

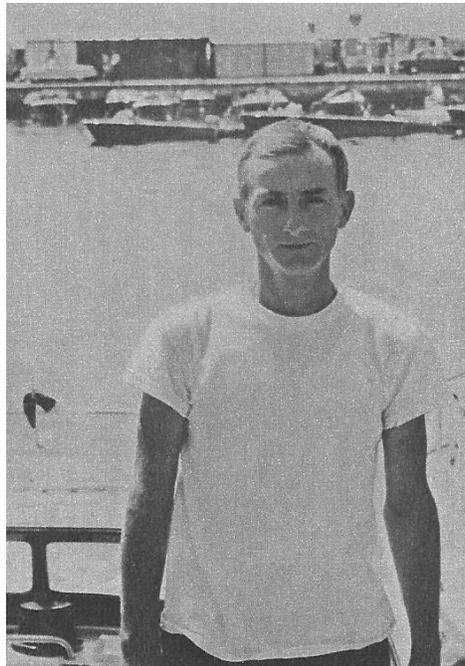
# Vincenzo Balestrieri

By Marco Bertini

To look at him, you would never guess he was a two-time world champion in offshore powerboat racing. Vincenzo Balestrieri seems even tinier next to American giants like Don Aronow, Merrik Lewis or Jim Wynne, but his small stature did not keep him from becoming a world renowned champion.

Law school graduate and famous businessman in the construction industry and with other businesses handed down from his father, sports occupied a good part of Balestrieri's time and energy. With his top-level background in sports: boxing, soccer, basketball, judo and cars, already a gold medalist in track and field in 1940 at the age of 14, Vincenzo Balestrieri ended up in offshore competitions by chance.

The first to perceive his champion's temperament was Picchiotti, engineer and owner of the Pichiotti shipyards in Viareggio, who "forced" him to sign up in the first edition of the Viareggio-Bastia-Viareggio in 1962, exploiting Balestrieri's enduring and instinctive passion for the sea and yachting.



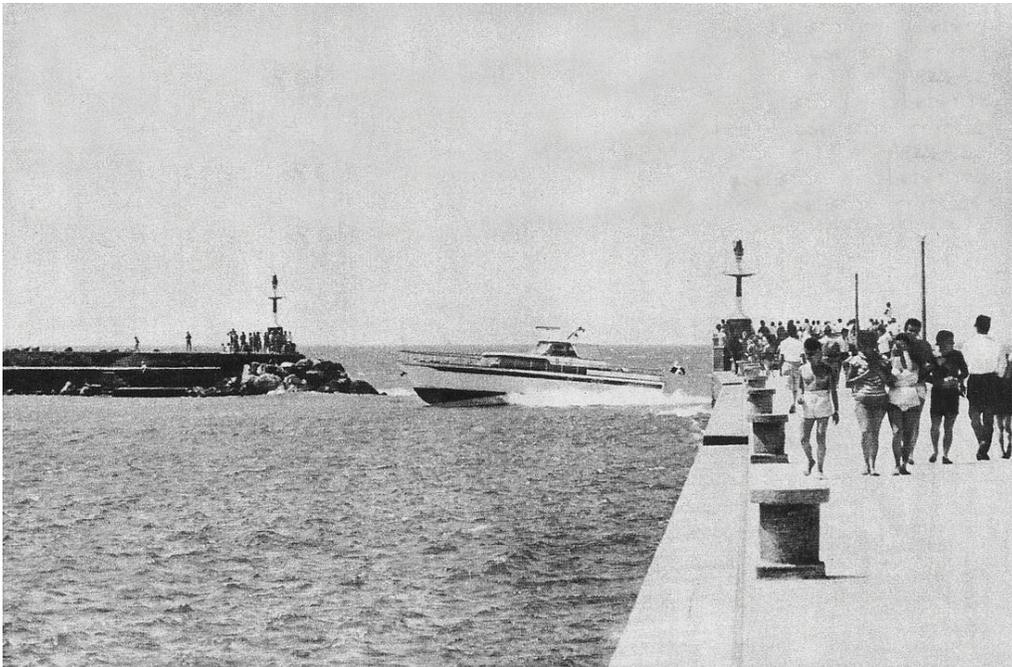
***A young Balestrieri in 1964 in Viareggio, on the day he won the first of his 27 victories in offshore.***

Balestrieri already stood out, both before and during the race. The morning before this first edition of the race, as it happened, the sea was pretty rough and several drivers were doubting whether they were up for it. Franz Furrer, the president of Club Nautico Versilia at the time and founder of the race was discussing, with Viareggio Port's Harbor Captain, whether or not the race should be held. Balestrieri showed up at one point, navigation charts in hand, a complete stranger to Furrer, asking him why they had not yet decided to move the boats into the starting area. Furrer explained

how some of the drivers were concerned about the sea conditions, to which Balestrieri curtly responded: "What sea conditions? If someone does not want to take part in the race, then just stay on the docks, I want to race!" Furrer turned to the Port's Harbor Captain, who confirmed that since the boats had their navigation certificates, anyone who wanted to could take to the sea. Furrer decided to hold the race, since there was at least one competitor was ready and willing. Nine of them started the race while the others remained in port, but the race had been saved.

This first race of Balestrieri's ended with an act of sportsmanship and chivalry:

These two facets would remain the most important traits of this driver throughout his entire career - determination and sportsmanship. He abandoned this competition, in fact, in order to rescue another competitor's boat, which was about to sink after being damaged, using his large 55' Super Versilia "Cohete" with its onboard radar.



***The "Cohete" at its first Viareggio-Bastia-Viareggio in 1962 was a "Super Versilia" series Pichiotti with two G.M. diesels with 450 hp (each), and was young Balestrieri's first offshore powerboat.***

These were the pioneer days of offshore competitions - few races, few competitors (in Italy, at least), and this type of craft was experimental.

The future champion laid low in 1963, not participating in any of the three races on the offshore racing calendar - Miami-Nassau, Cowes-Torquay and Viareggio-Bastia-Viareggio.

In 1964 he earned his first victory: he participated in only one race, the Viareggio-Bastia-Viareggio, but he won it, even if it was thanks to a questionable and confusing rule penalizing any boats which were specially built for competitive racing, and instead favoring production series boats like his 32' Navaltecnica "A' Speranziella", named after the motor yacht class being marketed by the renowned Anzio shipyards. The one who had actually dominated the

race, in terms of straight racing times, was Dick Bertram with his 31' "Lucky Moppie", which came from the 'Bertram' shipyard which was so famous for its sports fisherman.



***Viareggio-Bastia-Viareggio 1964, after taking time off in 1963, Balestrieri starts racing again with a 32' Navaltecnica series designed by Levi, with two Ford Interceptors with 390 hp (each).***

Balestrieri's first encounter with the world of American offshore won him a fourth place in the Miami-Nassau classic in 1965: two malfunctioning rudders on his "Speranziella II", a one-off 32' Navaltecnica with a pair of 500 hp Holman Moodys, are what kept him from placing better.

After a relatively flattering 1966, a second place behind Merrik Lewis in the Viareggio-Bastia-Viareggio, and a victory in the first edition of the Dauphin D'Or in France, the "dark year" began, as he described it: "In six races there was only one record I succeeded in beating: the record for never reaching the finish line."



***The "Delta Blu" was the fourth Levi boat driven by Balestrieri, winning him the Dauphin D'Or on the French Riviera in 1966. It had two Daytona turbos with 500 hp each.***

This 'record' was amply compensated in 1968, the year when Vincenzo Balestrieri won the world championship, with the support of expert t-man Don Pruett, aboard a 28' Magnum which had been one of Don Aronow's boats the year before, and which Balestrieri himself christened the "Tornado" and outfitted with two 450 hp MerCruiser motors.

Just when offshore seemed to be the exclusive prerogative of champions on the other side of the Atlantic, this dominance was refuted by this little Italian with a carrot top and freckles.

And so began an endless series of wins: Balestrieri, in addition to being the first foreigner to win an American offshore race, was the first non-American to win the world championship, the first driver to win four consecutive championships (Naples, Viareggio, Les Embiez and Oregund, in Sweden), was also the first to beat five speed records and, as if this were not enough, he received the highest score in an offshore world championship until then: 51 points, surpassing Aronow's 41 in 1967.



***Vincenzo Balestrieri and Don Pruett during the Sam Griffith Memorial in 1968. At the finish line he became the first foreigner ever to win a United States race, and he did it aboard the just-purchased 28' Magnum which had been Aronow's the year before.***

The road to success was not free from accidents, of course: from the spectacular sinking of the glorious Magnum "Tornado" in the waters of Manica, to the explosion and fire on the 31' Bertram "Yellow Tornado", which left Pruett, his mechanic, severely burned.

The world championship returned to America in 1969, thanks to Don Aronow and his fast 32' Cary "The Cigarette", with Balestrieri forced to content himself with the Italian championship title. A series of accidents compromised the final victory, after a positive start with a victory at the Wills

International in Great Britain and at the Roseto-Makarska in Yugoslavia, both with the 31' Bertram "Red Tornado", also with MerCruiser motors.



*Balestrieri alongside his t-man, Don Pruett, who was severely burned by an explosion of fuel vapors which had built up in the cockpit of the 31' Bertam, which the Italian driver had rented in order to race in the Miami-Nassau in 1968.*

The following year, however, paid off well with the winning of a second world title after a tough battle with English rival Sopwith up until the second to last race of the season. Yet another record, the record for having won two world titles, like Don Aronow (Wynne and Bertam won the first of the two Sam Griffith Trophies before the UIM was associated with the official world championship), even though it was achieved as a result of Sopwith's disqualification in the waters of the Bahamas.

Misfortune continued to plague him in the years that followed, as new rivals such as Wishnick, Rautbord and Bonomi appeared on the offshore scene. An incredible series of withdrawals and race delays due to mechanical problems, most of which were caused by the low reliability of the MerCruiser motors and the powerful new Kiekhaefers he mounted on his boats, even though he was still a primary contender in these competitions.

Balestrieri's suspicions about sabotage and rival drivers who were using irregular motors had been festering for three years, from 1971 to 1973, until they finally burst forth in an ignoble episode at the

Dauphin D'or in 1973, when, at the end of the race, a protest against Bonomi degenerated into a fight between Balestrieri, his trusted t-man Jack Stuteville, other Italian drivers, Carl Kiekhaefer and the UIM itself.

The whole story was very controversial as well as demoralizing, leading him to abandon his dream of being the only one ever to win a third world title, and to race only in Italian races for the sake of a Mediterranean Championship, which was his idea.

The oil crisis, in the meantime, noticeably reduced the field of participants in offshore racing, so that the feeble success of this championship led this Roman driver to end his racing career after 13 years of races, seven of which were consecutive worldwide (the only driver ever to do so), 27 overall victories (second only to United States Bob Nordskog), two Italian championships (1969 and 1974), two South American (1971 and 1973), and two worlds (1968 and 1970) in 18 different boats (16 of which were his) and eight different shipyards - Picchiotti, Navaltechnica, Delta, Magnum, Bertram, Cary, Cigarette and Abbate.

He was the driver who brought Italian offshore with its handful of few enthusiasts to the covers of magazines which were not limited only to motors or boating. He wrote his own articles about his undertakings and other events in offshore races across the world. His fame also led the cinematic world to take an interest in this sport, resulting in a psychological-mystery film which used offshore racing as its backdrop and included appearances by him and his boats. He and his enthusiasm were what drew many future Italian champions to the sport.



**Covers dedicated to Balestrieri from various magazines from those days**

Regarding the costs and characteristics of this sport, he said:

“The costs, always the costs! A hull costs as much as a swimming pool. Then there is the motor. True, boats need to have at least two. I have three. Each boat needs to have four motors. Then there are the full-time mechanics, on-land support, transfers, repair costs. This is the foundation for winning a world championship, if you are content with less, then the costs go down a bit... Anyone can drive a boat, basically, with

calm seas and skies, maybe even win a race. For a world championship, though, it takes something more.”

In the history of offshore there have been champions with as many wins as him on every sea of the world, but none have done so with the consistency, commitment and determination which makes driver Vincenzo Balestrieri truly stand out.

