

Fabio Buzzì. We meet this son of Lake Como with an unquenchable passion for making fast boats go even faster

Fabio Buzzì

TEXT ALAN HARPER PHOTOGRAPHS SUZANNE GRALA

Fabio Buzzì came to the Cowes Classic powerboat race again last summer. With him came 55ft (16.7m) of military-style RIB packing four Seatek diesels, four two-speed gearboxes and four Trimax surface drives. As soon as *Gincanotto* arrived in the marina the competition was as good as over: the race for second would take place among the other Buzzì-designed Endurance RIBs or – given some helpful navigational or mechanical disasters from other teams – perhaps even the Buzzì-designed Sunseeker XS2000.

L'ingegnere was in an expansive mood. His driver was to be none other than Tim Powell, who raced in 19 Cowes-Torquays and then, as organiser, kept the race going through the next two decades.

It could not go unremarked that neither of these distinguished sportsmen was in his first flush of youth: was this perhaps the oldest team ever to take part in the grandfather of European offshore racing? “Ha!” agreed the Italian. “You know Reggie Fountain? He said we should race together. I said, ‘Reggie, I have a rule: never go above 100.’ Reggie was amazed: ‘But you set an Open speed record of 150!’ I tell him ‘not speed, the combined age of the crew: you are 62, I am 57!’”

“So I am racing with my daughter,” he volunteered while squinting at the chart plotter. “Misa is 20, and brings the average down. And Paola, who has raced many times: her father was a good friend of mine.” He lifts his spectacles and peers more closely at the screen. “Misa has never raced before. This makes me very nervous. I must get all of my waypoints correct.”

For anyone who followed powerboat racing in the Eighties, Fabio Buzzì is a legend. At that time offshore was deep into its second golden age: 25 to 30 Class 1 machines would make the start of each race, catamaran and monohull, petrol and diesel. In 1988 Buzzì won just about everything in the winged monohull *Cesa 1882*, then took it to the US and won everything there too. The following year in Stefano Casiraghi’s hands the same boat was world Class 1 champion again, while Buzzì himself piloted his new catamaran to the European Class 1 title. Buzzì designs also won the Class 2 championships for

Europe, Italy and South America that year, while yet another Buzzì catamaran took the Italian Class 1 title.

The late Eighties were the culmination of over a decade of design and development in offshore racing, and among the millionaires, gangsters and royalty that filled the racing cockpits of the era Buzzì was undisputed king of the hill.

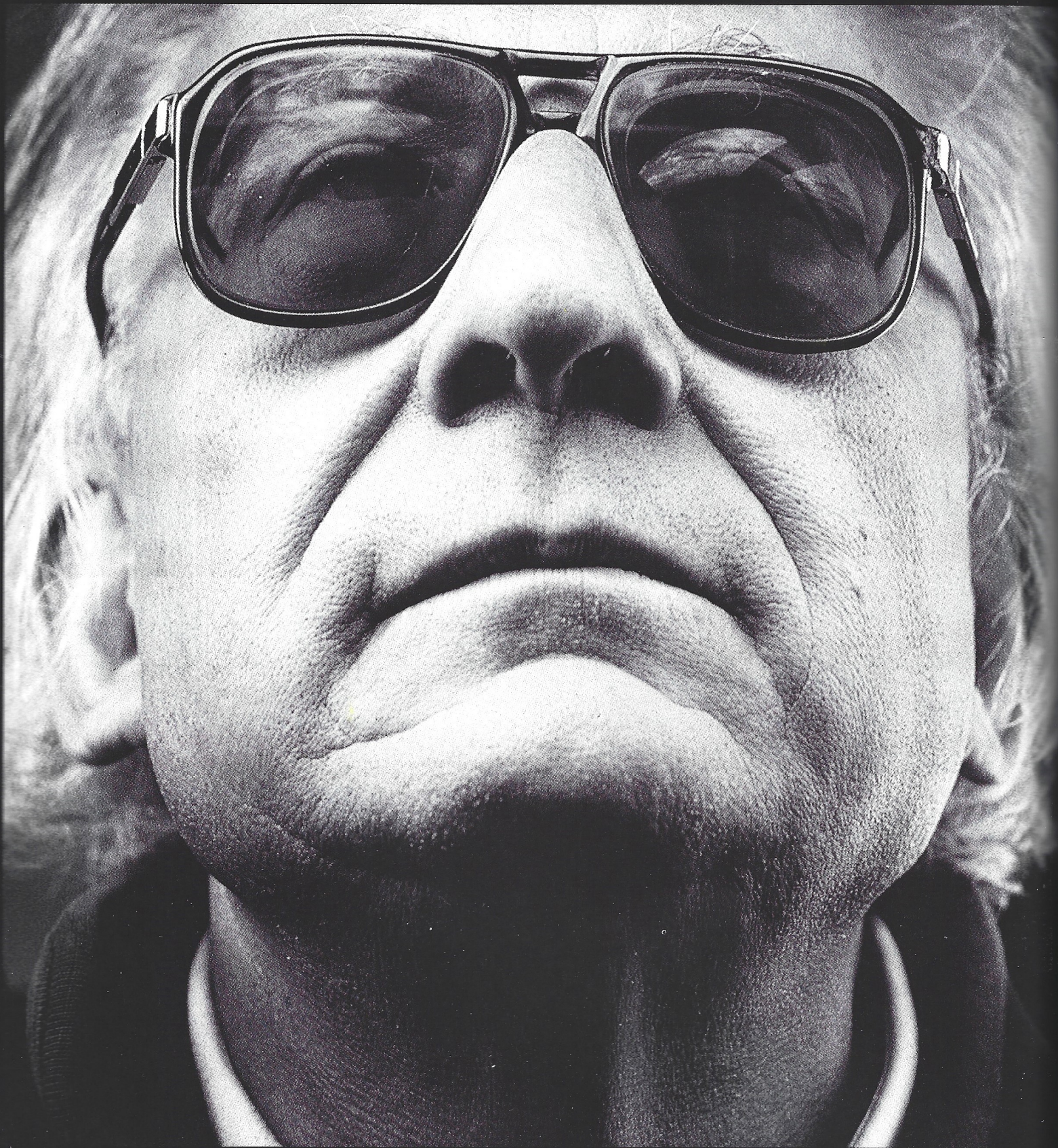
Powerboat racing has occupied a disproportionate amount of his creative energies for more than 40 years, but Buzzì is no Corinthian: it is not the taking part but the winning that counts, because in the pure logic of the engineer to win means that you have designed and built the boat best suited to the job.

“I am a mechanical engineer, I insist on this. I am not a boat designer. The perfect boat for a kilo record,” he pronounces by way of example – beneath an office wall completely covered with framed UIM speed record certificates – “does one kilometre, then turns around and goes back, and by the end is completely destroyed.” On the same wall is a photograph of *Red Iveco* heading for the bottom at Cowes in 1983 while the crew jumps off the bow. “It’s there to remind me that sinking is essential,” he says. “People who are not sinking are not good designers; they’re not at the limit. I don’t care if they win: their boat is too heavy.”

The son of the only gynaecologist in a long line of engineer ancestors, Fabio Buzzì grew up on the shores of Lake Como where he still lives and works, building model boats and aeroplanes, breaking them, repairing them and pondering the mysteries of structures, shapes and power-to-weight ratios. Racing hydroplanes on the lake fascinated him, and at 16 he persuaded his father to buy him a little red racing hull from Angelo Molinari’s boatyard. “I was excited by the technical part, not with the sport,” he contends. “I have never been too much in love with the sport. I am not even a good driver...”

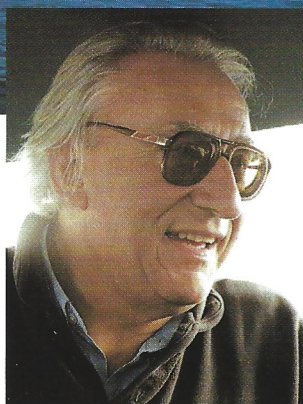
He sank, of course, in his first race, the marathon Pavia-Venezia on the river Po, but far from being discouraged merely resolved to do better next time, which he did. He moved on to bigger, more powerful boats and started winning races, but it wasn’t until studying engineering at Turin polytechnic that he marked himself out as someone a little unusual. Finding himself in possession of a beautiful Aurelia 2500 Nardi inboard engine, and deciding it was shame only to use it once a

Designer, engineer, racer, inventor, businessman: there's something of each of these in the uncategorisable





The awesome Cesa 1882 Class 1 monohull, unconquered in 1988 and 1989, and the basis of many successful later designs.



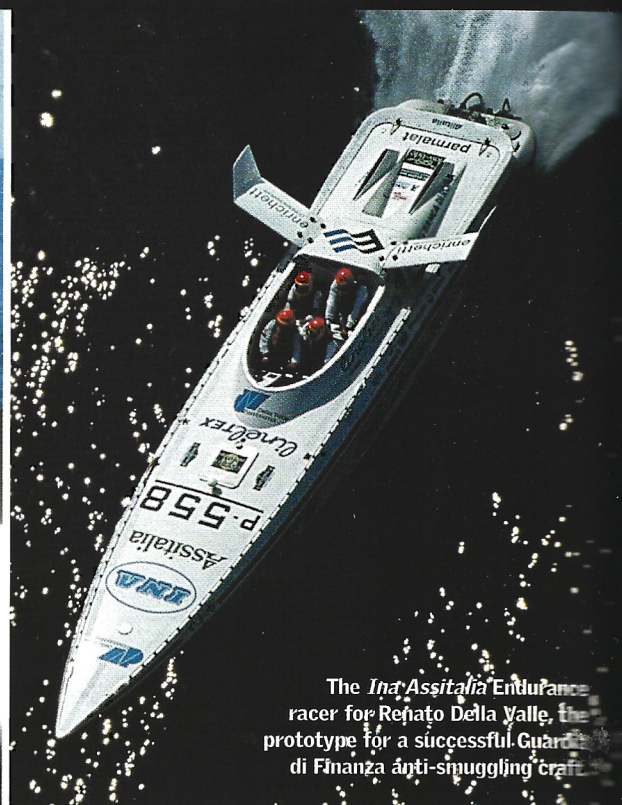
year in the Pavia-Venezia, he resolved to build himself a car to put it in. Which he did: from scratch, in the American 'hot rod' style, complete with enamelled FB badge on the grille and a flying cow mascot on the radiator cap. The editor of the leading Italian car magazine was so taken with it he gave it eight pages of the September 1966 issue, complete with cutaway drawing, and when the precocious young engineer scratch-built another car – an off-roader with a Fiat 500 engine – for his degree project, the auto industry began to take note.

"I received invitations from Fiat, from Lancia, from Alfa Romeo," he recalls. "But can you imagine me in an office with 600 engineers, on a drawing board, designing just one little part of a car?"

After a brief period with glassfibre specialists C&B in Turin, Buzzi set up in business in 1971 with one assistant. His first independent boat design was a small jet-driven river workboat, which is appropriate for a boatbuilder who has long contended that raceboats are mere test-beds for more serious, or at least more profitable, concepts. Cesa 1882 herself, the awesome 105mph monohull, is a fine example of what he means: versions of the design went into production as pleasure boats for Ilver, Offshorer, Ferretti and Novamarine, and its logical development, the Ina Assitalia Endurance raceboat, was the basis for Buzzi's first fast interceptor for the Guardia di Finanza and our own Royal Navy's special forces.

"Cesa was a very profitable design," he says. "Every time you build a monohull, you make money. Every time you build a catamaran, you lose money." The limited speed range on most fast cat designs, he explains, makes them impractical for anything other than balls-out racing on flat water.

It's so simple and looks so right that it seems a wonder no one thought of it before now. "Yes, the idea came to me suddenly," he laughs, "after just 20 years of thinking!"



The Ina Assitalia Endurance racer for Renato Della Valle, the prototype for a successful Guardia di Finanza anti-smuggling craft.

But the two Cesas, mono and cat, were too successful: under pressure from the petrol lobby after the 1989 season, the UIM rewrote the engine rules to which the Seatek engines, under Buzzi's direction, had been designed. Seatek continue as a manufacturer of extraordinarily efficient marine turbo-diesels, but the brand's hold on offshore racing was destroyed and Buzzi is no longer involved. Disgusted, Buzzi turned away from Class 1 but soon found absorbing challenges in the new Endurance racing, and in the military potential for the now-proven capabilities of his hulls, Trimax drives, two-speed gearboxes and Seatek engines. Radical new opportunities presented themselves too, such as the 62ft (19m) gas-turbine Endurance racer built for a Japanese owner, who destroyed it with bulldozers when it only came fourth. Writing about the incident, Buzzi found himself musing on the Japanese tradition of ritual suicide. But then, "one is reminded of that rather oddly vindictive husband who, in order to spite his unfaithful wife, cut his own balls off".

The latest enthusiasm is the Ring Drive, a surface drive that folds the conventional power train in half to take up as little room in the boat as an ordinary outdrive – without

the drag of a leg or expensive maintenance. The engine is mounted backwards, drives through a two-speed V-drive gearbox of Buzzi's own design, and the after engine mount is combined with the P-bracket. It's so simple and looks so right that it seems a wonder no one thought of it before now. "Yes, the idea came to me suddenly," he laughs, "after just 20 years of thinking!"

Sealine are looking at it, and have fitted it in an S37 with two 230hp Yanmars, which Buzzi demonstrates for me on lake Como one bright, icy



This photo and left: demonstrating the Ring Drive FB33 RIB for the Italian Guardia di Finanza.



Il Mostro, the venerable Kevlar three-pointer that Buzzi still races today.



Buzzi in the VM-powered three-pointer built for the diesel world speed record in 1978.

morning in December. The portly sports cruiser manages 31 knots and accelerates briskly, planing down to 17 knots with single-speed gearboxes – figures that will improve, Buzzi feels, when he fits bigger propellers.

Alongside the jetty is the very latest Buzzi design, his FB33 RIB for the Guardia di Finanza. This has 300hp Yanmars and two-speed boxes, and with the air temperature just crawling above –3°C and the wind-chill off the scale, we scream across the mirror-calm lake at 62 knots. This, too, has the wrong props after the previous set met a rocky beach, but it's only possible to tell in the tightest turns when the cavitating blades thresh empty air and the engines complain. I try to crouch below the freezing gale as we shoot the low arches of a bridge at full speed, and glance across at Buzzi in his Russian hat. He is not looking ahead at all, but down at his engine instruments: revs, oil pressure, boost... this boat is a piece of equipment under test, and the lake is his laboratory.

At the age of 59 Fabio Buzzi shows no sign of slowing down – quite the opposite, in fact. Work starts this spring at FB Design on a new building for dedicated R&D. This is his future. Boatbuilding puts him in competition with his customers, but with pure R&D he can work for everyone. You do feel, as well, that this is what *l'ingegnere* has been working up to all his life.

Then this year he entered the great annual Pavia-Venezia river race for something like the 37th time, taking the chequered flag in a highly creditable third place at an average speed over the winding 268-mile course of over 80mph. In previous races he has achieved much higher speeds in faster boats but his mount this time was none other than *Il Mostro*, the Monster, a Kevlar three-pointer he built in 1974, with a 27-year-old BMW 2.5 engine.

"It is incredible," Buzzi observes, "for an antique boat, with an antique engine and an antique driver, to do so well. What does this say about progress?"

● For more on Buzzi's recent round-Britain exploits, see p92.

CV – Fabio Buzzi

- 1943** Born, Lecco, January 28
- 1960** First race, Pavia-Venezia. Sank.
- 1963** Italian champion, CU class hydroplane
- 1971** Graduates in engineering from Politecnico di Torino
- 1974** *Il Mostro* hydroplane: Europe's first Kevlar hull
- 1978** Diesel world speed record (102.89mph); VM engine
- 1979** Diesel world speed record (119.04mph); VM engine
- 1980** First catamarans. Italian Class 2 offshore champion. Winning design in Italian Class 3 (4lt) championship
- 1981** Buzzi 6lt, 4lt, 2lt designs win first of numerous World, European and Italian titles
- 1982** First Trimax surface drives: *Aifo* catamaran (2 × Iveco Aifo). Diesel world speed record (132.85mph); Isotta Fraschini engine; driver Carlo Bonomi
- 1983** Red Iveco catamaran, 4 × Iveco Aifo: Italian Class 1 champion, sinks at Cowes.
- 1984** White Iveco monohull (4 × Iveco Aifo); winner, Round-Britain Race. 1985 First two-speed gearboxes: Nitro monohull (4 × Iveco Aifo). Diesel world speed record (135.62mph); Iveco Aifo engine; driver Carlo Bonomi.
- 1986** First Class 1 world title for a diesel boat (*Mededil*, ex-Yellow Iveco, Antonio Gioffredi).
- 1987** First Seatek engines installed in *Baltek* catamaran and *Luchaire* monohull (ex-Rolly Go). One Class 1 victory.
- 1988** *Cesa 1882* monohull (ex-Luchaire) wins World, European, US, Italian Class 1 titles and Miami-Nassau race.
- 1989** *Cesa 1882* catamaran (4 × Seatek) wins European Class 1 title but sinks in Cowes-Torquay and again at Atlantic City.
- 1990** UIM rewrites diesel engine capacity rules.
- 1991** *Ina Assitalia* monohull (3 × Seatek, Renato Della Valle): first of numerous successful Endurance raceboats. GT63 gas-turbine/Seatek monohull.
- 1992** Tecno 40 RIB. First contracts for Guardia di Finanza.
- 1993** MIL50 monohull for Royal Navy. *Valentino* trimaran (2 × Seatek): World Class 1 speed record (145.16mph)
- 1994** Tecno 40 RIB wins Miami-New York race
- 1995** *La Gran Argentina* monohull (4 × Seatek); 135 knots, four APBA Superboat championships
- 1999** Sunracer 38 – prototype Sunseeker XS2000
- 2001** *Record!* (79ft/24m, 4 × MTU): Venice-Monte Carlo, Monte Carlo-London and round-Britain records. First Ring Drive: 33ft Guardia di Finanza RIB



Above: Red Iveco, the four-engined Italian Class 1 champ of 1983, which sank ingloriously at Cowes.

Below: a 'Buzzi-cat' as the British christened them – Grey Iveco, the twin-diesel Class 2 European championship winner of 1983.

