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WHEEL OF FATE

ALEX PERONI WAS ON THE BRINK OF UNTOLD SUCCESS WHEN HE CRASHED HIS FORMULA 3 CAR AT MONZA. NOW HE AND HIS FAMILY ARE DARING TO DREAM OF A SPECTACULAR COMEBACK

FOOD SMASHING NEW CAFE **TRAVEL** SPA AND RETREAT AND RELAX **ART** VIGNETTES AND ABSTRACTS



Don't dream it's over

His mum's heart could have stopped when she realised something had gone terribly wrong. Alex Peroni, at just 19, had dived with death in a Formula 3 crash at Monza. Just two months later, he is haunted by the prospect of perhaps never racing again — not as a result of his injuries, but because his devoted family is running out of money to support him

WORDS **TRACY RENKIN**

Just before her son's monumental crash in September, during the Formula 3 race at the Italian Grand Prix, Cathy Peroni was dancing around her Tranmere lounge room celebrating with Percy the family cat. Her son, Alex Peroni, was having his best race of what had been a challenging season for the young Tasmanian. "Zandy Pandy", as only she calls him, was "on a charge" and in sixth place. His mum was thrilled.

But then, all of a sudden, and with only four laps to go, her heart sank. She put the cat down. "Alex's name just went off screen and he didn't come around the track and I immediately knew something was wrong," Cathy says.

"I was staring at the telly and it seemed like 10 hours ... it felt like such a long time, but it was probably only seconds. And then they showed the crash ... I don't think I was breathing."

His dad, Piero, was in the pit lane when it happened. He had headphones on so he could hear Alex talking to the engineer. But then there was no response. "We saw his name drop down on the leaderboard," Piero says. "The engineer kept saying 'Alex, are you there?' and he wasn't responding."

And then someone said: 'That's Alex's car on that pile of tyres'. Piero looked over and saw that the car's safety cell was still intact.

"That was a good sign," his dad tells *TasWeekend* in the same family lounge room seven weeks since the accident. "It was only after I saw the replay of the crash that I understood the gravity of the situation."

When the car hit the "sausage" kerb on the exit of what's called the famous Parabolica corner at the Monza track, Alex says he was driving at about 220km per hour. The car flew several metres into the air and somersaulted twice before landing heavily upside down on top of a trackside tyre barrier.

The orange race car with "Tasmania" emblazoned on its side

then flipped right-side up and came to rest against the safety barrier. The massive impact of both hitting the kerb and the crash landing fractured Alex's T6 vertebra.

Piero says the "sausage" kerb was removed after the crash, and he's been told it will never be returned to that corner. "I just think it was an avoidable accident and a totally unnecessary one," Piero says. "The kerb shouldn't have been there."

The governing body of motor sports is investigating. As a result of his accident, the Mexican Grand Prix has just announced it will use electronic controls and sensors on high speed corners.

Alex says he believes his life was saved by the metal bar that was installed above his head, called a halo.

Such devices were only made mandatory in open-wheel race cars a year ago. Alex says he landed directly on his head and — even with the halo in place — his helmet still hit the barrier.

The \$10,000 helmet, with its unique artwork by Tasmanian Nathan Fellows, is sitting on a sideboard across from him during our interview. It's just been put into a perspex display case in the hope someone will part with at least \$10,000 for the privilege of owning it, so Alex can buy a new one. The dings and dents from the force of the impact are easy to see.

Alex says he has only one memory from the moment after impact. It is a single frame in his mind, a vision of some trees. Then nothing.

Just like his mother, who was pacing up and down at home, the motorsport community right around the world held its breath after watching the crash live on television.

It had already been a very difficult week. Just seven days earlier, 22-year-old Formula 2 driver Anthoine Hubert died after a collision at the Belgian Grand Prix.

Cathy lifts her hand up to her face as she finishes recounting the torture of waiting for her husband's phone call. She says even before the race went bad she was unusually agitated and didn't know why.

Even Percy the cat (who has since died) was out of sorts, she says, and instead of going outside like he normally did he stayed by her side as she waited for news. Alex's sister Ellen rushed home from ten-pin bowling to be with her mum.

It was only parental premonition, Cathy says, that prompted them to buy a ticket for Piero to travel to Italy so that he could be by his son's side and support him for that particular race.

She slowly shakes her head and looks over at Alex who is sitting on the lounge, smiling back at her and hugging a cushion. Piero is beside her in his own chair.

Alex is visibly moved by his mother's tears. "It was tough for all of us," Alex says. "You don't realise how it's going to affect everyone else."

Alex walks into the room for our interview a few minutes after his parents start telling me about his accident. Ellen is sitting in the next room with papers strewn all over the dining room table and headphones on, studying for her university accounting exams.

She's putting herself through her economics and marketing degree and working as well — because all the family money has been spent on Alex's racing career.

They've recently had to re-mortgage their house after one of Alex's sponsors dropped out. Formula 3 drivers don't get paid.

Alex has done a stack of media since his crash, and has had interview requests from media organisations all over the world — including the television program *Good Morning America*. In the first 48 hours after the accident, the vision of his crash had been viewed two million times.

He slides open the lounge room glass doors, gives us all a big, toothy grin and carefully slumps onto the sofa. Within seconds, the 19 year-old is being berated for wearing well-worn socks with multiple holes in the toes and soles.

His response is a cheeky laugh as he points out that they are, at least, clean.

Alex Peroni may have beaten the sons of millionaires — and at least one billionaire — to win prestigious Formula 3 races at some of the trickiest tracks in the world, including last May at the Monaco Grand Prix and three out of four times at what is considered the world's most technically difficult track in Pau, France — but this young Tasmanian is down-to-earth and instantly likeable in his much-loved ankle socks, an old fleecy jumper and corduroy pants.

In 2006, he won at the Mugello circuit in Tuscany twice, be-



Picture: RICHARD JUPE



Clockwise from main: Alex Peroni at pre-season testing in Hungary; At home in Tranmere; The spectacular crash at Monza during the Italian Grand Prix on September 7.

fore becoming the youngest Australian to win a single-seater championship in Europe. After winning at Monaco he was invited to attend the Prince of Monaco's black tie ball for all the winners. Alex had to rush out and buy a tux before adding another first to his list: the only former Fish Frenzy employee to party with the Prince.

Following our interview, he and his girlfriend Beatrice are borrowing Cathy's old Ford Fiesta and driving to his grandmother's Dodge's Ferry shack for a few days.

It's like Alex lives on a different planet to his fellow Formula 3 racing drivers, most of whom have a lifestyle akin to the rich and famous. His spinal fracture is the first serious injury Alex has endured since he started racing go karts when he was seven. At that time, his dad says, he was about as big as the helmet he had to put on his head.

His motorsport racing career started when he was 15. It was then he relocated to Europe for nine months each year, initially living with his grandparents in Italy.

Even as a four-year-old, Alex was spellbound by the world of racing, and recalls being entranced for hours watching his dad's VHS videos of rally and Formula 1.

"I fell in love with the speed and wanted to be like Michael Schumacher," he tells me. Piero took him to the Baskerville track at Old Beach when he was four, and sat him on the roof of the car so he had a good view of the racing cars flying by. "He was

tiny and I stood next to him and he didn't move for six hours," Piero says. "The guy who was parked next to us told me he'd never seen a kid sit still for so long."

Alex says he remembers the sound of the cars and the smell of burning fuel and the atmosphere. He was hooked. The track became his "happy place".

"The sound is incredible," Alex says. "It vibrates right through your whole body like music."

People who don't follow motor sports may not understand that the professionals who drive these fast cars are in fact elite athletes who follow gruelling training sessions every day to mentally and physically prepare their minds and body for the sport. At the time of our interview, it is 50 days since Alex has been wearing the back brace. He is hopeful it may be removed around his birthday at the end of this month.

He may be able to start training again by mid-December because the testing in Europe starts in February for the first races of the season, which kick off in March.

A few days ago Alex should have been racing at the Macau Grand Prix, which is the ultimate for Formula 3 drivers. To miss out on that race, he says, is gut-wrenching.

But it's not just his physical injuries that need to heal, says the soon-to-be 20-year-old.

The crash also has taken a toll mentally. He's never before missed out on races before because of injury. ▶



Picture: RICHARD JUPE



Picture: Diederik van der Laan/DUTCH PHOTO AGENCY

The thousands of messages he's received, from all over the world, have helped to lift his spirits. Piero says the well wishes that flooded in while he was sitting with Alex in the Italian hospital — not knowing how bad his son's injuries actually were — kept them both going.

"When you are going through something like that on the other side of the world, you do feel so isolated," Piero says. "Those messages sustained us. I was amazed that so many people cared."

Since the accident, six-time Formula 1 world champion Lewis Hamilton has passed on his well wishes and, when Alex was still in Europe, he even offered him his personal physiotherapist.

But Alex is probably even more stoked, he says, about the multiple messages he's getting from Australian Formula 1 ace Daniel Ricciardo.

"I hope you are okay buddy," one text message from Daniel says. "All us boys here are thinking of you and sending big love."

Those few words meant the world to Alex. "It's kind of surreal to have your idol messaging you," he says. "It's blown me away — he's just trying to cheer me up and that's so cool."

Another highlight was a visit from a 10-year-old Hobart fan, Tom Dawkins, who drew him a "Go Alex!" sign and made a get well card. "That was a real boost for me," says Alex. "It was the first time I'd experienced something like that."

Although, on the way home to Tasmania after the accident, Alex was recognised at all the airports he travelled through, from Heathrow to Sydney, where fans asked him for his autograph.

Ever the optimist, Alex is confident he will bounce back even stronger than before. "I feel more fired up than ever," he says. "I'm used to doing it tough in motor sports. Being in Tasmania I've always been behind the eight-ball."

Alex has seen the replay of the accident at least 50 times and likens the experience to watching a video game. He was shocked when he initially saw it, and says he couldn't place himself there.

Piero says in the early hours of being in hospital Alex didn't understand how serious the crash had been.

"His lips were shaking and his eyes were so bloodshot he had no white in his eyes," Piero recalls.

"His head was locked into a brace and he had pads on either side of his head and he said to me: 'Do you think the team will have the car ready for tomorrow Dad?'"

Piero says he's given his son multiple opportunities, both in the past and recently, to chose whether he still wants to continue in one of the most difficult and dangerous sports in the world. And the answer is always unwaveringly the same: "Yes."

Alex doesn't want to talk about the accident any more. He says it's time for him to "turn the page now and move on".

He says he believes one of his strengths is resilience, something he has been building since he started go-karting. But he's also aware that for him to be successful in his chosen career it will take more than just an ability to bounce back from adversity.

"I have thought about the fact that it could be over because of this," Alex says. "And that's really hard."

The car he was driving in that race is now a write-off. And that means the Peroni family are now in the predicament of having to somehow raise \$160,000 to pay back the Campos team that owned the car.

Then there is the \$1.5 million they need to enable Alex to race again next season. It's a never-ending struggle for this everyday suburban Tasmanian family to stay in the game.

Alex is in touching distance of the Formula 2 competition, which is of course the stepping stone to Formula 1 — where drivers get the big bucks — but it's starting to feel like it's slipping through his fingers.

The Peroni family have been living on the edge for the past four years and are doing all they can to keep their head above water to keep Alex in the sport he's always excelled at.

While other racing families hire luxurious yachts during races, Piero recalls the countless times he's rigged up a clothes line in the hire car so the clothes he's handwashed can dry in the carpark of the two-star hotel.

Piero Peroni is a realist. "The reality is that Alex's career is at a crossroads right now," he says. "He's at an age where he has to prove what he's capable of, but he also needs the right championship winning team and he also has a very limited timeframe."



Clockwise from main: Alex with his Parents Piero and Cathy Peroni and sister Ellen Peroni; Listening intently during F3 pre-season testing in Hungary; Completing a pre-season test of the FIA Formula 3 championship at Circuit de Barcelona, in Catalunya; Trackside at the Mugello Circuit in Tuscany, during a family holiday to Italy in 2006.

GET ALEX BACK ON TRACK

The Peroni family will hold a Get Alex Back on Track fundraiser dinner at the Wrest Point Convention Centre next Friday, that can cater for 600 people. Tickets are \$120 for the three-course meal. Tables are for eight. Former United Kingdom Ferrari manager and journalist Peter Windsor will host the evening. He has collected signed memorabilia from some of the top Formula 1 champions that will be auctioned off alongside Alex's helmet and various parts of the car he was driving on September 7, including some wings and a nose cone. There are also \$10,000 worth of Australian Grand Prix VIP tickets to be auctioned, and a two-night stay at Saffire. Payment for the dinner is requested in advance via EFT BSB 037 014 AN 299663. Piero is on 0407 334 020. alex-peroni.com

"So if we can't find the right funding for him for next year I think Alex's European career could well be over it's hard to see how it will continue.

"The problem is that we are dealing with incredibly rich people," his dad says. "So if we had money right now we would be sitting at the table and about to sign a contract with a team. It's like musical chairs: the longer you wait before signing a contract, the less options you have.

"So we are sitting here in Tasmania and we don't have the full funds. And that means we can't negotiate with the European-based teams.

"All the best seats in the best teams are being negotiated and signed right now. But because we don't have the funds we have to wait. And then we negotiate with whoever still has a seat available. And this is the problem Alex faces year in and year out. He's really on struggle street every single year."

What the family would love is to be in a financial position to put Alex in a championship-winning top team.

But there's still not enough money, even with some private investors and sponsors like Blundstone, RACT, Richardson Devine Marine and the Tasmanian Government.

And without the funds, Alex Peroni's career could be over — no matter his talent. If that happens, not only will Alex's dream be over, but millions of people around the world will stop seeing the word "Tasmania" on the side of a racing car.

"Alex is taking Tassie to the world," Piero says. "It's pretty exciting, and a lot of Tasmanians feel a real sense of pride when they see Tasmania in a flash on the side of his car."

It's difficult for Piero to stand beside the wealthy fathers of his son's competitors, with their seemingly unlimited budgets, and hear about their plans for the next season of racing when he is worrying about how on earth he will possibly manage to finance even the remainder of the current season.

"Most Europeans would laugh at what we do to keep Alex in this sport," he says. "You know they just make cheques out for millions of euros and we are running raffles and organising dinners. It's just not sustainable. People need to know that our family is constantly on the precipice. We are constantly about to slip over."

When Piero went back to the track late on the Saturday evening after the crash to collect Alex's things, someone had put Anthoine Hubert's cap in the spot where Alex's helmet would normally be stored.

Today, that cap is slung off the handle of the big silver cup Alex brought home from Monaco, and which now takes pride of place in the family's lounge room. Next to that is Alex's beaten-up helmet.

"It was a really touching moment to be honest," Piero says as he chokes on his emotions. "Because everyone was still reeling from Anthoine's death and someone, I don't know who, had taken the time to put that cap there for us. It makes me quite emotional to think about it."

Alex says Anthoine's death hit him hard: "I've been racing since I was seven and that's the first time there was even a serious injury in an event that I was in.

"I was so upset with myself after the crash, but I guess that doesn't really matter when someone's just lost his life." ●