car building, going back to GT cars and with a Porsche 911 won the Italian title in Group 4 before immigrating to the USA. There he became a permanent fixture in the IMSA series behind the wheel of the Gran Turismo of Stuttgart.

While racing in America he got the nickname of the “Dartagnan of Porsche” from Mark Raffauf, President of IMSA. This grabbed the attention of the stars and stripes enthusiasts.

His Porsche 935s and the Moby Dick versions with the long white tails were not always amongst the most competitive cars however the team MOMO motor home and pit box always ended up being the most popular meeting point whether it was due to its livery (the red combined with yellow always brings to mind the very Italian Ferrari) or whether it was due to the wonderful person he is remains uncertain.



MOMO Porsche 935 in 1977 with Moretti at the wheel. Fred Lewis photo.



MOMO Porsche 935 at Sebring 1978. Michael Keyser photo.

Apart from being a great gentleman driver and a wise businessman, Moretti is also a good public relations officer for himself, always takes advantage of every occasion to obtain great advertising at low cost. His nosh-ups of spaghetti become memorable occasions and the people present in the Momo team tent at these occasions are people who count, from the most important journalists, photographers and Americans to great champions like Mario Andretti and Hollywood legends like Gene Hackman or Paul Newman with whom Moretti became close friends.

Momo felt that friendships in those days were more genuine, commenting, “In those days nothing was planned and there were no round table meetings. Everything used to happen naturally. If Paul Newman sat eating spaghetti in your motor home (on one occasion the blue eyed diva defined Moretti as “a cook worthy of the Waldorf Astoria”) it was because it was a sure pleasure for him and not only because he was invited or worse yet paid by a sponsor to do so. Those were other times....less technology, less professionalism but with an environment that was definitely more ‘real’ so to speak.”



Moretti and actor/racer Paul Newman. MOMO photo.

The races in the US used to take up a large part of Moretti's time, but now and again the driver from Milan, with the Swiss passport, used to remember his origin and return to the old continent to race. In 1979 he participated at the Giro Automobilistico d'Italia (a sort of rally where the speed trials were held on various tracks in Italy) behind the wheel of his Porsche 935.

After having dominated Formula 1 with Ferrari, Fiat also wanted to put their seal on what was known at the time as "Mille Miglia" (thousand miles) and in order to increase the chances of success, they entrusted their Lancia Beta Montecarlo Turbos to Gilles Villeneuve and Riccardo Patrese, assisted by rally racing drivers Markku Alen and Walter Rohrl.

As forecast the Lancia Gran Turismos of Chivasso took first and second place in the ranking while the Porsche of Moretti – Schon took third place. Right from the first stages of the race doubts started spreading about whether the two Lancia cars broke the rules by taking the highway to avoid arriving late for a time check.

Moretti thought long and hard before deciding to file a protest, saying, "We had the proof and I told Cesare Fiorio. For our private team it would have been enough to rank second between the two official Lancia cars. I spoke to Cesare Fiorio, sports director of the Fiat Group, about it but he didn't even want to take my offer into consideration. So, after the triumphant arrival of the two Beta Montecarlo in Turin and the celebrations in Piazza San Carlo, we lodged a formal complaint against them. In the heart of the night we were declared winners of the Giro while the two cars of the Fiat Group were disqualified."

Moretti continued, "It goes without saying that for some people this was not good news at all and from that moment on and for a long time the name Momo became taboo for the Fiat Group. And as if that wasn't enough, in that same period we were also at odds with Ferrari or to put it better, with Enzo Ferrari, who still hadn't forgiven us for having used pictures of the "traitor" Niki Lauda, who had abandoned Maranello in 1977 to go to Brabham, to advertise some of our steering wheels. In fact, Ferrari found it difficult to cope with this betrayal and one day he decided to cancel the supply of steering wheels that were ordered for Formula 1, only to call us back a few years later because our business rivals didn't meet his expectations."



Moretti Porsche 935 at Giro d'Italia 1979. Photo provided by Paolo D'Alessio

So was this whole episode behind us then? Not a chance: a year later, during the 1980 Giro D'Italia , something happened that Gianpiero Moretti suspects was a case of revenge served cold.

“On the eve of the last stage we had a good chance of repeating the success of 1979, but there in Mugello (a race track near Florence, Italy) our engine cut suddenly without any warning sign. Of course this is something that can happen during a race but unfortunately after dismantling the engine we found an abnormal amount of water inside it. The possibility that our car had been tampered with was more than just a suspicion,” said Moretti.

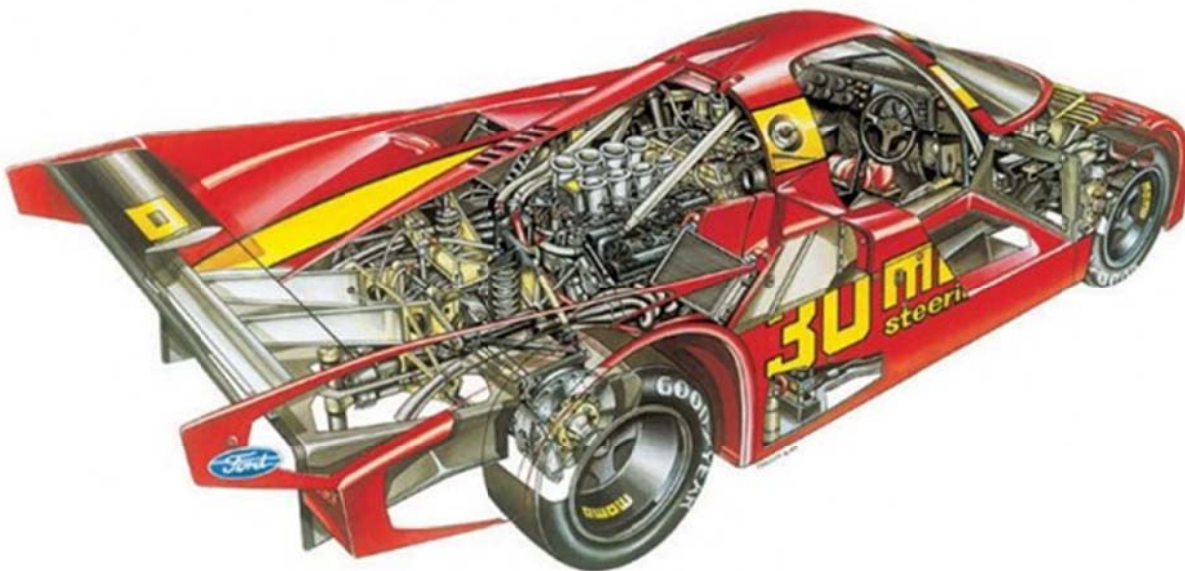
Anyone else would have cursed at this adversity but not the much envied Moretti who left the Giro D'Italia accompanied by his girlfriend at the time, the statuesque Dorothy, who was declared 'Girl of the Year' by *Penthouse* magazine.



Moretti and Penthouse Pet girlfriend. MOMO photo.

How can you not envy someone whose closest friends are Paul Newman, Emerson Fittipaldi and Mario Andretti and is in a relationship with a self-confident American model? Many have asked themselves this question but not Mr. Momo who handles all of this so naturally and even after that episode he still continued his travelling back and forth between Europe and the USA like a modern migrant worker, all work and racing.

In 1984 he again wanted to add a touch of Italian to his participation with IMSA and so he turned to the engineer Giorgio Stirano, owner of Alba, to use one of Stirano's cars in the IMSA series. The 8-cylinder Ford Cosworth that pushed the small Alba was clearly less powerful than many American engines around at the time but Stirano's two seater was more sophisticated than the sport made in America and so before you knew it everyone wanted to learn about this car's aerodynamics and especially the chassis made of composite.

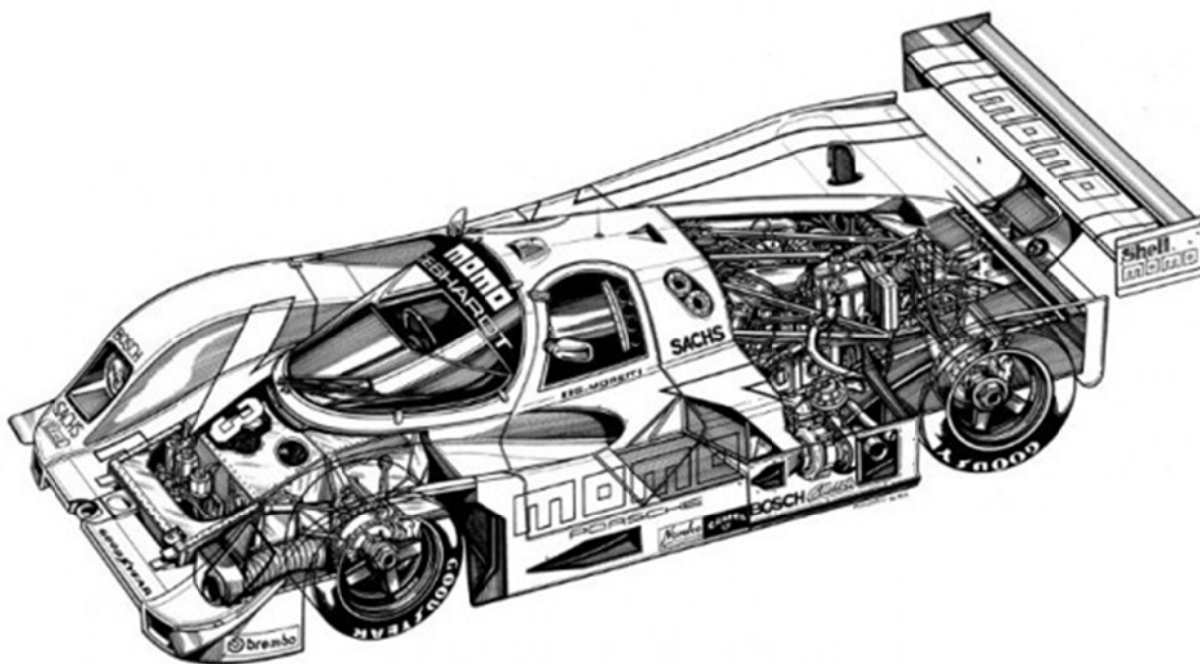


Alba MOMO 1984 - d'Alessio artwork.

The gentleman driver Gianpiero Moretti's team thus became a reference model for all the categories. There was even a moment in which Mike Kranefuss, the big boss of Ford racing, thought of transforming the Turinese workshop into a sort of official Ford team.

Moretti bitterly recalls, "Kranefuss was in love with the project but in the end nothing came of the idea...and certainly not because of the value of the car which in 1983 won the Group C Junior World Championship, but because of 'political' reasons you could say."

The Alba was an excellent car but to aim higher a more powerful engine was needed and it was for this reason that at the age of 50, the gentleman driver from Milan was forced to go back to his old love, Porsche, converting to the Group C 956/962.



Porsche 962-1989. - d'Alessio artwork.

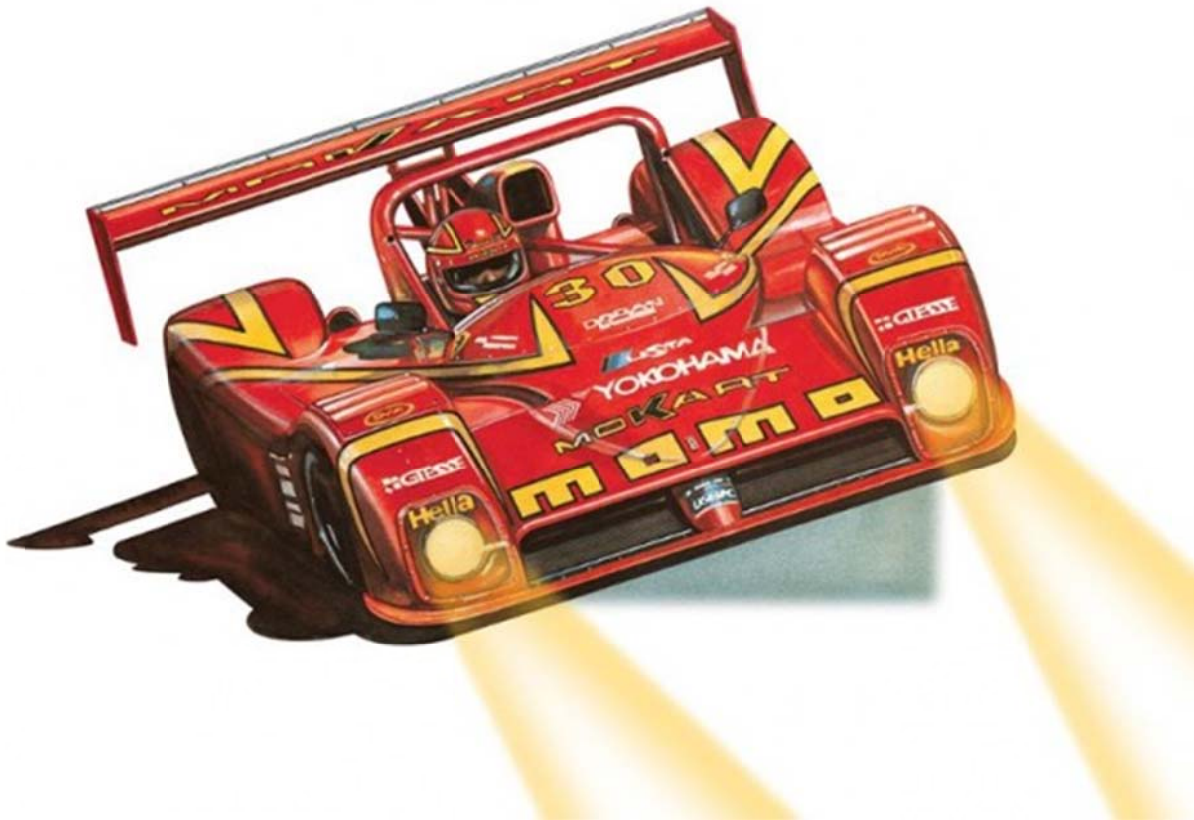
"No doubt a great car, it's just a pity about the big difference between the cars that were managed by the head office and the other two seaters of Stuttgart. The top teams always had the latest updates while we had to be satisfied with what was passed down to us," according to Moretti.

Moretti was unhappy with this situation and reluctantly returned to his post working with Ferrari at Maranello, who season after season used to repeat the same sentence, "Moretti, next year I'll have a car for you to race with in the US." A 'red' to race with in the US was a dream that never came true while Enzo Ferrari was alive but did become reality in 1993, thanks to Piero Ferrari.

Moretti's eyes still sparkle when he talks to us about it, "In 1993, after a lot of insistence, Piero finally realized that building a two-seater sports car designed for the length of the races in American would have been good business for Ferrari. Everyone, in the USA and in Europe, was waiting for this to happen and there was no lack of potential clients."

Twenty years after the 312 P became world champion in 1972, Maranello went back to building a prototype for competitions, with the same technology deriving directly from the Formula 1 of that period. Italian race-car chassis constructor Dallara took care of the design of the chassis while the task of developing the engine was assigned to Ferrari's engine tuner Michelotto.

At first the idea was to have a V shaped 12 cylinder with 65° angles and 5 valves per cylinder of the Ferrari F92 A, however the IMSA regulations imposed the use of an engine with a maximum of 4.000 cc. Therefore it was decided once again to go with the F50, which was being designed at the time, bringing it to 4.7 liters.



Ferrari 333 SP - d'Alessio artwork.

Moretti finally had a car to prepare for the IMSA series classics. However, it wasn't until 1998 that he finally managed to carry out his aspiration, saying, "With the 333 SP we won a lot but we could have done even better had Ferrari put more effort into it. You have to bear in mind that not everyone at Maranello at that time believed in the 333 SP. While we were having our ups and downs on the other side of the Ocean, back in Europe things were not going so well for Formula 1 and a lot of people were not taking it very well. Things changed when the directors of Cavallino realised that apart from the victories gained, the 333 SP project brought home a fortune if you consider that until the year 2000, forty models had been produced. So after the adjustments made by the head office came the long-awaited success.

"During those years we won quite a few races but for one reason or another we missed out on the IMSA classics. There comes a time in your life when you realise that whether you have achieved your goals or not, it is time to close that chapter of your life. After handing over MOMO and entering into a different business venture with the purchasing of a famous brand name in the nautic sector, I decided that at the end of 1998 I would stop racing. However, as it often happens in important stories, the results that you have chased after for many years, eventually materialize in just a matter of a few months and when you least expect it."

In 1998 Giampiero Moretti at the threshold of his 60th birthday, won the 24 Hours Daytona, the 12 hour Sebring and the 6 hour Watkins Glen races (in that order). They were the three most important races in the American series and by doing so he made history in this category. In that same year he also took part in the 24 Hours of Le Mans and in the Monza 1000km race before finally hanging up his helmet. He was asked if he had any regrets for making that decision.

"Absolutely not, I retired at the right time. I would be really selfish if I said I had any regrets after a life like that. If anything, because in my life I did the thing I love doing most during a unique moment in history. It's really hard for me to imagine a professional and competitive activity like the one I lived, set in today's day and age. Today it is all too calculated, too impersonal and too perfect. No, to be honest I have no regrets."

Well, we can't say he is wrong.



Winning MOMO Ferrari 333 SP team at Daytona in 1998. MOMO photo.



Moretti in winning Ferrari 333 SP. 1998 Daytona 24. MOMO Photo.

* According to a couple of books regarding Enzo Ferrari it was the English racing teams in the 1950's that started calling Ferrari the "Drake." Supposedly they considered him the Sir Francis Drake of the race track. Not so much the pirate, but the Queen's man that defeated the Invincible Armada with determination, fighting character and winning intuition.

About the author Paolo D'Alessio:

Born in 1957 in the province of Torino, D'Alessio began working as technical journalist and designer in the car related field in 1978. He collaborated with the most important specialist publications all over the world, contributing detailed articles, images and technical drawings of the most important Formula1 single-seaters of the last year's competitions. Since the middle Eighties he's dedicated himself entirely to the car 'phenomenon', in particular to car races. He works on corporate image, organizing exhibitions as well as lithographic prints, philatelic and numismatic collections. D'Alessio has also published several volumes. Paolo D'Alessio hasn't limited his interests to automotive competition. In 1993, after taking a bachelor degree in architecture, he founded an industrial design firm called Multilinea. Since then, he's been producing watches, bikes, means of transport, helmets, sport glasses, bags, writing sets, mowers, visual displays, air conditioning systems, for customers such as Momo design, Martini & Rossi, Mazda, Honda, Diavia, Momo, Philip Morris, Alfa Romeo, Fiat, Ibea, Universal, Bieffe, Aura, Torino Incontra.

[Source: Paolo D'Alessio]