

The horse whisperer

Meet Ferrari's official King of Speed –
the impossibly cool Dario Benuzzi

Words: Paul Horrell Photography: Ferrari

YES, YES, DARIO BENUZZI needs no introduction. But sometimes it seems he's an introduction and nothing else. The same few things about him are part of automotive lore, but beyond that no one knows anything extra. Even his Wikipedia entry is just eight lines.

For the sake of completeness, let's get the introduction out of the way, with my apologies for repeating what you probably already know. He's been Ferrari's number-one test and development driver for a generation, and he can drive a Formula One car at pretty much race pace, he has the best job in the world, the removal of his sunglasses demands a lengthy surgical procedure, and therefore he is self-evidently the king of cool. But beyond that, the conventional research channels simply hit a wall. There's nothing more.

Wait a minute... The comparisons are unavoidable. The mystique, the hidden eyes, the insanely talented driving. Some say that when he removes his sunglasses, every lizard in Italy blinks. All we know is, he's called Dario Benuzzi.

Enough of this. If you don't ask, you'll never find out. So we sat down with Benuzzi and an interpreter. It was evening. We were in a fairly dark room. He wasn't wearing sunglasses. He's human, folks. This, after all, is the man who imparts soul to Ferraris. You wouldn't want him to be a colourless automaton, would you?

Earlier that day, I'd been with a bunch of Ferrari people preparing to do some high-mountain snow testing of the FF. The car was already up there (it was helicoptered), but we were waiting for the first ski-lift of the morning. A bit of standing around shivering, hand-rubbing, smoking, gentle joshing, but when the lift started late, it was Benuzzi who got most impatient. He's knocking on the door of retirement age, but he clearly doesn't like to think about it. "I'm one of Ferrari's longest-serving employees, but I really don't feel my age. That's important. I like modern music and technology. I guess this place keeps you young. There must be something in the Maranello air." His passion for the job is as bright as it ever was.

To be driven by Benuzzi, especially around Ferrari's Fiorano track, is to see a decisive, precise and staggeringly fast-acting driver. But – unless a photographer has pleaded with him – he doesn't really showboat, and out of the car his body and hands make gentle movements. He's wiry and supple and seems to walk, like many of the very fastest drivers, as if a thin

layer of air separates the soles of his loafers from the ground beneath. He is a gentle man, but he lives a fast life.

Benuzzi was born in January 1946 (of human parents) in Vignola, a mere 10 miles from Maranello. He didn't apprentice himself at Ferrari, but trained up as a mechanic in Vignola. He joined Enzo's firm in 1971, the era when they were making front-engined Daytonas and mid-engined Dinos. "I took the Ferrari test driver course, so I drove then worked on the cars. Chassis, engines, everything.

"I'm a good driver, because my ethos is that you have to understand what you are driving." So he's not just the plug-in unthinking hotshoe. And conversely, to contribute meaningfully to a car's development demands understanding. "I can spot if there's a problem – and what it is – within 500 metres. The hard part of the job is giving a subjective report, giving the engineers feedback."

He's been there for so long that he's obviously the custodian of Ferrari's secret sauce. Is he

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aiming to produce another Ferrari each time, one of an evolving line without much reference to what the rest of the supercar world is up to, or is he more open-minded to what's happening outside? "We borrow cars from our rivals, and lend them ours. Everyone does that. But if there's something I don't like on a rival car, there's no doubt a reason they did it. I wouldn't copy them but try to understand them. We'd never make a Porsche or a Lamborghini."

Sometimes, for a hyper-cool enigma, he can tread close to corporate PR language: "But it's important never to build a car around yourself. You have to think of the clients." Or maybe he simply sincerely believes it.

Benuzzi has final sign-off on every new model. But he's not just there at the end.

"I join a programme right from the first static model. So I'm there for the interior mock-up, having a say on the driving position, ergonomics and entry/egress." Fair enough that this is part of a tester's remit, really. If you can't see out of a car or get comfy in it, driving it will always be more of a drudge than it ought to be.

Partly because of his job title, but partly because of the evident regard in which he's held inside the company, and the length of time he's been embedded there, Benuzzi can pull strings all around the company to make sure he gets the car done his way. "My direct bosses are the Technical Director, Roberto Fedeli, and the CEO, Amedeo Felisa. But really I've got a sort of 360-degree thing inside the company – people on chassis, engine, gearbox, software, aerodynamics, interior design. You need to be able to see people, and here we're all in one place."

So how's it different now than it was when he worked for Enzo himself in what was a far smaller company? "Not much different, because I still answer to the top. Actually in the last 20 years, what's changed most is having Felisa here." A career engineer, Felisa was the technical chief of the road cars before taking over the whole firm. "He's changed it fundamentally. He's the guiding light really. He knows all the detail and squeezes blood from us all. And di Montezemolo – he changed the company as well as the cars."

OK, what important cars did he do? They include the BB, 288 GTO, F40, F40 IMSA, F50, 550, Enzo, 333 SP, 599, 458, FXX and 599XX and FF. "But," he quickly points out, "not the 348." Ah yes, the modern Ferrari whose handling was most roundly criticised. The car Luca di Montezemolo always says was his personal wake-up call that all was not well at Ferrari. "I was working on the F40 at the time, and then broke my hand so couldn't sign off the 348. I went straight on to the 355." Which, though evolved from the 348, was a sight better.

Benuzzi also says he's pleased with having worked on the original paddle transmission for the GP cars. Of course, he did a whole lot more, having test-driven the racing cars for many years. He still drives the Corsa Cliente cars: F1 racers as little as three years old. And he doesn't pussyfoot. But he never raced? "Nooooo. Developing road cars is far more fascinating and complex. F1 is a simple thing."

So just to confirm, Man Who Officially Has the Best Job in the World, do you love your work? The answer's as decisive and quick as one of his hot laps: "Si." 🏁

