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SEPT
201725th SPA SIX HOURS

BY MATHIAS KÖRBER · PHOTOGRAPHS: OKP (9), CHARLOTTE CASTELEIN (3)



My passion for the Alfa Romeo brand started back in the 1970s. I think it originated from two key experiences: firstly, while on family holiday in South Tyrol in Italy, the owner of a hotel we stayed at had a metallic blue 1750 Berlina – in which he'd occasionally take me shopping. I was maybe 10 years old, and fascinated by the instruments and the gear shift. I could see from the back seat how he'd work his way through the five-speed gearbox, which impressed me deeply.

The other formative experience came thanks to my older sister's then-boyfriend. They were living in Paris, and would come and visit in their dark blue two-litre Alfetta GTV. It was a brand-new car at the time, and as far as I was concerned it was the prettiest car in the world.

However, I had to put my passion aside. While I always liked the 2000 Bertone, at that point five or six years on the market, it was still an unattainable car for 20-year-old me. Even cars that were in really bad condition. Therefore my first Alfa was a 1300 Bertone, which I bought for 50 German Marks.

At the time I was an apprentice mechanic, having already dropped out of school as my sole interest was cars. I later completed my high school diploma after my apprenticeship. At the time we were six or seven friends in Munich who shared the Alfa passion, so we pooled our money and rented a workshop. There, we restored six different Bertones – which during the time of the Golf GTI and the BMW 323 we could buy incredibly cheaply. And we felt like kings.

I met the Alfa kids once a week, and along the way I even met my current business partner Christian Ondrak. He had bought a red Bertone two days before the first meeting, which we had to weld together. That's how it all started.

We both started buying Giulias. We tore the cars apart. The good parts went on our own cars, the rest were sold. Slowly, word got around Munich that we were the home of Alfa parts and cars. In 1984/85 we drove to Italy for the first time and picked apart the junkyards, finding parts to take back to sell in Munich. The most popular items were Giulia doors, which in Germany would often rust through.

In 1986 we founded the company Ondrak and Körber (now known as OKP) and rented our first shop in the Munich borough of Schwabing. For the first few years we worked in the shop during the day and then went to work on cars at night to make money. Christian was still working for his dad, who had set up a similar business for BMW motorbikes.



ABOVE Körber/Merzario/Restelli: the Team OKP lineup for the Spa Six Hours in 2017.

LEFT The Alfa Romeo Giulia Sprint GTA leads the Frankel/Frankel/Harris Ford Falcon through Raidillon.

Thirty-one years later and our passion for Alfas has turned into one of the world's leading hubs for classic Alfa parts. We have a lot of genuine parts, a lot of reproduction parts, and a lot of racing parts. We are driven by our ongoing passion, which has brought us plenty of joy and suffering over the years. About 15 years ago we bought our first original 1600 GTA from a good friend, with which we started to compete at motorsport events.

First steps on the race track

I still remember our early trips to the Salzburgring in Austria, where we watched Sandro Munari in a GTA and marvelled at what were unattainable cars. We always loved Alfa Romeo and motorsport, and now it's a world we've been involved in ourselves for the best part of 10 years. As much as anything it's a great



...EVERGREEN ITALIAN PLAYBOY WITH A COWBOY HAT



Pure passion: Arturo Merzario, how he lives and loves.

test bed for our parts, a real tour de force. For years we've competed in the Alfa Revival Cup, and now we even sponsor the series. It's fantastic, with up to 40 cars taking part in each race. We also race at a few of the big historic events like the Le Mans Classic and the Spa Six Hours.

For me, the Spa Six Hours offers the best driving experience. Driving a pre-1965 car at race speed for six hours is a major challenge for both man and machine. With nearly 100 cars in the field, there are obviously faster cars out there. We have no illusions of grandeur, but at the same time we don't want to come last. Spa is for me one of the hardest races on the calendar, because everyone is taking it seriously. The evening shift requires the greatest of respect and concentration, particularly as it is so often raining as well. The faster cars in the field might be coming past with a speed difference of up to 80 km/h. To make it to the finish is fantastic, and even better if you can get a good result.

A legend in the Alfa cockpit

I got to know Arturo Merzario through various Alfa Romeo events as well as through our partner, Scuderia del Portello. We have repeatedly bumped into each other at awards nights and racing events all over the place. He's one of the old guard and an extraordinary personality. As a former Alfa Romeo and Ferrari works driver, he is still extremely closely bound to the Alfa brand. During a chat at Mugello in the early part of 2017, we decided to race together at the Spa Six Hours. He's a man of his word, and by the beginning of September we were organising the whole thing.

On the Friday, before qualifying, we collected Arturo from Brussels Airport and drove to Francorchamps. With his unique appearance and charming nature – the evergreen Italian playboy with a cowboy hat – he's always putting on a show. A lot of the spectators must have spotted his name on the entry list, because we'd barely got to the track when we were swamped by fans wanting autographs. They were properly prepared, with old photos for him to sign. One had 50 large-format photographs. Only then did I realise how popular Arturo still is, even outside of Italy. These were genuine fans.



ABOVE 40 years of Alfa passion: Mathias Körber (left) and Christian Ondrak (right) during the early years.

RIGHT PAGE A snapshot of the weekend: a relaxed atmosphere in the OKP garage (top), Merzario at work signing countless autographs (middle left), and a near-faultless race.

We were together until Sunday evening, and it was a lot of fun. We'd have dinner every evening and chatted during the day at the track as well. Arturo obviously still gets a kick out of driving, but without the pressure. It's just passion, plain and simple. Roberto Restelli from Alfa Delta in Milan prepared the car and raced with us. The engine comes from Alfa legends Carlo and Giuliano Facetti, who have been looking after our motors for years.

Qualifying went smoothly enough. We all took a slow and steady approach, and started from a long way back. Our engine was designed to last, which meant we were probably missing 10 or 15 horsepower. Our main aim was to give Arturo a car that would make the finish. When I see some of the big teams arriving with their GT40 in the back of a Formula 1 transporter and then having to retire their highly-strung car after only three laps in the race, it makes me wonder...

Getting the car to the finish

Without doubt, Arturo enjoyed it when the grid girls visited our garage. He was in a good mood in the early stage of the race and comfortably got through the first 1.5 hours. We did a quick oil check and a splash-and-dash before Roberto took over for a smooth stint that ran until 7:30 p.m. He did, however, notice that the clutch was a little hard to use. We did a complete refuelling before I headed out on track, and already by pit exit up the straight I couldn't get the car into fifth gear. After three laps I could barely find any gear at all, and the shifter was coming loose from being thrust around. I pitted, our crew gave the shifter a quick overhaul, and I headed back out.

Somehow, I kept the car going into the night. With some delicate feeling, I could get it in and out of gear. I even worked out how to find fifth gear. When Roberto showed me the gears and the fifth gear synchro after the race, it felt like a miracle that we had made the finish. Still, driving the sunset stint was a unique experience, and making it even more special was that we were one of the few teams running an Italian car. Having Arturo on board made the race a genuine highlight from the last few years.

It was a great honour to race with this hero, four decades on from his active career. He was – and still is – one of the rock stars of motorsport. At the same time, he's a down-to-earth guy and easy to get along with. When someone like that sits in your car and tells stories about Carlo Chiti and company, it's unique. We plan on continuing to savour every moment we share with greats like Arturo Merzario and keeping the history alive. 🏁

