

Carlo Pintacuda



A photo of Carlo Pintacuda during his years with Scuderia Ferrari. He would become a master of the Mille Miglia and one of Alfa Romeo's finest sports car drivers of the 1930s.

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Photos courtesy of the Carlo Pintacuda Collection

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Becoming a race driver

Carlo Pintacuda held a steering wheel for the first time at the age of 13. The car was a 30 hp Darracq, owned by his father. In 1914 his family bought a Nazzaro which had just won the Giro di Sicilia driven by its builder, Felice Nazzaro. Later, Carlo had the opportunity to drive a more powerful car with a better handling, an Aquila Italiana, a six-cylinder car built in Turin by Ing. Marsaglia. The young Pintacuda also drove a Lancia Kappa, and then an Isotta Fraschini.

During WWI Carlo became a volunteer in the Italian army, and when the war was over, he immediately returned to his passion of racing. His first race was in 1925 at the wheel of a Lancia Lambda Sport, in a race held at Livorno. Although he was first from the start, his youth betrayed him. He reached a turn too fast and crashed heavily. Fortunately, he was not badly hurt, and the Lancia returned home, pulled by two horses.

In 1926 he bought a 6-cylinder, 3-liter Alfa Romeo RLSS in which he won his first victory in a sports race at Perugia. This was the first link of a great chain of victories that lasted until 1928. During this period he won every race he started, including the Coppa Perugina, Circuito Firenze, Coppa C. Pistoresse and the Vermicino Rocca di Papa in 1926. During 1927 he placed first at the Coppa Rossore, in Terni and the Coppa Vermicino. In those years, he was able to afford racing thanks to an inheritance from his grandfather. But due to the high costs of racing, and because the prizes in those races were only trophies, Pintacuda soon ran out of money.

However, Carlo was not without influential friends. Two men, both from Firenze, taught Carlo the secrets of motor racing. These two men were Conde Gastone Brilli-Peri and Emilio Materasi. They also taught Pintacuda that a driver should be a sportsman, who knew how to lose but never give up. Sadly, both were killed racing--Materasi in 1929 at Monza and Brilli-Peri the next year at Tripoli. Carlo, the professional

In 1929, at the wheel of a blown Zagato-bodied Alfa Romeo 1750, he entered the Mille Miglia. He was third the first 500 kilometres, but finished tenth due to transmission problems. Several years elapsed, but by 1933 Pintacuda was again racing in the Mille Miglia. With the help of Alfredo Bornique, the official Lancia dealer in Rome, Carlo obtained a Lancia Astura with an aluminum body. Although he did not reach the chequered flag the car was very competitive and Carlo was enthusiastic and confident. The next year, he entered a standard Lancia Astura two-door sedan, and placed a surprising tenth overall with this comfortable street car. He was now ready for the longest race of them all, the Giro d'Italia.



Pintacuda drove a Lancia Astura similar to this in the 1934 Mille Miglia. The Astura was powered by a 3 liter V-8.

In 1934 the Italian Automobile Club organized a race for sports cars called the Giro d'Italia, held in three stages of 2000 kilometers each. Il Giro d'Italia started in Rome with 400 cars racing toward Calabria. At the end of the first stage Pintacuda was leading the race with his aluminum bodied Lancia Astura.

The 300 surviving cars then went by ship to Messina. Once on the island Carlo ran the 1000 km stage but had fuel pump problems, which made him fall to the fourth place, behind three Alfas, and 44 minutes behind the leader.

The cars then returned to the continent to start the stage from Calabria to Milano. Only 250 cars were left to start this leg. Pintacuda won the stage and climbed to the third place. The last stage was Milano to Rome. The day started with a heavy rain, but Carlo was comfortable in the wet. The race finished at Rome with Pintacuda winning with an advantage of four minutes. With this victory, Pintacuda had become a professional driver, and at the end of 1934 the Scuderia Ferrari called him to test a P3 Alfa Romeo at Monza.

The Scuderia days

After the formalities, Carlo jumped into the car and made 70 laps. When the test ended he said, "If you could adapt this car for the Mille Miglia, it would be a winner". He was very impressed with the power of the Tipo B. Ferrari had already entered a brace of 2.3 Alfas and 2.6 Monzas, but decided to help Pintacuda with the P3. The agreement included the assistance of the Scuderia during the race. According to Giovanni Lurani, the "single seat Alfa P3 was powered by a 2654cc engine with twin superchargers, developing 220 bhp at 5500 rpm. Transforming this 'monoposto' into a sportscar involved fitting two small seats, moving the steering wheel and fitting a self starter, dynamo, lights, spare wheel, battery and mudguards." Only the wiry Pintacuda could fit behind the wheel, and his co-driver was a brave fellow Tuscan, the Marquis Della Stufa, who also barely fit into the confined cockpit.

One day before the race started, while testing in Brescia, the gearbox showed serious problems. After a quick phone call to "Don" Enzo four mechanics with spare parts arrived, and after working from 8 at night to 6 in the morning, the P3 was ready for the start. Evidently, the work was well done, as Pintacuda won by more than 40 minutes over the Alfa of Tadini-Chiari. After the epic Mille Miglia win, Ferrari decided to hire Pintacuda as an official Scuderia driver. But in 1935, always at the wheel of a P3, he was not very lucky. In 18 starts he placed third 14 times and had four DNFs.

The new Alfa 2.9, based on the Grand Prix cars with four-wheel independent suspension, dominated the 1936 Mille Miglia. Pintacuda managed to place third, behind Brivio and Farina, after suffering carburetor problems.



Not a Monza but a P3, with a larger cockpit, lights and fenders. Pintacuda convinced Ferrari that the new P3 was an ideal car for the Mille Miglia, and proved it by winning the 1935 1000 mile race.

Gaining a position on the Grand Prix team, Pintacuda was fifth in Tripoli with the new 8-cylinder Alfa, behind the powerful Auto Unions and Mercedes Benz. As a reward, Ferrari sent Pintacuda to Brazil with the new 8C2900 "boticellas". Once in Rio de Janeiro, neither he nor Marinoni were lucky. Carlo retired while leading with differential problems. But he would have a second chance in San Pablo, where he won after leading the entire race, thanks to new differential gears having arrived from Italy.



1937 was a year full of success. It started with a Mille Miglia win and continued with a great win in Rio de Janeiro in the "Trampolin do Diabo", the Devil's Springboard. The Mille Miglia was contested in a deluge, and the French Delahaye cars of Dreyfus/Gherzi, and Schell/Carrierre posed a significant threat to the Alfa team. The Alfas were similar to the 1936 entries, but now had 260 bhp and a top speed of over 130mph.

Pintacuda at the Mille Miglia with the "boticella" 8C2900 in 1936. Again, with thinly disguised Grand Prix cars, Alfa took the first three places in the event. Pintacuda placed third.

Pintacuda drove flat out from the start, and broke all existing records on the Brescia to Bologna stage. Notably, he also led at Rome, breaking the long standing rule that "those who lead at Rome will not win the Mille Miglia." Dreyfus was gaining on Pintacuda, but left the road at Tolentino. Experiencing electrical problems, Carlo drove without lights, following his teammate Farina to the finish, winning his second great victory in the Mille Miglia.

On June 6th, Pintacuda traveled to South America for the Rio de Janeiro Grand Prix. He was to drive an Alfa 8C 35 with a blown 3800cc engine, as raced at Tripoli the year before. His rival was Hans von Stuck who drove a more powerful Auto Union. It was not an easy situation. The German car had 100 hp over the Alfa and Pintacuda could only hope that only that the wet track would be to his advantage. The race started under heavy rain and von Stuck took the lead, but on the second lap, Pintacuda passed him and at half distance he was still leading by 18 seconds. By then, the rain had stopped and a strong wind started to blow over the track. The Auto Union appeared in the mirrors of the Alfa and quickly passed. Pintacuda thought that if he could follow the German he would be able to pass him on the last lap at a place on the circuit where the Italian car had a better acceleration due to the lower weight. However, four laps before the end, von Stuck had to go to the pits for refueling and Pintacuda was leading again by 20 seconds, after having set a new lap record of 7 minutes 10 seconds. If he had to pit, Pintacuda would lose first place, so he had to drive very carefully. When he was 2 km from the checkered flag, at 200 km/h, the Alfa ran out of petrol! However, Pintacuda coasted to the finish in first, with von Stuck four seconds behind.

The Monaco Grand Prix, held late in the season on August 8th, 1937, was a total disappointment, as the new low-chassis Alfa V-12 was not yet ready. The entry consisted of the aging 1936 12C models for Farina, Brivio and Pintacuda, as well as two even older 8Cs for Sommer and Ruesch. On the first lap, as an Auto Union that was behind Pintacuda crashed and came back on the track, Carlo stepped on the brake pedal but could not avoid hitting his teammate Brivio, damaging the front brakes. He went to the pits several times but the brake problem could not be solved. He finished 9th, bravely driving the Monaco G.P. without brakes.



His boarding pass states Pintacuda sailed alone to South America in 1937, but he was never without exemplary company.

The 1938 Mille Miglia and Beyond

The start of 1938 season was not very encouraging for Carlo Pintacuda. For the Mille Miglia, Alfa had entered their latest version of the 8C2900B with a Touring body, one of the greatest Alfa Romeos ever made. Driving one of the four 2900Bs, S/N 412030, Pintacuda was leading at Rome, ahead of Biondetti in the other Touring 2900B. At Terni, Pintacuda had to stop for 40 minutes due to brake problems in his Alfa. Once they were repaired, he started a great drive, placing second behind his old friend Biondetti, losing by only two minutes after a twelve-hour race. He tried to overtake him many times but without success. Carlo felt he was betrayed. After the race, he went to Firenze without going to the award ceremony. Biondetti won his first Mille Miglia but lost his friend.



Driving the magnificent 8C2900B, Pintacuda races against time after brake problems slowed his progress in the 1938 Mille Miglia. The car, S/N 412030, was later owned for many years by the Bill Serri.

The Grand Prix of Rio on June 12th was the next challenge. Alfa Corse, still headed by Enzo Ferrari, sent Pintacuda and Tadini with one of the new powerful 3-liter 308 C Grand Prix cars. Pintacuda said the new Alfa was "a lovely car, powerful, modern and perfect for the twisty circuit of Gavea". He was very confident for the race, but it was not as easy as he thought. At the start, Pintacuda, unfamiliar with the new Alfa, was passed by many cars in the field, including the Argentinean driver Carlos Arzani. But Gavea was his second home, and by half distance, he had re-passed 28 cars, and was 25 seconds behind the Arzani, who was driving an Alfa Romeo 8C 35 (#50014). Suddenly a heavy rain started to fall on Gavea. Arzani was on worn tires, which made his driving very difficult, and he could not keep the lead. Pintacuda, who thrived in the rain, won the Devil's Springboard for the second time in a row.

Back in Europe, on July 9th and 10th, a new challenge was waiting for him--the Spa-Francorchamps 24 hours. Alfa Corse set two 2.9 Mille Miglia cars for the event, one for Sommer and Biondetti and a second for Pintacuda and Francesco Severi. Again, Pintacuda demonstrated his wet weather skills, winning at an average speed of 76.44 mph for the 24 hours. Despite his impressive victories, it seemed that Pintacuda was being ignored by the Alfa Corse team. The new 158 voiturette, with a blown 8-cylinder 1.5 liter designed by Giocchino Colombo, was making its debut, but in the hands of newcomers Severi, Emilio Villoresi, and Raymond Sommer. The 308Cs were entrusted to Farina, Wimille and Pintacuda's old friend Biondetti.

In 1939, the Mille Miglia was canceled after an accident in the 1938 race had left ten people dead. Instead, a 1000-mile race was held in Libya, between Tobruk and Tripoli. Driving one of the new 6C2500SS models, Pintacuda placed third, behind Biondetti in second, and Mussolini's chauffeur, Ercole Boratto, who won the race. Pintacuda got his first drive with the new Alfetta at Tripoli, but Mercedes appeared with the W165 and thoroughly trounced the field. Next were the Coppa Ciano and the Coppa Acerbo, both in Italy. Pintacuda drove the Alfetta 158 to second at the Coppa Acerbo and third at the Coppa Ciano.

In September of 1939, World War II began and only the Italians and Americans held races in 1940. On April 28th, a modified version of the Mille Miglia was staged, this time with engine limitations. Alfa sent a team of four 6C2500SS, three spyders and one coupe for Count Trossi. But the Alfas were down on power compared to the new BMWs, which won the race. Pintacuda managed a seventh place, in this, his last Mille Miglia. At Tripoli, again with the 158, he finished fourth, with engine trouble, behind Farina, Biondetti and Trossi, all with Alfettas. The Mercedes Team did not appear, as the Germans thought that the English navy would confiscate their new 1.5-liter cars during the trip.

Post-War Life

After the years of the conflict, Pintacuda went to Alfa to ask to drive an Alfetta at an event in Brazil. After a spoken agreement and only 15 days before starting the trip, Alfa Romeo canceled the loan. A solution seemed to turn up when Enrico Platé offered him a prewar 1.5 liter Maserati, but during the trip to South America, Carlo had a liver attack, and once in Rio he could not start the race.

He recovered for the Boa Vista race held on December 15th 1946 but still had pains and high temperature. After the second lap, he stopped and was immediately taken to a hospital.

In the first days of 1947 Carlo went to Buenos Aires, Argentina to race at Retiro, the first race of "La Temporada Argentina". The old Maserati only lasted a couple of laps and Carlo made two important decisions. The first one was to quit racing, and the second was to stay in Buenos Aires. However, he could not resist the temptation to race and came back to Gavea in 1948 with Jean Pierre Wimille and his Simca-Gordini, but he had to retire just two laps after the start. This was his very last race.

An Incredible Character

With a white driving suit and jacket at the races, or a black suit in his everyday life, Carlo Pintacuda had a great sense of humour. He decided to live in Buenos Aires in 1947 when he swapped passions, motor racing for antiquities, and opened a shop called La Spiga. But he could never say no to a question regarding cars; just a word about racing and he would begin to start talking about the old days. He was born in 1900 and passed away silently, in 1971. Undoubtedly, Alfa Romeo owes a great deal to Carlo Pintacuda, who represented the Portello pride every time he was behind the wheel of an Alfa.

Our thanks to Argentinean correspondents Cris Bertschi and Lao Iacona for this unique biography of Carlo Pintacuda.



Pintacuda was also victorious behind the wheel of Alfa's Grand Prix cars. Here he is seen winning the VI Grande Prêmio do Rio de Janeiro, June 12, 1938, with the Alfa 308.