

COLNAGO

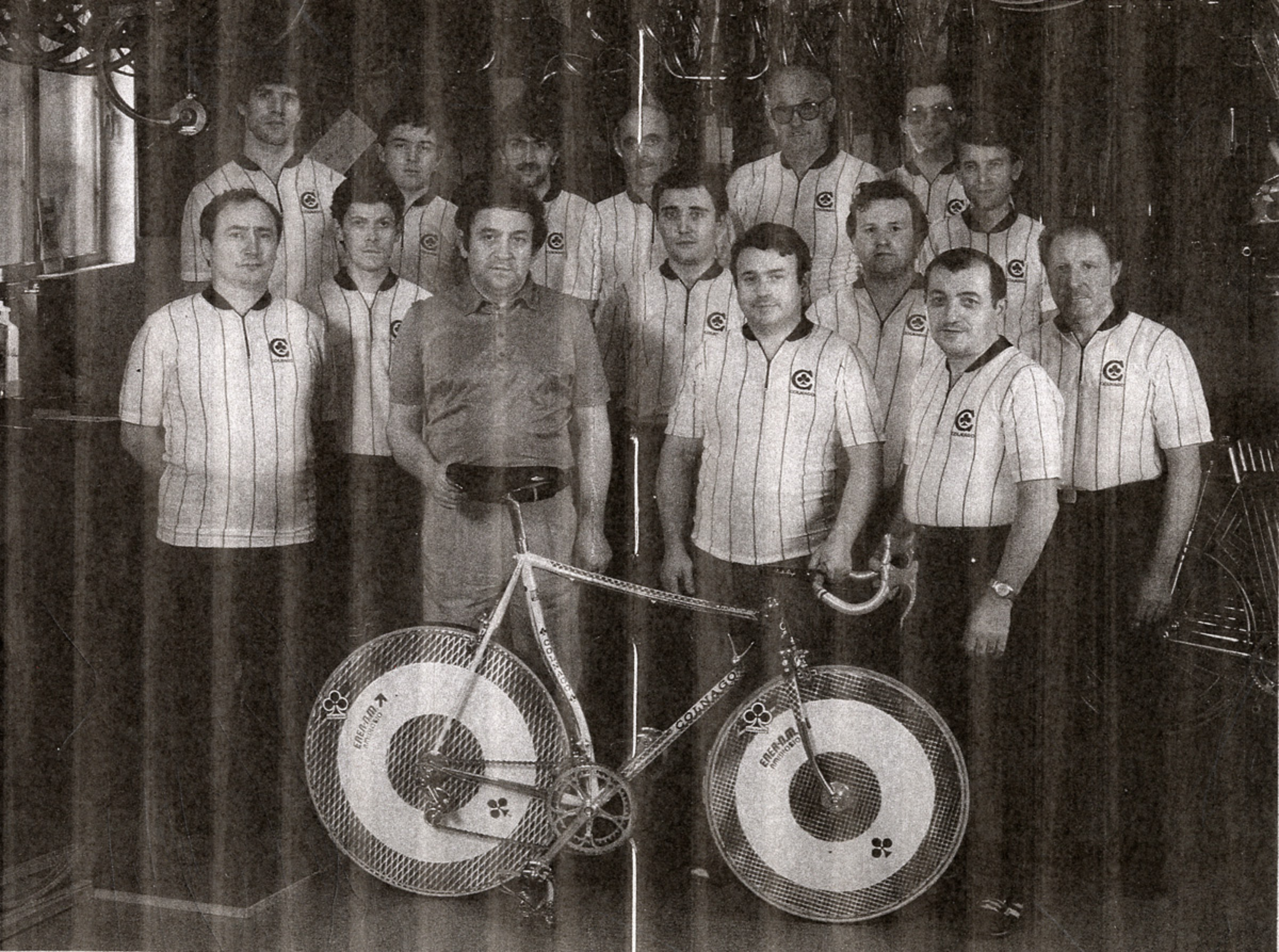
SERGIO MEDA COLNAGO





He is one of the last genuine bike craftsmen as well as a thoroughbred stylist and a ingenious inventor. For these valid reasons he has decided to keep his word given many years ago, when the concern bearing his name manufactured only a few dozen frames per year: Ernesto Colnago had already established that quality went together with "small numbers" and that neither success nor flattery would ever alter his policy. Never, in all these years, has it occurred to a Colnago bike purchaser to ride a bike not coming from the workshop in Cambiago, near Milan, bearing the name Colnago with the unmistakable ace of clubs as trade mark.

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COLNAGO



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COLNAGO



The entire Colnago family received by the Pope for the presentation of a bicycle in homage to His Holiness. August 29, 1978.

AT NIGHT, EVERY NIGHT

His inventions, and it is no exaggeration to call them that, are usually conceived at night. It's not a problem of insomnia; sometimes he wakes up suddenly to scribble down what is buzzing round in his head. Often, retains Colnago, the spark of an idea comes to him in his dreams, perhaps dreaming that he is still at work. He rises at six-thirty to find eight or ten closely written little sheets waiting for him as if by magic.

Colnago says they are all notes for urgent telephone calls. His wife pretends to take no notice, muttering something under her breath about the old beggar's desk - strictly out of bounds, of course.

They quarrel about only one thing, his health, and the scarce interest this workaholic, a prime example of the tireless Brianza breed, shows in looking after himself. His rejoinder is prompt: the aches and pains are the legacy of years of racing, years when the then little known mechanic was always to be found in the thick of it, often hanging out of a car with a bicycle either in his hands or within easy reach, ready for anything.



A very young Ernesto Colnago sprints for the tape in the 1950 Caldirola cup, a classic race for rookies.

THE BIRTHPLACE OF INVENTION

Such flashes of nocturnal inspiration only occur on holiday, and only in one place: Bratto of the Presolana. Exactly how much ANCMA, the National Cycle and Motor Accessory Association, owes to that small corner of the Val Seriana is impossible to say, but if Colnago is famous from Moscow to Rio de Janeiro, from Honolulu to Peking, and every bit as much a representative of Italian design skills as Armani or Valentino, then some of the merit must go to the fine air and restful climate of that picturesque spot so popular with Bergamasks and non-locals besides. In any case Bratto is the haven of peace that miraculously convinced Colnago to take a well-earned rest.

The word holiday, though, is one that had never properly entered Colnago's vocabulary until five years ago - before that he thought it meant a waste of time. Back pain and other aches, but more especially his recently becoming a granddad, finally brought him to see the light. Now all that Bratto needs is a field station from the CNR, the National Research Council, like those they sometimes set up in the South, with just a director and a secretary. Colnago, of course, wouldn't even need a secretary.

He smiles awkwardly, parrying intrusion, and heaven help anyone who tries to make him out to be something he is not. As for invention (devilry would be a better name for it) he puts it down to intuition; he sees or feels things in a certain

way and maybe in the end he makes a blind guess. He lies out of convenience and modesty; intuition plays its part but in certain cases it has to be prodigious otherwise it would mean luck never accompanies talent, which is nonsense. Then he whispers himself that you must look before you leap, but how can he speak of leaping into the unknown when he spends as much if not more on experimental research than those who give themselves so many airs? Where is the reckless gambler in a chap who recognizes his mistakes, disowning and withdrawing a product which he realises is not up to the Colnago mark?

The Oval story is a case in point and is worth telling here, before the thousands of successes which speak for themselves. It is a tale of both intuition and hard thinking, and it haunts him still. The frame was an audacious conception and was subjected to endless checks and controls, Colnago taking comfort in the word of the experts, the 'professori' as he calls them, but above all in the numerous torsion, resistance and strain tests that a new frame routinely undergoes. The Oval was, in effect, a double-edged sword, and Colnago remained sceptical until the technicians insisted on making the joints elliptical as well as the tubes using a micro-casting technique long tested at Colnago to give the fullest possible guarantees.

With some lingering misgivings perhaps, the frame came out and was a huge success. It made its debut at the Milan Trade Fair and the orders poured in. Unfortunately though, in the meantime it had become clear that the triangle could not support a man over 1.70 m in height. There were problems in decelerating too: slowing down, it shook.

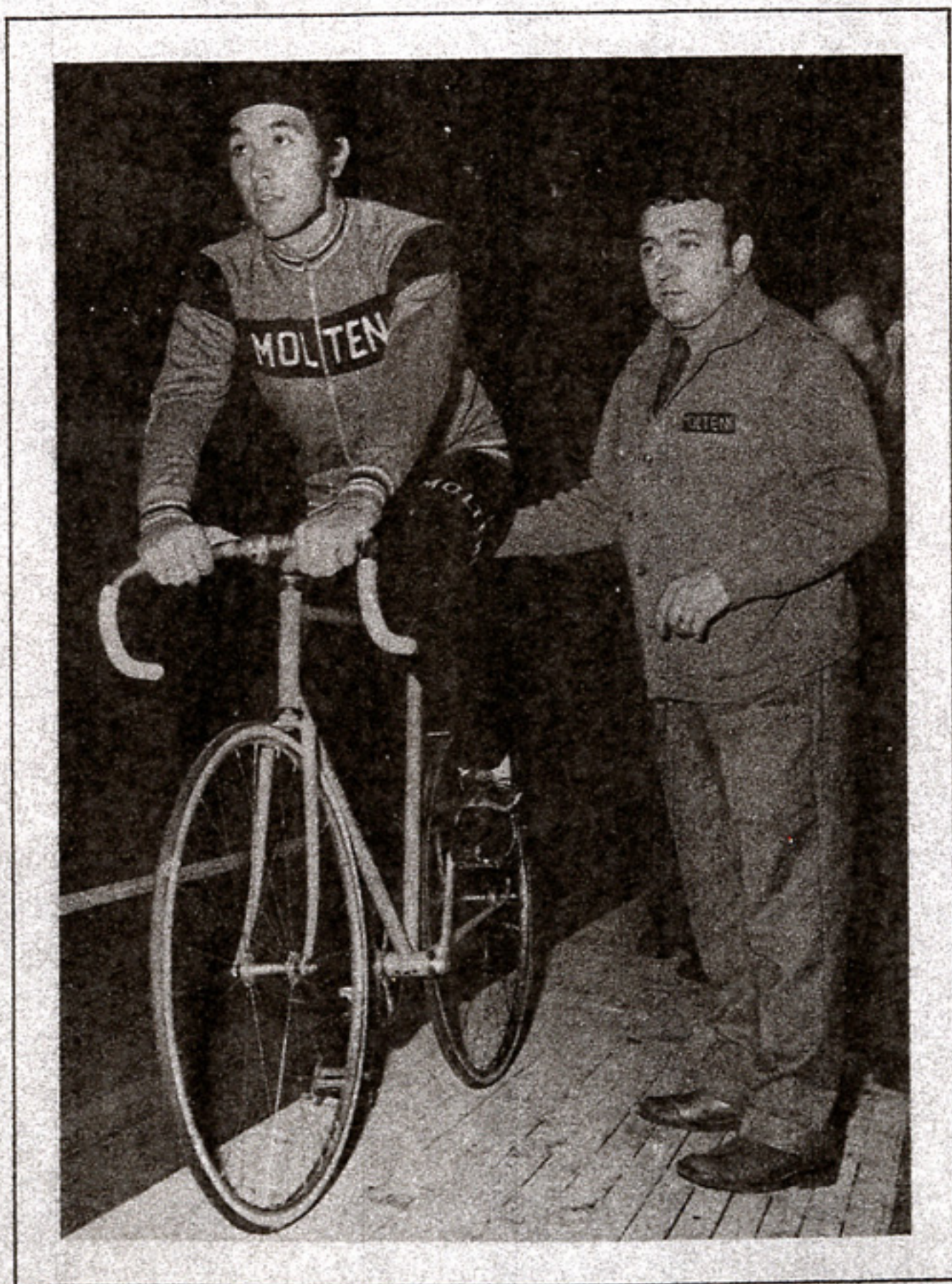
Millions of lire spent on patents suddenly went up in smoke. The frame was immediately taken off the market ignoring the cries of enthusiastic admirers who were willing to overlook its defects including those imperceptible

vibrations discernible only to one who speaks the language of the machine - a living, breathing instrument that resonates in harmony with itself or grates and jars tunelessly on the trained ear.

Fortune, though, has smiled on Colnago. It gave him the chance to race, study and at the same time construct the 'iron horses' that had captured his heart and which were to hold him forever. He was a happy captive however, for his greatest experience, an inimitable one, was gained in the world of professional racing, following the great names who, like all champions, were so exacting at times as to be insufferable. But, in their almost fanatical search for better performance, those same champions had found one of their own kind, perhaps even more stubbornly determined, one who was prepared to work through the night on what seemed a trifling detail, but which would prove decisive.

There is one example that is especially significant because it marked the first qualitative leap for the humble mechanic in his tiny five-metre square workshop in Cambiago. The year was 1953 and the incident involved three men, Albani, Piazza and Fiorenzo Magni who Colnago miraculously "healed". (OK, the expression is a bit strong, but Magni had a painful leg and a short temper, never sweet at the best of times, as he would be the first to admit). Anyway one morning Albani invited them over to the shop in Cambiago. They chat about this and that and then the conversation turns to Magni's aching leg. Colnago needs no prompting, an expert mechanic is on first-name terms with aches and pains that result from bad habits or posture. While at Gloria in Milan's Viale Abruzzi he had had time to see everything and understand plenty, having fitted hundreds of gears, pedals and forks. He guesses the pedal cranks are out of line which does not surprise him (in those days it was a common occurrence with no axle as now to keep them straight, just the

crank and cotter pin.) All it needed was a touch of the craftsman's file on the pin to put things right) And from the admiring tone in which Magni shows his appreciation we can tell that the two men will meet again, in different roles that we need not go into here.



Colnago on the track, at the Vigorelli Velodrome in Milan, with Merckx. Though still friends they have been competitors for some years now.

1953 - THE BEGINNINGS

Let's look at a few figures: in 1953 to put together a complete cycle Colnago would earn 320 lire, a little more than 10% of the retail price. In those days an ordinary bike would sell for 3000 lire, a racer for around 8-9000. To make a little money to buy parts for his own cycles he would do jobs for others; in this sense Colnago could be called a self-made man. As long as it remained economical to do so, he bought in components, keeping up a sizeable stock. Then, when the cost of money began to reach hitherto unimagined levels and it was no longer feasible to tie up capital even for three months, when his suppliers continued to raise their prices, refusing to offer him special tariffs, he changed his policy. By that time, meanwhile, he was well enough known to be able to put the name Colnago on parts that only a few years before he was obliged to buy to make his bicycles saleable. And the day was shortly to dawn, as happened with the automobile, when a Colnago bike would go well beyond its origins: no longer just the frame and joints but the whole cycle, down to the minutest details, stamped with the Colnago name, thanks to parts commissioned from leading manufacturers, happy to take advantage of the craftsman's ideas and creativity to improve their product, be it the gears, the chain or the frame.

In the end his policy was a success, for although there are some who like him and others who like him less, none could

accuse him of copying. If he could not create something completely new, at least his adaptation was original; there is nothing wrong in borrowing a good idea as long as the personal contribution is authentic. The bicycle has been with us a little less than a hundred years and in its modern form only since the turn of the century, which shows how the term 'modern' is only relative. The pursuit bike used by Moser for the one-hour record is indeed something new, but the others have remained where they were after the war. Colnago fought - that's his own term - when the emphasis was on lightness, to build a cycle weighing only 5.5 kilos for a 76-kilo rider. But after Merckx came a man of 77 kilos, Moser, who broke the record on a machine weighing ten. Colnago did not hang his head; he just changed his mind.

Everything is relative then, but we can be sure that there are still improvements to be made in components, and Colnago occupies himself with these problems more than one would imagine - since they are properly the concern of others. He often wonders about the brakes, paradoxically worse now as cycles have become quicker, and not only downhill. He looks at the crude lever mechanism and it occurs to him that oil brakes might not really be that costly either in terms of weight or price. He also considers the gears and wonders whether the mechanical cable might not be better replaced with an automatic push-button release.

He talks openly about such things, not wishing to stick his nose into other people's business, but he does have a few examples of his own ideas which he shows to close friends, and these, good and bad, represent his inventions. Some are profitable, others less so and these, despite his painstaking care and attention to detail, end up back on the drawing board.

The terms of the equation are simple enough - a man is born with a gift and lands an apprenticeship with a qualified

firm after being lucky enough to race and there learn the limits of the vehicle and the risks it must endure; later he has the good fortune to gain invaluable experience and maturity as a mechanic to the great names of professional cycling - what more could you ask for? The least that could happen is that the chap in question invents something, or makes himself useful in some way.....

In 1956 the economic situation was anything but stable, and it took nerve to throw away hundreds of fork tubes in the attempt (later successful) to bend them cold. Today the practice is perfectly common, but in those days the sceptics smiled in derision at the crazy mechanic who claimed that bending under heat 'burnt' the molecules of the tubes, thus destroying their resilience. But Colnago was blind to their incredulity: the first special bike he made he not only bent the tubes cold but to save time welded the fork and the sheaths straight and bent them both together in one go. For this he used a special machine built in his own workshop which he tried out, to save money, on pieces of spring. Once tested he went on to build a more suitable machine, milled and shaped to perfection.

Today producers of tubing for Colnago must follow his precise requirements and these are strictly related to the vehicle's ultimate purpose. Cobblestones, for example, demand tubing that will stand up to extremes of stress, whereas for an asphalt road the frame can be of regular chromomolybdenum steel tubing.

At one time rims used to have 36 holes. Colnago insisted they be made with 32 or 28. He even managed to get the standard size for tubes down from 26 to 20 mm and, when necessary, 18. Those who don't believe it can ask Mr. Carrera, the manager at Clement who had to keep him happy. He is a hard man to budge, Colnago, when he thinks he is on the right track. He laughed at the sceptics who

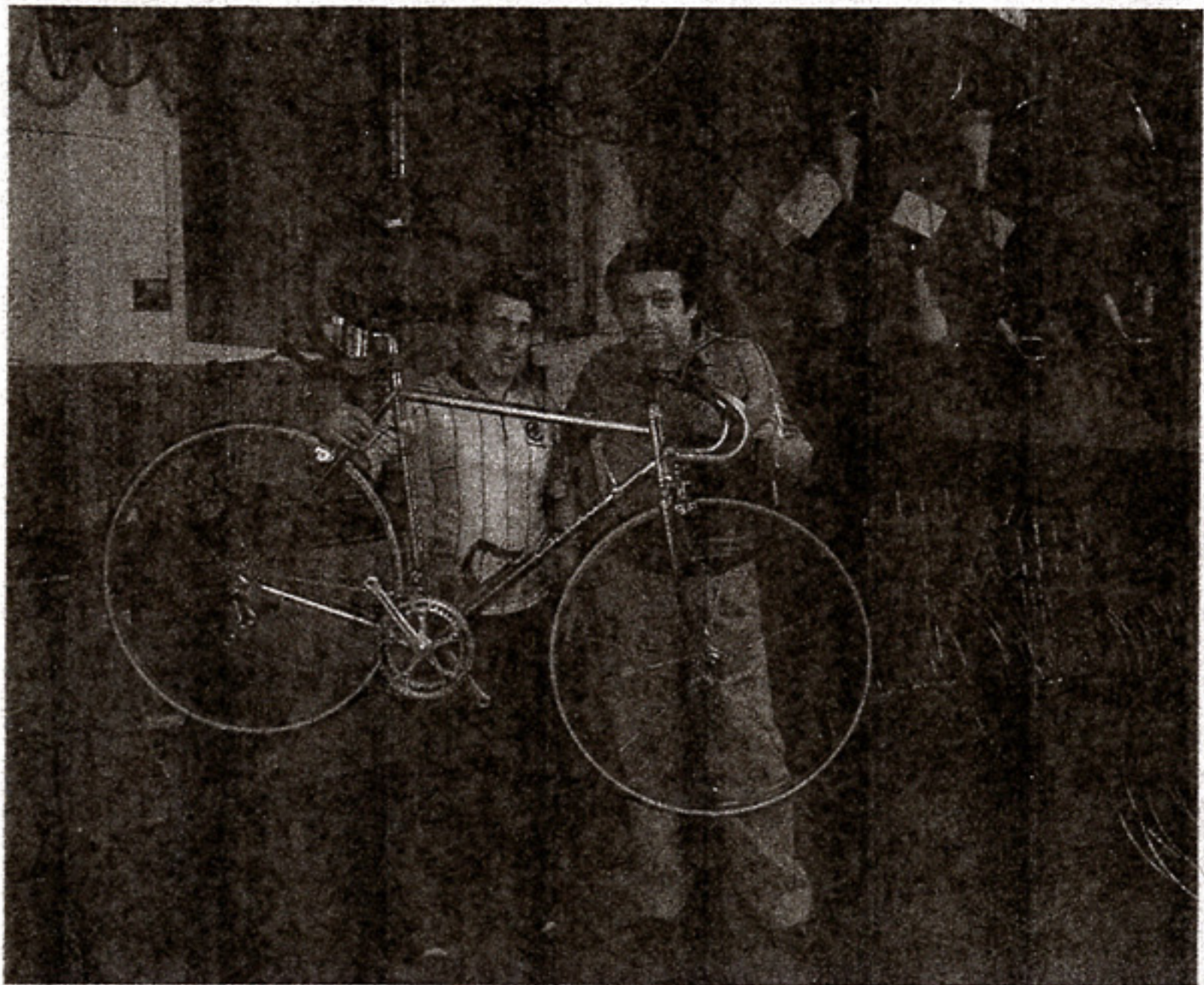
thought it impossible to cast a fork head or a bottom bracket. But as Fiorenzo Magni says: if you want to do something you can. And Colnago could!

To produce Merckx's bike, which made history for its feather-lightness, he perforated the chain on both sides of each link. They said he was crazy but he shed weight without risking anything on strength or safety. It was essentially a problem of new materials and if no-one had tried titanium or carbon fibre, we would not today be able to consign them to use only in special cases or controlled conditions. Merckx can testify on this point. He was completely sold on titanium until he nearly threw away one of his seven Milan to Sanremo victories through poor road-holding on the Poggio descent. In fact the hold was quite satisfactory for a man of his build, but it didn't take into account his athletic abilities which were phenomenal. Thus the frame ended up in the cellar and in later years Merckx always demanded bikes of not less than nine kilos. Nevertheless, that frame taught Colnago the impossibility of trying to marry lightness and rigidity and out of that apparently negative experience was born the Master with its fluted ribbing and no reinforcement.

Colnago does not fear comparisons, or even rivals, except the Japanese, who would give him and plenty of others a rough time. He is afraid rather of those who, flattering him, really want to persuade him to quit the field. He fears self-satisfaction which is so often followed by a wish to do nothing or less than before. He is afraid the future may hold fewer incentives and would prefer a fiercer competition, on a serious basis, though, not just idle chit-chat, because gossip in the end annoys him too even though he seems to just ignore it. He has a horror of the stupidity that money can cause in some people and a wholesome dislike of those who think the wallet says everything. At times he has been

reduced to tears by anger, and he has suffered unnecessary humiliation but has never allowed it to embitter him unduly. He is genuinely astonished by the honours that have from time to time come his way, on other's initiative. Above all he has never refused an award like those who pretend they got there by chance, that they are irritated by or contrary to official recognition. He believes if you deserve something it is right that you have it, because it is other people who determine your success.

He is, first and foremost, a good man of the old stamp, and a first class craftsman by trade. In fact he never dreamt of being just an ordinary artisan, but always felt that whatever you do, once you are sure you have the ability to do it, you must go all out for it, never being willing to settle for results that are only satisfactory. And one can forgive him a slight moistening of the eye when he describes his workshop with a hint of pride: "Once there was a file and a vice and little by little the machines arrived. Now I'm the happy owner of a small firm which is well-equipped, clean and tidy."



The two Colnagos side by side: on the left Paolo, Ernesto's junior by 12 years, and his indispensable sidekick since he was 12.

THE TWO COLNAGOS

The Colnagos - the two brothers that is - were both born in February, Ernesto on the ninth, in 1932, Paolino the seventeenth, twelve years later. They were the sons of Antonio, a peasant of the Brianza, and his wife, Elvira. The old man passed away in 1981. He loved both his sons equally, but neither of them had it in them to go onto the land; Ernesto, in particular, caused his father untold worry with his unshakeable desire to work for himself, when a better idea would have been a safe job "under the master", security being a precious commodity.

Papa Antonio had good reason to hold this view. Born in 1906, the Second War came unexpected, finding him with a small child to bring up. His younger brothers were called up and what was worse his livestock were rounded up for the war effort. Ernesto still has vivid recollections of those years, which for the family meant hunger, but he recalls with a smile the earlier times, when the cattle were still around and he would help out as best he could after primary school. Home by two, a quick sandwich and then out to tend the cows grazing the pastures around Cambiago. He well remembers the time he was called to be altar-boy, one winter when the snows were heavy, maybe '38 or '39, and how he loathed the idea of helping with mass when he could be outside snowballing. There was a rota for the boys of Cambiago to perform the various tasks in the sacristy but an

altar-boy's fee was very small - not more than one lira-fifty - and little Ernesto told the parish priest he could keep his money and find someone else to shift all the snow in the churchyard. The priest was furious but Ernesto had his way and come the spring they were back on good terms.

He was a lively and alert child, certainly, and a bit reckless as well. When he was six-years-old he used to like to milk the Fresian cow: she was the most placid, she kept still and never kicked. Even then, like a bug he had caught in infancy, he was always looking around for ways to improve the stable, for the time would come when he would be in charge, following his father's wishes.

His recollections of the war are hazy, indistinct. His uncles were in the army, or more accurately, at war. Meanwhile at home were his aunts and cousins, fourteen mouths to feed in all and the Colnago household decided to spend their meagre savings to buy a cow so as to provide milk for the six or seven babies in the family as well as for the other children of Cambiago, a village, recalls Colnago, of two thousand souls.

At home meat was a rare sight, seen only at Easter and Christmas. So when, towards the end of the war, his grandfather became the 'custode' of 31 Via Imbriani in Milan, young Ernesto reversed the traditional holiday itinerary: as city dwellers made their annual exodus to the country, he eagerly made the opposite journey to spend his summers in the metropolis, and not only out of familial love. Whereas in the village the staple fare was 'polenta' and milk, milk and 'polenta' all year round, the two months in the city meant meat, so longed for at home, twice a week.

For his part Ernesto made himself busy. He has keen memories of his kind and loving grandparents who treated him to such 'forbidden' pleasures as a picture show or two at the Duse or Vox, or swimming at the Milan Lido, and it was

even possible to go skating. The only chore, which more closely resembled a sacred rite, was on Saturday morning when it was his job to shine the brasswork, taking good care not to miss any. Work began on the top floor, the fifth, grandad with the broom, grandma with the mop and little Ernesto with the Brasso and the 'elbow grease'. That was real teamwork.

The occupants, all respectable people and for the most part pretty well off, were also very kind to the boy - once someone offered him a sailor-suit and Ernesto, who was never one to refuse anything because it was second-hand, gratefully accepted.

His friendship with Walter, the original little sailor, dates from those years. A friendship which has since evaporated - it has been forty-five years since the two of them last saw each other and the latest news he had of Walter was a long while ago, when his friend became an engineer. Ernest and Walter used to play together, swapping tales about the city and the country, and forging a link between the two worlds.

After primary came middle school but not the money for secondary school. At home the land needed tending, as we have said, but Ernesto already had little taste for it. Thus he decided to go and work for Fumagalli Dante, a quality mechanic and well placed in the village. In the evenings, so as not to get out of the habit, he studied with Mr. Caprotti, schoolteacher who helped boys who had to work by day. Two other boys used to go to Caprotti with him: Pietro, who later became an engineer and Cesare, a doctor, who died a few years ago. Young Ernesto made progress with his studies but at home needs became pressing. One day Mr. Caprotti was informed that his lessons would have to come to an end: a fourteen-year-old friend, Luigi Oggioni, had found a job at Gloria's in Viale Abruzzi two weeks before and Ernesto was to follow him to Milan. For young Colnago, apprentice

mechanic from Cambiago, this was to be the first milestone: his encounter with the bicycle.

It was November 25th, St. Catherine's Day, when he got his first pair of working overalls which his dad had bought off a stall in Gorgonzola, in the town square. They did not make boy's sizes so the overalls smothered him and there were plenty of laughs when he turned up looking like a clown. His first contact with the world of work is absolutely typical and worth recording: to start as an apprentice you had to be fourteen and his birthday was still a couple of months off. Nobody was going to take pity on him so, without a second thought, he quickly altered the date of birth on his card. Now back to the baggy overalls, which in a way saved his life. He had only been at work a few days when he had a terrible accident. He was at the lathe working on some forks. It wasn't an automatic lathe and there was a handle to shift the belt from the drive wheel to the load pulley; his overalls got caught in the mechanism and if they hadn't been so abundant that might have been the end of the story. Luckily they tangled up and he managed to escape unhurt.

It was no use being too fussy about your clothing in those days: the war had come and gone and some had suffered more than others. The following winter, again on St. Catherine's Day, the bitter cold persuaded him to give up the fustian jacket which was none too warm and get an overcoat. The only one available is his uncle's old military great coat, so, duly dyed a more suitable navy blue, the sleeves were taken up. Nobody gave a thought to the pockets, though, which hung down unusually low. The wisecracks never stopped, even more so when the coat began to lose its colour and little Ernesto's neck took on a dark, sickly hue. Why don't you wash more often, they jibed, but he just took it on the chin. Meanwhile in his job everything

was going smoothly: he was respected at Focesi and he stayed at Gloria till he had learned his trade, first on frames, later moving on to assembly. By the time he was twenty the intrepid Colnago was ready to go it alone.

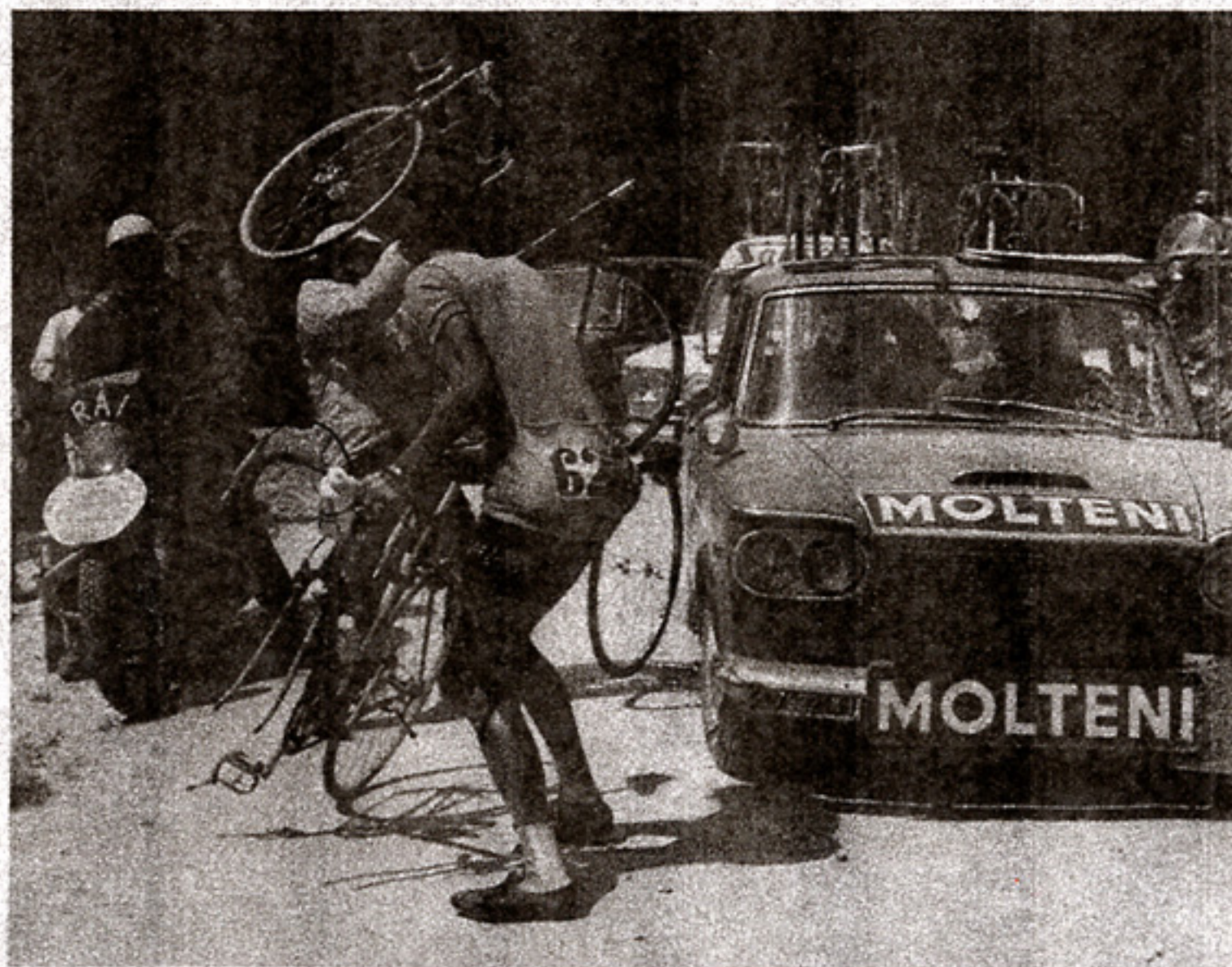
By this time bicycles are not just his daily work; they soon become his main form of recreation and at fifteen he is already racing. He is taken on by Aurora Concorezzo, and proves a good enough sprinter to have to falsify his documents again - the rules are clear enough, you have to be over sixteen. But the forgeries stop here; Colnago swears it never happened again. (Even Maspes did the same to start racing - some people are born with an urgent impatience to get ahead - there are plenty of good examples). The races are naturally local affairs, sometimes the first prize is a salami. His first bike is paid for with hard-earned cash: a Garibaldina, mass produced and nothing special. Two years later he gets his first hand-made bike, "made-to-measure" as Colnago likes to say. The important meetings become more frequent: there are sprint events and sometimes he comes in ahead of the field. The Gazzetta dello Sport gives him the odd mention, his name gets around at least in Lombardy, and he can afford a bit of swagger. It doesn't do him any harm, and his fame grows in 1950 when he wins the Caldirola Cup.

Here the victories come to an end; the count stops at 18 when, 50 metres from the line in the Milan-Busseto, he collides with a stationary "Guzzino". His right fibula goes and for Colnago its good-bye to cycling.

Or more precisely, to racing, then only a weekend escape from his job at Gloria, where his skills as a mechanic are by this time consummate. Having got the trade safely under his belt, he realises it is time to move on: after seven years of work well done the thanks are mutual.

Back home he finds his brother Paolino, who he already

calls "Paol" or "Paul". But he is still just a boy of nine, only interested in having fun, while his father dreams he may one day make a farmer. Little does he know that Ernesto has already made up his mind and before long he will make his brother an offer of work that amounts to one question - can you lend me a hand?



One of the many Giro d'Italia of the, sixties, Colnago hard at work with a mechanical problem during a race. The rider involved is Gianni Motta in the pink shirt.

THE FASCINATION OF THE UNKNOWN

At nineteen Colnago is already determined to be a mechanic and to set himself up in business. His capacity shows in the way the others watch him work, in the initiatives he takes on the sly - after all he is not paid to make improvements. He studies the bicycle and the bike, so to speak, studies him. They like each other, and the relationship will be an intense and enduring one, even if Vicenzina, his wife, remains his first love.

The first step was already a risky one in his father's view, since Ernesto had to do everything by himself. He set up a shop, a hole in the wall five metres by five, right opposite the Du e Vint tavern in Cambiago. His customers were all close at hand, and remember that in those days - this was in '51/'52 - very few in the village had a car. Many took advantage of the tavern to rest their legs and have a glass of wine, while Ernesto adjusted their mudguards across the road. During this time he thought things over. He wanted to leave Gloria to ride professionally. After Aurora Desio he was chosen by Velo Club Melzo and Dario Mattavelli and this encouraged him. He decided he would give up his job and give himself a couple of years to see how things went. Long distance was out, but he was a fair sprinter up to a kilometre. And please, not too many hills.

At twenty, as we have seen, his dreams are shattered in an instant. With the fall in the Milan-Busseto, which he could

have won, his destiny is fixed: to finish with racing, which was only a matter of Saturdays and Sundays, certainly not training or the semi-professionalism that today you see in a lad of fifteen just out of school. The road ahead for Ernesto instead was as a mechanic.

Let's make it clear that the bike he raced with was not a bought one. He had made it himself and it had Colnago Ernesto stamped on it, not just to show who was riding but who had built it as well. And other riders gathered round it, looking at it, hazarding a few questions. The bike gave him prestige, and encouraged him to dream. It was the first indication of a career which would mark him out as someone special, but not without a price in terms of hard work. He was conscripted in 1952, but his foot was still healing and his hip was giving him trouble. Then, luckily, he was classified as the breadwinner of the family - Paolino, remember, was only eight years old.

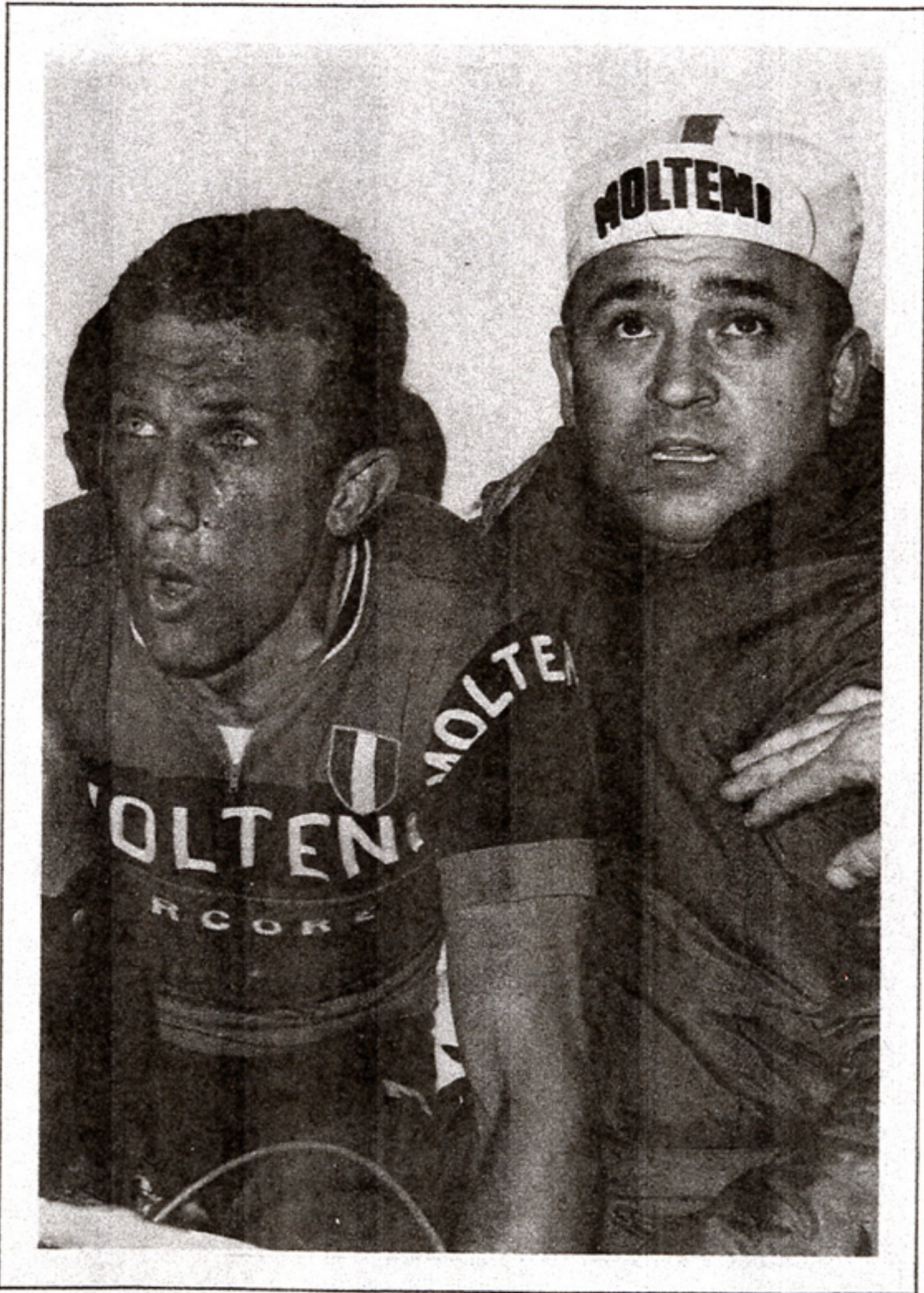
The shop alone was not enough, especially as there were two other bicycle repairers in Cambiago, older men, but capable all the same. Everyone had enough to eat, but they were small helpings for one as ambitious and stubborn as Colnago.

He could have got a job, Papa Antonio would have been happy, but it would have meant a step backwards. In the area there were two wholesalers who were doing well, Beretta of Villasanta and Bucci of Monza. Then there was Doniselli in Milan. Colnago offered to assemble bikes for them, twenty each a week. That meant putting together single-handed sixty complete cycles down to the last little detail. All this in the five-metre-square workshop in Via Garibaldi, Cambiago.

Papa Antonio grumbled and the rest of the family chimed in: when is that blessed lad ever going to learn, they said, that his big ideas will be his downfall? Ernesto, stubborn as ever,

COLNAGO

would not ask for a penny, but looked round for other dealers and producers who could offer him work. The money he earned went towards his own machines and if there was no money it did not matter, he could still get accessories, spare parts and any components he needed. The frame he could take care of himself: it was right up his street. He was happy with the situation and was already looking forward to the day when he could move out of the shop, not only to avoid paying the 2,500 lire a year rent, but to be independent of his cousin who let the shop and gave him the use of a shed. About this time Colnago also got a moped, a 'mosquito', sharing the cost with Appaini, the owner of the tavern opposite. He was a good man whose son, Marcello, today works in a cycle workshop - Colnago's, of course.



Colnago is known for his loyalty: he remained with Molteni as a mechanic for nine consecutive seasons. Here shown with Motta, one of his pupils.

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

He speaks a bit of French, just a smattering, but he is good with the hand gestures and there are people who have had conversations with him in New York, where French is considered something of a refinement, who were quite impressed. His first foreign customer, individual that is, was of unknown age and Colnago made no note of the year. Let's say it was 1960.

What is certain is that he was from Berkeley, California, a university professor and in Italy for a vacation: it was the mid-August bank holiday. He was over six feet, and emaciated, but he enjoyed sports. He wanted a Colnago in ten days and he got it. The downpayment was in dollars, as was the settlement, paid promptly on delivery. Colnago remembers him, not so much because he was the first, but because he took size-thirteen shoes.

It was no accident that Colnago was in his workshop when everyone else was on holiday. Or that with him was Paolino, whose days of fun and games were long gone: he started fitting wheels for his brother when he was eleven and you can bet that in that department there wasn't a faster or more accurate worker anywhere.

Even while he was still doing repairs, when the shop still had wooden doors, the first Colnago model came out under the name "La Freccia" (The Arrow). There were frequent requests for the "condorino" type, a bicycle classified as

“half race”, with a tiny, very narrow handlebar that they don’t make anymore. The special bikes were still to come; it took a couple of years after he finished racing for the young mechanic to begin to stretch himself, just as he used to do when rushing for the finish, and as born sprinters still do today.

But the sprinter’s physique did not suit this Brianzolo who saw the sprint as one phase to be followed by others: the next goal was to be the long distance, to be attained as quickly as possible. Long distance meant hours of practice, of training and hard work. All this Colnago put in between 1954 and 1973, after which it was downhill.

1954 means Magni, a year before he joined Nivea-Fuchs definitively. An odd year in which Colnago is called upon to pay his dues as an apprentice. The call comes seven days before the start of the Giro d’Italia, with all the bikes yet to be assembled, and for the last three days the wheels are his daily bread. Naturally he keeps his mouth shut about payment. After that comes the Giro del Piemonte and then the Lazio where he is taken on for what they think he is: a youngster with talent. Still no mention of money. He does not dare go to Nivea’s accountant Pagani; that wouldn’t be a wise move, and in any case it is Fiorenzo Magni who decides. So one day at the Cycle Show, he overcomes his shyness and approaches him: Magni’s answer is final - forty thousand lire, a pittance, but, according to Magni, he could not expect any more, because apprenticeship must be paid for, always.

Colnago owes Magni a great deal, above all ten years spent talking about this and that, always trying to improve. Magni is the type of man who believes that anything is possible if you work hard enough, and the attitude has rubbed off on Colnago.

In 1955 things go differently. By now he has learnt the ropes, although Faliero Masi is chief mechanic and he quite

happy to be second. To give a complete account of all that happens from then down to 1973 would be impossible, but a brief outline goes like this: two years at Nivea-Fuchs, the following three at Chlorodont, another three at Philco and then nine at Molteni. He is even around long enough to revolutionise the life of his peers, for years exploited and forced to accept poverty-line wages ; professional status for mechanics following cycling teams eventually wins the day, and a minimum economic security becomes a reality. These are the years of pure enjoyment. The rudiments he already knows, and he picked up enough to follow the races from Faliero Masi. By the truck or in the cellars, where the real work of the mechanic goes on, he has little to learn, though Masi remains his most important reference point because Colnago sees that he can keep pace with one of the best. Masi refines him and introduces him, no small thing in itself, to a Mantovan frame builder called Merlo, a man with golden fingers. At Chlorodont he becomes chief mechanic with Mario Borsoi, from Treviso. At Molteni he is already official supplier: the bikes are called Molteni by express wish of the owner, Ambrogio, but they are obviously Colnago's - the brownish colour recalls the Arcore company, which goes to show that you can paint a bicycle any colour. Well, if you are happy with it, says Ernesto, but meanwhile it occurs to him that there is no harm in putting forward advanced styles and shapes as well as colours which may not be to everyone's liking but have a large following anyway.



Colnago and G.B. Baronchelli when the rider from Bergamo was a rising star. Between them the well known sports writer Rino Negri, from "La Gazzetta dello Sport".

ALL THE SECRETS, NO SECRET

Tullio Campagnolo had a great fondness for him, he loved his ideas and encouraged him to go on. Zambrini too, the legendary sales manager of Bianchi in its heyday, often made his appreciation known - you might say he was a Colnago fan. Cesare Rizzato went so far as to try and attract him to Padua, where Atala was based, offering him a position as technical manager, knowing full well that Colnago might say no, which he did. Commendatore Borghi held him in high regard, as did Pietro and Ambrogio Molteni, testified by an understanding which lasted eleven years and founded solely on knowing glances and hand shakes, never by any written contract. But the one person Colnago remembers above all others from that world and never to return, is Tano Belloni, unhappily dubbed the 'eternal second', who bewitched the young mechanic during his three years as technical director at Chlorodont with tales and adventures of an era long past - tales of America, of the six-day events at the turn of the century, of the golden age, and with courageous exploits not only related to cycling. An exceptional man, a brilliant man, according to Colnago, not one to waste compliments. We have already met Fiorenzo Magni and there is no need to labour the point; a bond so tightly cemented as to become unbreakable. It must be said though that Colnago is doubly indebted to Magni for creating the extra-sporting combination of Nivea and Fuchs in 1954, and for

revolutionising a world that other innovators, Vincenzo Giacotto above all, saw from a purely business point of view. Let's get this clear. Calculated thinking is important in cycling but it is the fate of almost any innovator to run up against a wall of incomprehension in a field where tradition not only has a meaning but also justifies the very existence of the sport, which is not just a business as some seem to believe.

You cannot steal secrets where they do not exist. Colnago gives a knowing grin when you ask him how many have tried to make him blush with flattering remarks. Dozens, he replies, mostly foreign journalists, but there really isn't any secret. If you are really lucky, he may suggest a few of the qualities which help to make a Brianzolo what he is: determination, application, the willingness to work. But if there were no talent, real talent, little of any use would come out of those midnight jottings, those scraps of paper hurriedly scribbled in the early hours. Nor would it be any good getting up at six-thirty in the morning come rain or shine, to begin each day of work. Without talent life can only mean quantity, and maybe plenty of money just the same; but the quality, Colnago's obsession, would never have come out so unmistakably, even as a youth, and without that quality, it does not make sense expending all that energy just to plough back the proceeds into an enterprise which you happen to enjoy. Because this is another factor to be borne in mind, in times when for some the only goal is to make money, while someone else takes the risks.

The recipe for Colnago's success does not exist. Let's try and uncover it nevertheless, at least for the use and consumption of the many 'Japanese-minded' who are interested, in the daily routine of hard work which ennobles the people of Cambiago and thereabouts. The hour we have mentioned, and it only remains to describe the first thing he

does: that's easy, he opens the blinds to see what the weather is like. His mood does not depend on the heavens, but more on his rheumatism; yes, some days that does bother him.

Breakfast at quarter past seven, tea with biscuits and jam, a quick look through last night's notes and then the day begins. It is seven-thirty when Colnago enters his workshop, not far from the house, in effect linked to it by a communicating basement. Up till a few years ago mornings and afternoons were spent largely in manual work: he too bent forks and welded, irrespective of his being the boss. In fact, the first to use the term "padron" was Gianni Motta and Eddy Merckx for once kept on the tail of the blond lad from Croppino, borrowing the term with no irony intended. Now if a Belgian, from Brussels, and a champion of his calibre chooses to show his respect in that way, he is welcome, recognising in Colnago much greater merits than an ordinary cycle mechanic, albeit clever and highly valued, is accustomed to attribute to himself.

During his racing period, a good eight months of the year were spent following the more or less famous names, all more or less wilful personalities. Until age brought with it wisdom, a little caution, he was hardly ever in the workshop, and until 1974, when he began to settle down a bit, even the workshop was a modest affair. In reality it was more a point of reference for a particular world, that of the cyclists and enthusiasts of a certain type. It was not unheard of for some of the latter, those with their own Colnago, to put it in the bedroom, preferring it as an object of veneration to their legitimate spouse. Who can say how many quarrels this simple man of Cambiago has unwittingly sparked off in certain Italian homes?

Now that he has little time for manual work, busy with his duties as a full-time boss - personally checking that each piece turned out by his workshop is worthy of his name -

Colnago feels equally fulfilled. But he never fails to lend a hand if necessary, so much so that he remembers with a touch of nostalgia a period of three full weeks at the start of '85, when a flu epidemic in the workshop had him back bending forks, and more besides, more or less making the entire bike from the intermediate operations to the finished product.

He does not like the term boss which goes against the family structure that he immediately imposed. Nor businessman and to call him a manager upsets him: he will only accept the name if it is intended to refer to the wise management of his affairs. Rather than manager he prefers the title craftsman, which is not just a registration number at the Chamber of Commerce. He has had countless offers from people with money who have made him dubious proposals, hoping that, with the years, Colnago would be enticed by the idea of expanding production whilst maintaining the quality. There have been no lack of such offers, but Colnago has always loathed having to account to anyone except his wife. And Vicenzina, with patience and calm reasoning, has always shown him the length of his stride.

With age and experience that stride has lengthened but it has never gone beyond measure. It is the stride of a man just under one metre-seventy who indulges his appetite mainly out of a love of company tipping the scales at a healthy 87 kilos when as a youth he weighed a mere 67. He has just had his 54th birthday and you can say what you like but he won't make an acrobat now.

Food holds little interest for him and if it was up to him meals would never regulate his day. The real problem for Colnago are the formal meetings, engagements with customers, the working dinners which mean business, certainly not social gatherings. Without such obligations he

would get by very simply, with a light lunch at one o'clock - a small steak, salad and a glass of wine - nothing heavy. At half-past one he is back in the workshop, as he prefers to call it. The only 'factory' he ever worked in was at Gloria where he learnt his trade.

At seven he does his rounds. For the others the working day finished an hour ago. Only Paolino is still around; he loves what he does and you might say he is an ideal employee but a better way of putting it would be to call him a younger brother who took as his model the older one. Just time for a word or two with Paolino and Colnago makes his way back to the house, to wash and change and settle down in an armchair ready for dinner with Vincenzina. He admits he has one weakness: he likes a cuddle now and then, but his wife and daughter oblige and now there is also his little grandson, Alessandro, who delights him with every smile. His daughter Anna, so longed for by Ernesto and Vincenzina after a boy was taken from them at birth, is very close to her parents. She too works in the firm, on the administration side and is married to Giovanni, a first-class frame builder who has been in the workshop for years.

Giovanni is already head of the frame section but his career was certainly not built around his marriage. Before joining Colnago he worked as a mechanic elsewhere, studying in the evenings. He got a good diploma but the most valued accolade he ever obtained was from his future father-in-law, who saw in him a successor, one who could carry forward his style, and therefore considered him already "one of the family".

The subject of employees is a useful key to understanding the famous secret, the one that does not exist. It is the fundamental premise of a rationale that sets a limit of fifteen, everyone included, in order to be and remain craftsmen. Hiring the wrong man means a waste of time, not

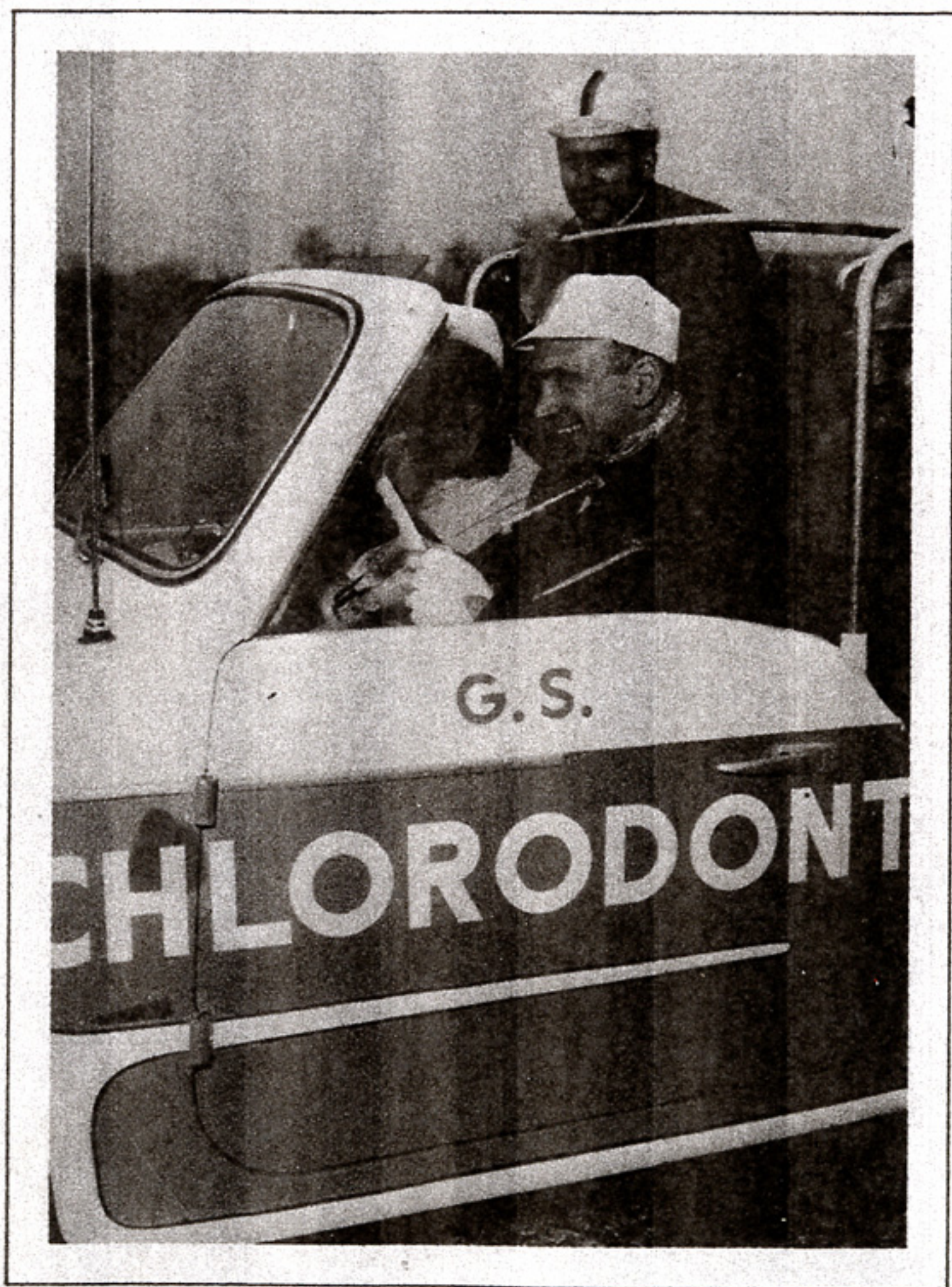
only for the firm, but also for the one who must undergo a trial period to no avail; all in all an unwarrantable setback. Having said that it must be pointed out that in Colnago's case it has never happened, and it says a lot about his shrewdness as a talent-scout that in all these years he has never had to fire anyone because they would never make a mechanic and should try something else. The basic criteria is to find youngsters with a willingness to work and certain natural gifts, chief among them being intelligence, because this is a living flame that begins to die only with old age. It does not matter where they come from, whether from North or South Italy, or even from abroad, if they get it into their heads that they have a vocation for the bicycle. That, perhaps, is important, but not indispensable because Colnago tells everyone that making bikes and other jobs that involve mechanics does not require exceptional gifts: what it takes is ability practised day after day and which hopefully increases as a result. It is definitely not a job for those who only want to make the effort one day and not the next, or when they feel like it.

He has never had any madmen in the shop, and those who came for a while before deciding to move on were never persuaded to stop. There is a place for everyone in this world, says Colnago, and it never made any sense trying to make someone stay if he doesn't want to. Neither is money an expedient. Colnago has a proverb on the subject which involves horses but not those given as gifts whose mouths are not to be inspected. His motto goes more or less like this: "when the horse has bolted give him free rein". None of his workers who left has ever changed his mind and come back, and he does not think it will happen in the future. For the simple reason that a good shepherd never loses his lambs; grown men haven't time for games of push and tug.

The first employee in the firm was Paolino, Colnago's

brother, today a highly specialized worker. The first clerk is not difficult to find because she is still there. Her name is Claudia and she was followed by Luisa. Initially all the paperwork was handled by Vincenzina. Among the workers of course there are those who can boast over twenty years' service: their names are Aldo Assoni and Luigi Perego but they are known to everyone as l'Aldo and il Luigi. Later came il Luciano, l'Andrea, l'Angelo and il Giovanni.

Talking about people leaving, he allows himself a rare display of vanity, because even those who did not stay learnt from him the basics of the art of bicyclery - an awful expression, but the art really does exist, to separate the wheat from the tares - and part of the credit comes back home, to Colnago Ernesto, painstakingly written in italics as on the first trade mark, with the surname placed before the name to follow official custom. Or maybe not. Maybe it is just that no one ever calls him Ernesto. For everyone he is simply il Colnago. Il Colnago, period.



Colnago in the wind, Fiorenzo Magni at the wheel of the Chlorodont flagship, where he was technical director. The two became great friends.

THE WORLD OF COLNAGO

It goes without saying that the name Colnago is known throughout the world. But few people outside Lombardy and beyond the confines of the professional cycling empire, where the Cambiago workshop is familiar to everyone, are aware of what exactly lies behind Colnago's craftsmanlike enterprise. The contrast between the physical reality of the company comprising the premises and the daily output of bicycles on the one hand, and the firm's international reputation on the other are a source of amazement to many. Some even suppose that Colnago the craftsman is a mere thing of the past. The American world champion record breaker Greg Le Mond, by no means a newcomer to the scene, was the last in a long line of professional racing cyclists to wonder at what he found. Perhaps with a vision of Detroit and a four-wheel industry in mind, he expected to see a high-tech computerized cycle production line devoid of all human presence. His amazement was equal to that expressed by a top level Chinese trade delegation from the People's Republic after a recent visit to his works.

Many people find it hard to believe that a workshop can turn out 'only' three thousand bikes a year as well as three thousand frames, thinking perhaps that other firms are involved, an accusation which can only enrage Colnago. People may believe what they like but there is a factory near Bologna producing middle to high quality cycles for the open

market, its name Colner being a composite of the first and second names of its more illustrious competitor. But one thing is for certain: all bicycles made at the Cambiago workshop are comprised exclusively of parts made by Colnago there on the spot (excluding those parts generally classed as accessories).

It is said that many have asked to go into business with Colnago. His response has always been "thanks but no thanks", perhaps followed by another of his favourite expressions, "I feel big in my smallness". It is impossible to describe the abashed tone of voice as he says these things and those who might take him to be merely a consummate actor do him a great injustice. His discomfort originates from the fact that he has always struggled to take himself seriously. He has always disliked putting on airs and you note with pleasure that this is still the case today. But one fine day back in the mid-sixties, Colnago must have felt buoyed along with the wind in his sails. At this point he must have realised that few could catch him, and that in all his modesty he had become an expert in his own field (though he would never admit it). In truth, the professional racing circuit of those days didn't lack capable bicycle mechanics and there is no lack of them today; however, few had the almost fanatical devotion and love of hard work that Colnago has shown all his life.

You cannot become a good mechanic in a day, and one has to remember that Colnago took almost 15 years before allowing himself to start formulating his own ideas. Before this he kept his ears open and listened, even to people who thought too much of themselves. He was fond of saying that even nonsense is at times useful in that it allows you to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

From then onwards, without wishing to drag up the past and circumstances that will never recur, only to mention people and ways which no longer exist, Colnago recalls two

outstanding features: firstly, the certainty that all effort bears fruit and that whatever the goal undertaken the road always leads upwards and on, and the second aspect was the willingness of people to lend a hand. He searches for the word, perhaps goodness, or understanding. The fact remains that he remembers perfectly so many who have helped him, perhaps only with an apparently insignificant piece of advice given at just the right moment.

He felt close ties with a large number of people, starting with Cino Cinelli who taught him a great deal ("because he had an extra gear") but he was on good terms with both the humble and the powerful, the latter recognising his diligence and effort, and perhaps they had also glimpsed his genius. Tullio Compagnolo was very taken with him, maybe seeing in Colnago the same verve of his native Vicenza that fired him in his youth: the insatiable desire to improve, the wish to invent each day something both useful and productive or even just something yet more useful. It is ironic that destiny has bestowed fame in such unequal helpings on two men equally envied.

Colnago imagines a new bicycle totally unlike the cycle as we know it, made in a way and of materials as yet unknown to us. He dreams that someday someone may come up with a realistic solution, as he suspects he has given everything he can on the traditional level. Colnago feels himself to be only half innovator in that he has been conditioned by a vision of the bicycle that leaves little scope for change. In that connection, he cites the furor caused by the arrival of Moser's one-hour record breaking bike, and he does not speak from pique when he admits he would have liked to be its creator. A new inclination had been spoken of for some time and the cow-horn handlebars had already been seen but it took an outsider, so to speak, like Prof. Del Monte to come up with the lenticular wheels at that level. Not that one

*should necessarily turn to scientists for an answer, but because they bring a fresh approach to the subject, whatever it may be. (*Already in the 1980 Moscow Olympics Colnago supplied the Soviet '100 Kilometres' team with bikes having 26-inch front and 28-inch rear wheels. The lenticular form had still to be invented).*

Colnago knew all about record-breaking bicycles, having built the one belonging to Eddy Merckx, not to mention other riders who won with bikes which differed from Colnagos only in name and paintwork. He had no doubts, though, concerning Merckx: in those days one thought about the materials and the weight, titanium was tried because it was a striking solution, and he thought twice about it because of the enormous problems of torsion created by such powerful athletes. For the Mexican run Colnago studied the most minimal reductions, filing and drilling holes in the bike and accessories until it seemed like a piece of Flanders lace. But that was not the way.

For Gregor Braun, Moser's most recent challenger, he changed direction, departing from the fashion to pursue a concept that was so new that it still required numerous adjustments. Does it matter that Braun failed? Not at all, because both Braun and his machine gave all that they could - well done Moser, and that's an end to it.

Colnago's philosophy as a craftsman can be summed up very briefly: a willingness to alter course, abandoning projects that bear no fruit; a flexibility of approach that distinguishes itself from the cautiously moving cycle industry. It is this individualism which has allowed him to press on despite small setbacks, not defeats on the track, of course, but customers who fail to pay. The industry itself was his benefactor, he realises this himself. It taught him the tricks of the trade and during his racing years gave him the opportunity both on and off the track to make contacts and

to exploit the name he was making for himself around Europe. Colnago remembers the hard work, the long evenings passed making frames for foreign clients he met in France and Belgium, arriving or leaving race meetings, in the basements, outside hotels or anywhere a race mechanic gets his experience: tending to the riders by day and the materials by night fully aware that any oversight could be fatal to all concerned.

There can be no doubt that the industry is elephantine in its make-up, very often ending up in the hands of people claiming to be managers (and who take home a manager's salary), but who unfortunately know very little about bicycles. However it should be mentioned that the whole concept of the bike has changed. Originally the term bicycle meant the frame only, but then people began to speak about accessories and this opened the door to the components industry. In Colnago's view, there is no absolute truth in the field concerned, even if part of the truth suggests that some claim credit that is not deservedly theirs, proclaiming themselves cycle manufacturers when all they really do is assemble parts, a slightly less noble profession. It is certainly a long story, involving also the various associations that represent only a part of the business, because the bicycle world too has its hidden areas. The associations gathered together under the initials ANCMA look to the motorized sector with interest, in virtue of the fact that the market for motorbikes and what used to be called scooters has a much greater economic value than that of the ordinary bicycle. The result is that there is no adequate ruling which sets the minimum production standards, quality being left entirely up to the individual manufacturer. Which is why craftsmen of Colnago's stature have had to select a particular portion of the market, the most restricted but the strongest economically.

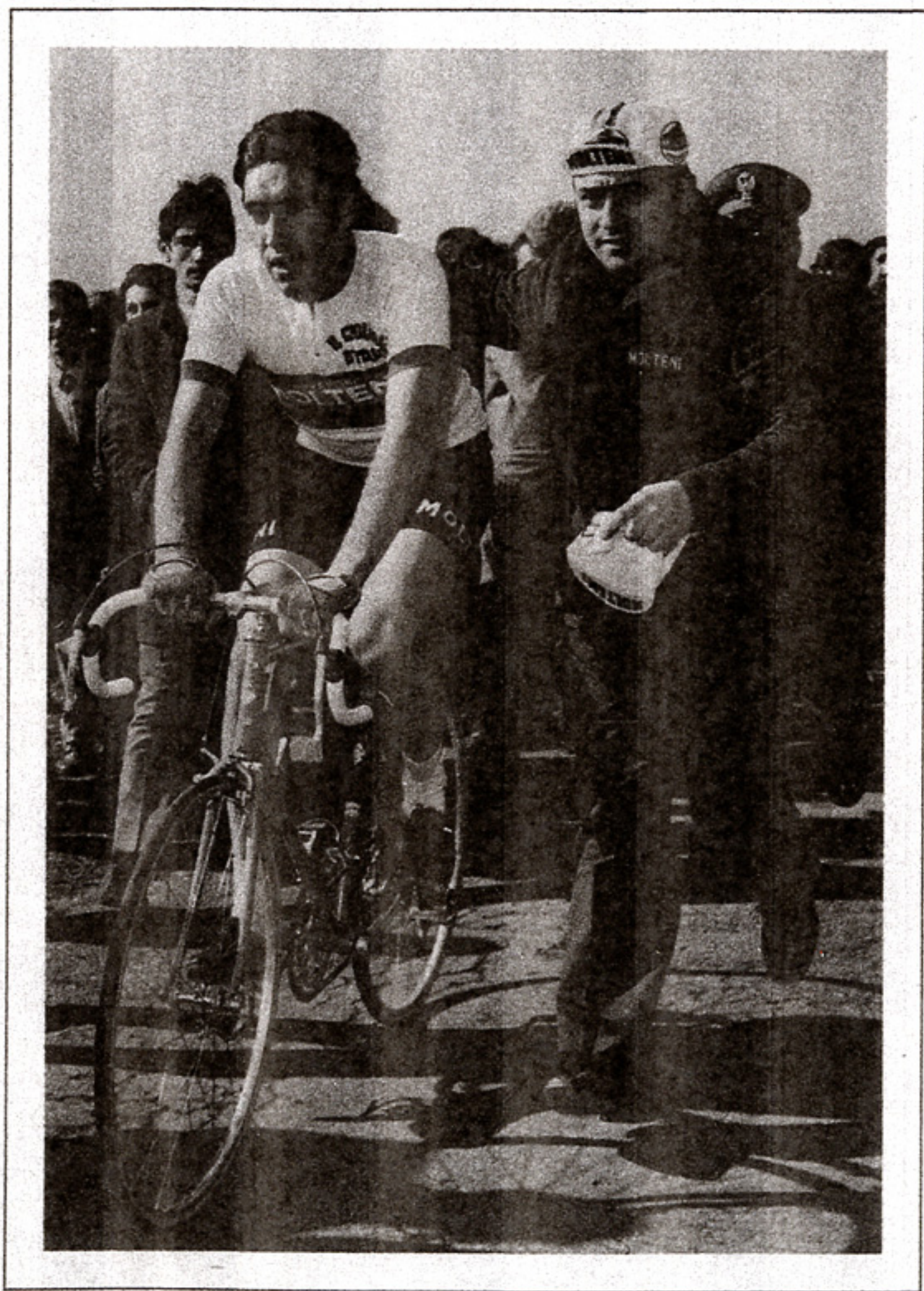
The reference to certain now almost legendary prices, when it was said that Colnago only made gold-plated bicycles for sheiks, is immediate. The idea of producing limited runs of special bikes for a select clientele came to Colnago as a way of diversifying his range of products and customers. The market for riders or hopefuls was in any case saturated (and we should not forget that Colnago was not alone), and it was therefore necessary to look elsewhere and the simplest solution were the freelance professionals in the middle-high income brackets. This led to the most widely varying diversification, and from there to the gold-plated bikes was but a short step, especially when spurred on by the consequent hunt for rareties, or better still one-offs.

All water under the bridge. The days of the emirs and sheiks ploughing their way through a sea of oil on tarnished gold has passed. Those extravagant times have past making way for the trend in homages to noted personalities. The most significant of these, engrained in the memory of the whole cycling fraternity, not only Colnago and Co., was that paid to the pope in 1979 when he was presented with one of those extraordinary bikes mentioned earlier. The curious background to the story certainly does not regard the use His Holiness made of it in Castelgandolfo, but rather the misuse of it by a Dutch bicycle salesman who, evidently convinced he could get away with it, used a picture taken that day in St. Peter's for an advertisement, having carefully replaced Colnago's face with his own. Unluckily for him the crude forgery was soon exposed. News carries fast and even in Holland it looked strange that the entire Colnago family was present without the head of the family to do the honours. A real piece of idiocy, but in the end you just have to laugh, bearing in mind that the Dutchman probably won over one or two local churchgoing catholics, whereas in Spain for example the hoax would have had quite a different effect.....

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On the other hand counterfeit bikes are not a rare occurrence. Colnago is not a Cartier or a Vuitton who, thanks to their emblems, cause alternative markets to spring up. But he is a victim of vulgar imitations, clumsy attempts that could never trouble a careful buyer. A number of Colnago fakes were traced to Belgium recently and one of these actually ended up in a large store in Los Angeles where Colnago himself spotted it. Problems arise with the transfers which certainly do not cost that much, and Colnago says he regrets not producing them himself (total cost around ten thousand lira or about 7-8 dollars per bike) instead of frames which are difficult and costly to build. But such is the price of fame. It isn't easy to be compared with those who purport to be master craftsmen, like the owner of a boutique or atelier, as if to construct bicycles you have to be a tailor. But its better to ignore them and convince yourself that there is room for everyone. There exist, at least in Italy, ambitious do-it yourselfers who in their spare time build perfectly ordinary bikes which they put out as 'racers' or 'racing bikes' at ridiculous prices; there are plumbers who put together tubes that are nothing to do with their trade. Everything goes on over here. On the other hand there is a Polish gentleman who saved all his money to buy a Colnago and then wrote him a letter describing his joy, a letter which Colnago guards jealously.

The problem is with standards - not everything may be defined a bicycle. Certain Italian-produced items exported to the U.S. and on show in New York or Los Angeles are only distantly related to the bicycle, presenting none of the salient characteristics. In short, they aren't worth a second look and it should not come as any great surprise if 'made in Italy', so much vaunted especially by ourselves, is progressively ousted by products from Taiwan or Japan.



One of the many happy moments that have marked relations between the great cyclist Merckx and the 'prince' of Italian mechanics.

A BICYCLE IN BLOOM

As noted above, the original trade-mark was in the form of his full signature. Not just a form of advertising, but a way of claiming responsibility. That was followed by the 'tricolore', the Italian flag. For the present trade-mark, the ace of clubs, we must wait till 1970, when Michele Dancelli won the Milan-Sanremo on a Colnago, ending a 17-year famine that had lasted since Loretto Petrucci's double. The ace of clubs (trans: known as the ace of flowers in Italian) was an idea that came to Colnago, a man easily moved, even to tears, by momentous occasions, the next day while reading the Gazzetta dello Sport. Bruno Raschi had produced one of his usual imaginative pieces, simple but effective. It revolved around Sanremo, 'city of flowers', and the picture of a cavalcade through two continuous streams of people packed together to cheer the long-awaited Italian victory. Raschi wrote of a bicycle in full bloom surmounted ethereally by Dancelli, effortless, light as a feather. So Colnago created the flower with just a C in the centre, the one that still appears today, and added the rainbow colours to signify the many world championships won on his bicycles. How many? He does not remember, nor is it worth recording, except to continually update the record. The 'ace of flowers' will never wither, however: it has put down roots too deeply.

One innocent soul once tried to persuade Colnago to

move, or rather, having received the blunt reply that nobody will ever shift him from Cambiago, to set up a show room in Milan to enhance his commercial image. To Colnago it sounded like affectation, a type of conceit, an attempt to pass himself off as something he is not - and who is to say he is wrong? In the end it is well that there is someone willing to remember that hard work is hard work, whether in a workshop five metres by five or one of 300 square metres, and that the work is still hard in 800, or even 1500. Cycling is not about downhill racing and a craftsman must not mistake himself for a businessman, if he does not want to lose his identity. It might seem like snobbery in a man who is known throughout the world, but it isn't. It is just knowing one's limits.

Nor did his head swell when one of his cycles was exhibited at the Milan Triennial. It was in 1973 and Remo Brindisi asked for it as a personal favour.

Colnago's image is disseminated through the normal channels:

he is present at the specialist trade fairs, two-yearly, with a stand at Cologne, Paris, New York, and Milan. A stand that is easily recognised by its size and by the great crowds of people, often just curious, many later becoming customers. But all, or almost all, buy direct from Cambiago, the hub of the cycling world. Of course there are reps around the world, but those who want to make a contract sooner or later take advantage of the cycling opportunity and make the trip to Milan. No matter whether they are national sports authorities, ministers or delegates from great nations - it all happens at Cambiago where the customer can see for himself that there is no trick and no fraud. There have been East Germans, recently also Czechs and Poles, but Colnago has always had a soft spot for the Soviets, whose manager Kapitonov, one of the past names in road-racing, never

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misses his annual three-day visit, bringing with him orders for his boys who repay Colnago in style, winning Olympic medals, world titles and classic races.

Colnago devotes himself, either through an intermediary or in person to these athletes. A talent scout is born, he is not taught. He must have the natural gifts - the nose, the eye to spot a champion. At times a glance is enough: there isn't a cyclist in the world whose potential cannot be discerned, especially as a youth, in his temperament. Better than a shy even temper is a haughty, surly, even sullen character, with a history of daily toil in the fields behind him. Someone with a limitless passion, but with both feet on the ground, because cycling may be a great excuse to skip school but to make it your job you need talent, aggression and a burning ambition as well as competitiveness.

Having followed hundreds of cyclists in his time, and created not a few, it saddens Colnago to learn that nowadays there are fewer and fewer racers around. What many do not realise is that Colnago, once he got on his feet, began a policy of investment in human resources. Every year he gives away seventy or eighty bikes to needy youngsters, those who could never afford to buy one. These are boys who are no strangers to a bicycle or to winning plenty of races. At one time the percentage was around five per cent, every year four or five cyclists with promise. No matter if the odd one disappeared from view. It happens.

Colnago reckoned to hatch at least ten a year as long as nature furnished the right material. We are talking about people of the calibre of Vianelli, Basso, Boifava, Dancelli. Mind you, all went on to Molteni because in those days you did not have binding contracts worth thousands - a cautious policy begun early was all that was necessary. Risky? Yes, but it was worth it. McEnroe was put under contract by Tacchini, the sportswear people, while still very young, but it

wasn't his shirt and pants that made him a tennis champion.

Colnago watched and understood, used his intuition and asked advice. In cycling there are plenty who know everything or pretend to; it is a sport which invites hollow expertise, bar pundits. Italy today talks football in the big cities, cycling in the little towns, where the bicycle is still a way of life, not a form of entertainment. It will never become 'fashionable' because fashions are transient and pass away as quickly as they come. Colnago has always listened only to his instinct. Once or twice he has cursed it, a victim of bitter disappointment. And these he still collects occasionally even today.

Those who answered the call are well known to us all: apart from those listed above names like Baronchelli, Bontempi, Rosola, and Noris immediately come to mind. But the list is longer and includes the cream of the foreigners, especially from Belgium where Colnago is an authority. He spotted Vanderaerden very young, as with Willems and De Wolf and, to go back a bit further, Godefroot. You could almost say that Flanders is a part of the Province of Bergamo, a colony within the confines of an empire in which every boy who dreams of becoming a champion, sooner or later must pass through Cambiago, and not to greet the lord mayor. People who as amateurs promised the moon and the stars, Zanoni or even Paganessi, later turned out to be only human; there are plenty of professionals in Italy who burn with an unsteady flame.

The others belong to the realms of the heart; two names in particular: Gianni Motta and Giuseppe Saronni.

MOTTA, MERCKX AND SARONNI

If he had the time Colnago could talk all afternoon about Gianni Motta, and then ask you back the next day because he had forgotten something. Gianni Motta is a case of blind love. He came from Gropello to the Cambiago area with Santini, man who knew his bicycles, and found a workshop that bore no resemblance whatever to the existing one. He was looking for a bike and it had to be second-hand since he hadn't a penny. He promised to pay in installments, rather irregular ones though: whenever he had some cash. He had the harsh tone of a ruthless man who lets his pride ride roughshod for a while, but who speaks plainly and says exactly what he wants, even if he risks getting a blunt no for an answer. Colnago saw in him at once a grim determination, even a bit of venom. He realised that standing before him was a racing cyclist and without hesitating or wasting time he took him on his word. He invested in Gianni Motta a beautiful bike to repaint and in those days, with a boy of sixteen he knew nothing about, it was a leap in the dark. But he knew that the lad went to work by bicycle, a full sixty kilometres in all weathers and flat out, to let off steam and train for the races at the weekend. And little by little, from snatches of conversation, he got to know the boy's background. It should come as no surprise to learn that compulsory day school was anything but compulsory - optional would be more like it - for those who had little

aptitude and were looking for something more exciting, or more likely, had to help the family make ends meet. Colnago learnt of Motta's checkered career beginning at eleven as a cobbler, soon fed up and eager to become a welder, then apprentice accordion player, playing with friends at country dances and weddings on a Saturday night, after an afternoon race. Some of that hard-earned cash went towards the famous bike, and this demonstration of intent meant something to Colnago, especially as Motta was meanwhile winning one after the other and seemed to think it was all a big joke. Often the losers came in for some ribbing, beaten by a skinny kid who didn't look like he had the strength. But in fact there are people who live on their nerve ends and Gianni Motta still follows his own conscience.

In too great a hurry to become a racer he lost his way, aided and abetted by those who took advantage of him with deceptions and false promises. Today he is trader who became an industrialist before being an artisan and then, in passing, came back to craft industry, consumed by the anxiety of a frenetic life, turning each day into a continual test of efficiency. In between, you will recall, a pathetic come back, a dismal attempt to get back into the racing world when everything, including his age, counted against it. And all this grieves Colnago, who failed to help him avoid some of the bigger mistakes, because at a certain point Motta stopped listening, and began to follow his own whims, chimeras, illusions of stability. Some people, says Colnago and rightly, are born never to sit down calmly and think about things, victims of their own fears. As a cyclist, Motta was afraid of going to sleep a champion and waking up washed-out, forgotten, useless.

To a chap like that, even if only for the pleasure of comparing their characters, both free of any streak of ingenuousness, Colnago gave everything because a horse

that can win the Derby is rare and life seldom offers a second chance.

With Motta the nominal contract, worth one Italian lira, was inaugurated, and was followed by many others. Colnago has never claimed a percentage on others' sweated labour. Instead he has played a range of often thankless roles: he has been father, elder brother, estate agent, accountant and financier, because too frequently cyclists forget caution, or they are the prey of unscrupulous, greedy or simply ignorant relatives.

Of course the pay-off is the option if the rider's career goes as planned - the passage to professional with Colnago's blessing is the only toll, so to speak, explicitly required. But this is nothing to what it might be, very often dealing with youngsters without clear ideas.

Saronni's story is very different from that of Motta. A different character, different times, different situations. Saronni was discovered riding for the Buscatese club when he was fourteen, and people thought his future lay in track-cycling. An option, the usual attention, and the respect that is owing, according to Colnago, to a boy who has it in him. These are the Merckx years, and Baronchelli was soon to sneak up and put an end to a relationship built on success, on a one-hour record and many high class performances. Baronchelli was a short-lived love affair, a wrong move almost for Colnago (and for many others besides), since the faith placed in the lad, the excellent references, his amateur showing led many to expect extraordinary things from him. However, cyclists are prone to uncertainty too, and Baronchelli, an extremely gifted boy, weaved a web of doubt around his ability, feeling oppressed by a world that expected a champion, closed himself in his shell and systematically refusing the fence.

Saronni came along just when the last attempts to make

something of Baronchelli were under way. He made matters worse with his confidence, with his behaviour during the race, with his success; still very young he made himself captain, under Bitessi who played wet-nurse, while Baronchelli looked on, curiously, trying to fathom his flashes of malice.

Saronni is an ambitious young man and he knows that the times are right for him; cycling doles out talent with a dropper. And he is straightforward with Colnago: I do the pedalling, you take care of the rest. The mechanic of times past has changed his skin. In the '80s Colnago infuses confidence, his days of racing are long behind him and he intervenes personally only when necessary or at appointments he cannot miss, the classic races. As go between, Carletto Chiappano, more a friend than a manager, and the man who laid the basis for the astonishing success which fate forbade him to witness: Goodwood, August 1982, when Saronni made time stand still, protagonist of a moment which few Italians, cycle fans or laymen, will ever forget. His home rush for the world championship was born of anger, of the past defeats, of the Sanremos perhaps thrown away. And also of numerous post-mortems between two men of few words: you went wrong there, you should have done this or that. His reply is assent, short questions only - men of action do not dwell on conjecture.

With Merckx the relationship was completely different. Different times yet again, but mostly the roles were changed. Today it is easy to say that this 'filibuster', Molteni's flagship, represents the most heterogeneous rider in cycling, but in the end it was Merckx himself who profited from contact with Giorgio Albani and Ernesto Colnago, the former as manager, the latter as precision mechanic. Not in getting to the top, obviously, but in a more personal sense,

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because the encounter with two such specimens of Brianza fervour has only done him good, helping him in his dealings with his fellow men, above and beyond an overwhelming physical power which is only transient anyway. Now that Merckx is a competitor of Colnago, it is easy to say that some lessons were learnt in Cambiago, but we all try to profit a little from our neighbours and what is wrong with that?



Time passes, times change. The passage from craftsman to co-sponsor was well considered. Colnago here with another pupil, Giuseppe Saronni.

WHEN THE DAY'S WORK IS DONE.....

He is an avid reader of newspapers and magazines and especially likes periodicals. He reads in the evening, when he has the time and the inclination. He used to enjoy drawing and he was quite competent with water-colours; he still has a passion for paintings, without being an expert. He is not keen on games. At the most he may have played a hand of 'briscola' with Saronni a couple of times to kill time. He is not interested in gambling of any kind and the only time they made him buy some shares he soon got rid of them. The stock exchange is not for him, but for folk who can afford sleepless nights. One Christmas he was kept awake worrying about losing a negligible amount. He does not like the idea of winning or losing on pure chance.

He only smokes when he is with friends, after a meal. He might find he has not smoked a cigarette for two months and he gets mad because it means he has been busy working and he has not had a moment for himself. In company he lets himself go, eats heartily, and becomes a lively entertainer gesticulating with gusto. It's as if he knew ten languages, though he admits to being familiar with only one and even then no public speaker. Anyway there are other people who get paid to do it, and no doubt handsomely. He regrets not having had the opportunity to study more, but fate did not allow it and he cannot be accused of being idle like some. There is a time for everything and the time for studying is

long past. To his limited French, lean but essential, he would like to add English. He has tried private lessons at home, but he is a busy man and a strong will is not enough. Anyway the fact that he tries is something - perhaps his grandson will be able to give him a hand.

To find him rested, relaxed and in good shape there is only one place to go: Bratto of the Presolana. He leaves the car at home and walks everywhere. He is full of a new energy and enthusiasm and will often invite friends over for a bit of company. He is not fond of the seaside, but not because he cannot swim: it is the sand which gets everywhere that bothers him, and bike-lovers have no affinity with water anyway, maybe because you cannot go in it on the beloved two-wheeler. And take note, it is not just the heeled shoes that give cyclists their funny walk. Some of them walk like that without them - they are as clumsy on the ground as they are gracious on their bikes.

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