

# Joe Scalzo's

## City of Speed and elsewhere

### Chrome Wheels

On October 31, 1999, on the California Speedway, out in Los Angeles, Adrian Fernandez, a little-remembered Indy car racing driver, caught a monster moment when he won for himself, and Mexico, the Marlboro 500-miler. Suitably impressed, one of the world's last Ricardo Rodriguez demons, myself, did some fast and fancy arithmetic. My calculations concluded that precisely 42 years, one month, and one week earlier, Ricardo Rodriguez

(1942-1962), El Chamaco, the kid, the wild little boy racer, just up from bicycles and motorbikes, who already was his nation's idol, had had a monster moment of his own. It occurred at the lost shrine of Riverside International Raceway, just down the block from the California Speedway,



RIR, was, back on Ricardo's big and hot summer weekend of 1957, hosting its inaugural card of races. A lot went on. Nothing, however, topped the shock of the under 1,500cc main event: a silver Porsche RS with "Mexico" emblazoned across its flanks had led all opponent Lotus, Cooper-Climaxes and rival Porsches on such a merry

dash that not only had it won, but lapped everything except second, third and fourth. And, jumping out its cockpit, had come Ricardo, still some four months shy of 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, and looking younger still.

**Que emocionate! Such a to-do! And not just for the over-excited, under-aged, winner, but for his bard, the whiskey journalist and Mexicophile Gus N. Vignolle, publisher and editor of**



**the hell-fire tabloid MotoRacing, who, earlier that same summer, at Avandero and Torreon, had been the first gringo to observe El Camaco trimming grown men, and also had been the first gringo to divine the mysterious overtones surrounding him. Vignolle was a graduate of the L.A. Examiner school of yellow and sensational journalism; sometimes he wrote up his dispatches with an open bottle at his elbow, other times while he was reasonably sober and sane. RODRIGUEZ STUNS!, his Ricardo story began, followed by, “One of the greatest sensation in the history of sports-car racing was created here this weekend by an incredible 15-year old Mexican boy.**

**For the following five careening years, Ricardo Rodriguez, El Chamaco, and his prodigious skills as a kid genius with the steering wheel, reaped full benefit from MotoRacing headlines and, of course, from all of Vignolle’s verbs, adverbs, adjectives and etcetera. Seldom far from his son’s side was Don Pedro Rodriguez, an indulgent and rich mystery man, who wore sunglasses indoors and out while functioning as a highly secretive tycoon in one of the world’s poorest nations. Nobody could identify for sure the source of all the pesos paying for Ricardo’s racing, but there were three guesses: 1) Don Pedro was the strong man of Mexico City’s crotch-rocket police squadron; 2) he was the ex-locomotive engineer of El Jefe Cardenas, Mexico’s reform president from the 1930s’, and Don Pedro’s well-placed connections within the administration permitted him to purchase lucrative real estate properties in Mexico City and Acapulco, or, (3 he was bordello boss of Mexico City’s most fancy string of whorehouses. (Gus Vignolle, who knew everything about the clan Rodriguez, told me that the correct guess was none other than number 3).**



**Vignolle had started out as Ricardo’s self-appointed PR flack, and earliest chronicler, faithfully documenting El Chamaco’s unprecedented rise from pop-gun Porsches into gore-red factory Ferraris wailing away at the island Grand Prix in the Bahamas and on the devil circuits of**

Europe, including the Nurburgring, the Targa Florio ,Le Mans – and then, at Monza, dramatically upping the stakes to the outer limits by landing on the front row of his very first F1 open-wheel GP.

Of course Rodriguez got to pilot Ferraris in the States, too, notably at Sebring, where his older, more aggressive brother, Pedro, acted as co-driver. Richie Ginther, who at this Sebring was the partner of Taffy von Trips in the first rear-engine Ferrari sports car, compared dueling with Pedro to being on a table full of number balls, with Pedro driving as though he was the game's cue ball. But the Rodriguez boys weren't sharing custody of a works Testa Rossa Spyder, just a second-string and dodgy Red Head belonging to Ferrari's arm in America, its North American Racing Team. NART, it has been reliably rumored, was one of the biggest of the buy-a-ride outfits: all anybody needed do was lose a lot of money playing poker with Luigi Chinetti, NART's major domo, and one of its second-string Red Heads was his. And if this was indeed what Don Pedro Rodriguez did at the 1961 12 Hours, he got his pesos worth.



After eight hours or so, the children Rodriguez and their No. 17 NART car already were riding a stunning lead of better than ten miles. Then, without warning, a suspicious and extremely prolonged, probably bogus, pit stop to repair a “dead generator,” was forced on the brothers. During the approaching June, at Le Mans, also while in a runaway lead, the boys again would be hit with a phony stop.

The Sebring stop deposited No. 17 miles and miles behind the leaders, two squads of Ferrari's works veterans. Night was falling. Ricardito – little Ricky -- replaced Pedro in the bucket of their Spyder, and –with banshee V-12 revs riffing all across Sebring –set out in darkness to grab back as many miles as possible. Three hours remained. Slower traffic fled from the heat of No. 17's exploding headlamps blazing up from behind, and Ricardo's reverberating up-and-downshifts through all six gears in and out of the esses, and over at Webster, came equipped with bolts of Halloween orange exhaust flame that lit up the Florida evening. Overcoming most of the lost miles, by the finish he was up to third and still coming fast – the veterans in the first and second team Ferraris were huffing and puffing and glancing over their shoulders in horrified anticipation of El Chamaco's sudden arrival.

“You can't no-clutch shift a Testa Rossa like that!” racing's know-it-all cognoscenti, the intelligentsia, had shrilly objected as they'd observed and listened to Rodriguez making his

magical moves around Sebring. “That little mojado (wetback) is going to blow the thing up!” The morons. You don’t have to believe this, but it’s true: the belittling of Ricardo’s talents went clear back to 1957, and his bombshell win at Riverside, when the automatic reaction of the cognoscenti and intelligentsia was that the victory shouldn’t have attributed to superior driving but superior gasoline; Rodriguez allegedly was burning higher octane Esso than everybody else. This never was proven, but the sour-grapes was predictable. Sports car and F1 racing in the Ricardo era were patrolled by self-appointed oracles who hallucinated that racing was so complex and difficult an activity, as, say, brain-surgery. What made boy wonder Ricardo – a five-foot-five, 135-pound child, barely 20-years old – so subversive was that he was showing racing wasn’t hard to master at all, providing you possessed raw, natural talent like Ricardo’s. And, of course, had the blessing of a rich papa with plenty of pesos.

The cognoscenti and intelligentsia controlled racing’s press, still do, and so, on November 1, 1962, when news exploded that El Chamacho had just crashed and been instantly killed on Mexico City’s GP Autodrome, his home track, the cognoscenti and intelligentsia were fast to issue blame. First reports out of the Autodrome about the accident blamed it on “Too much speed in an unfamiliar car.”

Which was only half true. Rodriguez indeed was behind the wheel of an unfamiliar and highly dangerous F1 set of wheels, a fragile Lotus-Climax belonging to the Johnnie Red brewer merchant Rob Walker - but Ricardo wasn’t going very fast, perhaps 100 mph, tops. Coming down through the gears onto the banked corner not far from the Autodrome’s last corner, he either miscalculated and made a slight mistake, or else the flyaway Lotus flaked off its fragile rear suspension. And this was something the marque was notorious for doing, leading, in the near-future, to such infamous fatalities as the Indy 500 great Bobby Marshman, and the world champion Jimmy Clark.



But for a quirk in the F1 world racing schedule Ricardo, on the Autodrome, would have been safely inside his F1 factory Ferrari; but because Mexico was withholding world championship points, the Scuderia was skipping the Autodrome. So Ricardo and Don Pedro had been obliged to pay a fateful visit on the Scotsman, Walker, to see about renting out his Lotus, even though the lethal machine had already made a victim of Stirling Moss, giving Sir Stirling career-

ending wounds. (Following the Rodriguez crash, the same Walker Lotus got another young star victim, the Rhodesian global motorbike titlist Gary Hocking.)

No investigation ever was made as to the what precipitated Ricardo into the Autodome's deadly steel railing or why, when the Lotus kissed the railing and broke apart on impact, he was tossed out of the cockpit. None needed to be. Ricardo was racing without belts or harnesses.

Like many drivers from the era of Lotus, Rodriguez no doubt figured his survival chances were best getting thrown clear, instead of having break-away Lotus wreckage and debris crush him.

All Mexico seemed to dissolve into an agony of prolonged mourning over the demise of El Chamaco; what still made it worse was that the celebrity obsequies were taking place on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, Dia de los Muertos, the nation's traditional day of the dead. El Jefe, President of the Republico walked in Ricardito's funeral and so, naturally, did Don Pedro Rodriguez, who not only was in deep grieving, but seeking revenge over the two men he held responsible for the death of his son.

One of them was Rob Walker, whom he excoriated in a Paris Match expose, complete with photographs of the collapsed suspension of the Walker Lotus. (Walker, infuriated by this, afterward publishing his own expose of Don Pedro, claiming that following his son's accident the old man, for some twisted reason had evicted from the Rodriguez household, bag and baggage, Ricardo's beautiful teenaged bride, Sarita. This never was proven.)

The second man was Gus Vignolle, and it took almost seven years to track him down, one night in the bar of a hotel in downtown Mexico City. If it hadn't been for MotoRacing, Don Pedro snarled at Gus – Pedro, too, by then had been killed, in a sports car – both his offspring would be alive still. Gus took the harsh criticism to heart. Renouncing racing, selling MotoRacing, he pretty much devoted the rest of his life to drinking himself to death, which he accomplished in rural Mexico, still his favorite place in the world. But minus all the liquor, what a scribbler he was!

Ricardo was much like the Corvette and Cobra master Davey MacDonald, who never experienced a bad crash except the one that took his life. I met Ricardo and Sarita just once, in October of 1961, at the old Grand Prix restaurant on Beverly Boulevard, in Los Angeles. Gus had telephoned me, saying that Ricardo and Sarita had just hit L.A. so that Ricardo could race the same NART Testa Rossa he'd exercised so spectacularly at Sebring.

As always when I was visiting the Grand Prix I purposely arrived late, and parked well up the block, so that none of the clientele ever discovered my humble set of wheels was a coppery brown Corvair Monza, its front end all raked like some rooster-back NASCAR late-model – not on account of any trick suspension, but because throwing onto the front end a 100-pound sack of Redi-Mix was the only means to tame the evil-handling that was the Corvair trademark. Just for garish touch I'd added infantile chromed wheels.

I was sitting at the bar, nursing a Johnnie Red, when Gus walked in with Ricardo and Sarita. Sarita was as beautiful as her photographs. Gus had introduced us: Ricardo this is Joe, Sariita, this is Joe. Ricardo had immediately asked me something in rapid-fire Spanish, which Gus translated: "Richard wants to know if that's your Corvair outside?" I had groaned and confessed, "Si." Ricardo set off another burst of Spanish and I was astounded, totally astounded, at what Gus translated: "Ricardo likes the chrome wheels."

At the Times GP, L.A. racing drivers and L.A. sports cars showed Rodriguez little respect. The volatile quartet of a Maserati Birdcage, a Merc 300 SL with a stovebolt V8, a plastic Maserati, and a Corvette running yet another big stovebolt V8 collected himself and his out-classed NART Ferrari right in the middle of the mile-long section of hell called the Esses, and served up a severe wrecking. But the most astonishing exchange I ever experienced with Ricard Rodriguez concerned my juvenile chrome wheels. El Chamaco truly was a kid!

