

Francesco Cosentino

His passion for things of the sea, a passion he himself describes as “complete freedom from all burdens of the cursed land, because the blessed sea is much clearer, simpler, simpler, more violent, but not evil,” drove him to make a particularly active and meaningful contribution to Italian offshore powerboat racing over the years, not just by participating in races but by engaging with just as much vigor in the organizational affairs of his favorite sport.

Drivers, designers, shipyards, Italian race organizers, not to mention the federal authorities and public relations with the press, in order to attract the best recognition for “his” sport, were always able to count on Cosentino’s support, advice and assistance in any form, up to the point that the Federazione Italiana Motonautica [Italian Powerboating Federation] itself decided to appoint him as president of the offshore commission. A stubborn and tenacious sportsman’s temperament, attentive and scrupulous to the point of exasperation while preparing for races, generous at sea and more chivalrous than any one of his adversaries with respect to the rules of the sea, which for him, a former Navy officer, count more than victory – all of this, rhetoric aside, is Cosentino, powerboat driver by vocation. Defeat does not demoralize him, not even the unluckiest of races: “A lesson which helps me win the next race,” he tells friends on such occasions, and he jokes about it, with his British-tinged brand of humor, without any trace of resentment or rancor.

An old-school nationalist, for several years he pursued his dream of winning the world title in an all-Italian boat, hull and engines, but not even his brand of obstinacy was able to overcome the shortcomings of Italian shipbuilders.



Cosentino in his first offshore race, the Viareggio-Bastia-Viareggio in 1963.

His offshore powerboat racing debut, as for all Italian drivers in those times, was the 1963 Viareggio-Bastia-Viareggio, on board a 27’ Italcraft motoryacht powered by Chrysler engines, 300 hp each. He placed 8th due to engine trouble. Troubles which would revisit him a year later in the same race, with the same boat, “Antonella III,” forcing him to drop out.

After a three-year break from competitions due to his work commitments, Cosentino teamed up with a friend, Balestrieri, on his “Delta Blu,” a 36’ Delta with a pair of Daytonas with 500 hp (each). They participated together in the first edition of the Bahamas 500 and in the Viareggio-Bastia-Viareggio, but with no luck in either case. The motors were a disaster in terms of reliability, forcing them to withdraw from six out of six races.

In 1968, Cosentino crowned his desire to race in an Italian boat with Italian motors. It was the new “Volpe d’Argento” [Silver Fox], a 28’ aluminum boat built by SAI-Ambosini, which specialized in aircraft construction, with a design by Captain Petroni and outfitted with a pair of Italian V8s by BPM with 450 hp (each). The partnership with Petroni, which had begun one year before, when he raced with Balestrieri and the Captain himself, would continue on uninterrupted until Cosentino’s final race, which was in Venice for the 1979 world offshore championship.

The boat did not perform badly, even if Cosentino was forced to withdraw from the first race, the Trofeo Napoli [Naples Trophy], after running out of fuel due to incorrect propeller spacing, which made the motors work harder. He placed fifth at Viareggio and had to drop out once again from the Dauphin D’Or due to mechanical problems, after he had been holding strong at around fourth-fifth place in this race as well.

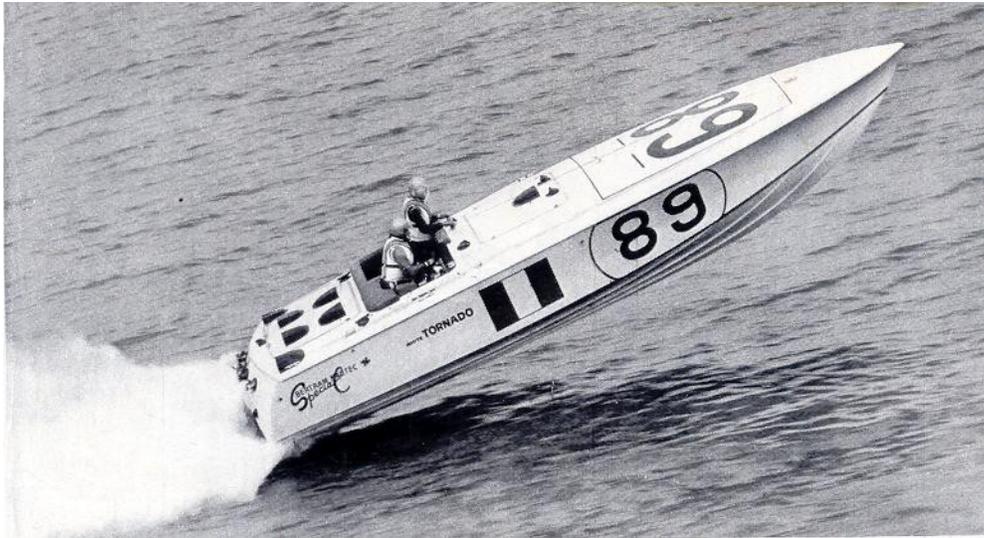


Three friends with the same great passion – offshore powerboat racing - from left: Cosentino, Balestrieri and Petroni on “Freccia d’Argento” [Silver Arrow] in France in 1968.

In the meantime, his friend Balestrieri won the 1968 world title at the helm of American boats, with American motors. Cosentino followed him down this path and formed the “Tornado Racing Team” with Balestrieri for two years in 1969-70.

This led to results and satisfaction in every international race, and a series of fortuitous circumstances - and the unstoppable Don Aronow, in particular – was the only thing that prevented prevent Cosentino from winning the world title, after winning the unofficial European title in 1969. This was also the fault of his delicate position as General Secretary of the Chamber of Deputies of the Italian Government, a position which left him without enough time to prepare, to organize and, on several occasions, even to participate in the races, so much so that his American driver friends would playfully refer to him as “The Flying General Secretary.”

He won his first race, the Trofeo Napoli, on board his MerCruiser motorized 31' Bertram, christened the "White Tornado," with Mike Vandenburg as his mechanic, beating Don Aronow hands down with his new, fast and powerful "The Cigarette" when it debuted in Europe after beating all of his adversaries back home. Aronow was faster than Cosentino, but the Italian is an excellent navigator and took all the check points very precisely. When Aronow arrived at the docks to find the Italian already celebrating, he gestured angrily, suggesting that the alleged winner had skipped a check point, but Cosentino calmly explained where he had passed it and the American had to admit defeat - Aronow's only defeat in Europe.



Cosentino in the 31' Bertram "White Tornado" was Aronow's most tenacious rival in 1969.

He alternated mostly between two boats in 1970, a 32' Cary formerly owned by Aronow and a 31' Bertram, not the same one as the year before but the one his teammate Balestrieri had driven, the "Red Tornado," with which he won the first race of the season, in Capetown. He also participated in the Bahamas 500, but since he did not have a boat in the United States, his friend Merrik Lewis, with Don Pruett's support, flew in one of his aluminum boats by air, the 32' "Mama Maritime," in time for him to compete in the race and connected him with Mel Riggs, who had won this race in 1967 and 1968. At the first check point Cosentino was in second place right behind the leader, Magoon, but problems with the wheelhouse forced him to beach on an islet. It was Balestrieri who prevailed for the rest of the season, while Cosentino seemed to limit himself to a support role, having chalked up a few placings. The world title went to Balestrieri following a fantastic and controversial season finale with his rival, Sopwith, as Cosentino placed third.

After leaving the team with Balestrieri at the end of the 1970 season, Cosentino's first European race of the 1971 season was in Naples with his 32' Cary, which ended with an accident which only left him a bit bruised, fortunately. Then he followed Petroni and his Navalconsult during the development of Ron Jones' catamaran, which the Captain had already driven in an American race. This 33' boat had become the prototype for the construction of two aluminum cats designed by English engineer Mike Trimming of Intermarine, an Italian shipyard. The two cats, which were identical in terms of construction, lines and motors - two MerCruisers - were built by

Pichiotti shipyards in Viareggio and driven by Cosentino and neophyte Giorgio Mondadori during the 1971 Mediterranean racing season.

The day before the Bahamas 500 race in 1970, a C130 arrives in Freeport carrying the 5-plus ton Mama Maritime, which Merrik Lewis sent to Cosentino so he could participate in the grueling competition.



It was not easy to fine tune his “Sir Cat” because there were no references for a two-hull design, except for sporadic appearances in the 1960s, but at the very end of the season there was a historic victory in Bellaria, the first by an OP I class multi-hull in the history of offshore powerboat racing since the subdivision of classes was first introduced in 1967.

During these same years, when interviewed by a trade journal, Cosentino said that the future there would be “tunnel-boats with turbine motors”... something which is happening in 2016? Even if offshore powerboat racing has been dead for over twenty years.



Bellaria, September 12, 1971, a historic ‘cat’ victory in offshore racing. Cosentino in the center with his son, Ubaldo Jr., on the right and t-man Mel Riggs. In the background, Mondadori’s other twin cat and Odell Lewis, placing fourth on ideal seas for the tunnel.

The year 1972 was another “sabbatical” for Cosentino, who was preparing a new Intermarine cat, 36’ of fiberglass reinforced by an aluminum tube structure inside the bridgedeck [“ala”]. The boat would be ready for the 1973 Viareggio-Bastia-Viareggio. Cosentino chose the no longer fashionable MerCruisers instead of Kiekhafers, which was now being used by all of his Italian colleagues in the OP I class. He was forced to drop out at the Viareggio, while he finished fifth in the other race he participated in, the Dauphin D’Or, which he would have won based on the initial mass disqualification of all boats outfitted with engines considered to be irregular by the French judges, a controversy which then faded away.

Cosentino, who had little time for his favorite hobby in these years due to his institutional commitments, forged onwards with the cat in 1974 and 1975 as well, joined also by Petroni, but the boat was too heavy to be a valid design in the end.



1975 was the last year Cosentino attempted to make his second “Sir Cat” (made of fiberglass) competitive, without success. Here they are in Viareggio.

Cosentino’s passion for offshore racing did not diminish, however, not even when his work situation forced him into partial abandonment, so much so that he relinquished his job as an officer of the Chamber in 1976 in order to keep racing in the Viareggio-Bastia-Viareggio in a boat he borrowed from De Angelis, the 39’ UFO, but he was forced to drop out. He then became president of Cigahotels, a large Italian hotel group, and formed a new team sponsored by Ciga himself and his flagship Italian company, Alitalia. The team was betting on two new boats, the more conventional mono-hulls this time around, built out of aluminum with Picchiotti’s CUV license and designed by Don Shead, an Englishman.

Cosentino's old dream had returned, half-realized: an Italian boat, but with an American motor. Besides, Italy was not offering any competitive engines during those years, and the Lamborghini sons were far from joining in.

The Alitalia-Cigahotels Team was coordinated by Attilio Petroni's Navalconsult, who was its sports director. Francesco Cosentino was joined by a rookie, Florentine banker Guido Niccolai, who had recently acquired the Picchiotti shipyards, the official builders of the two new 38' aluminum boats.

The 1977 season was a positive one. Cosentino won two races (Bellaria and Venice) and Niccolai won two (San Remo and Poole) and qualified for the world championship finals in Key West. Cosentino hurt himself in the face thanks to an unusually heavy wave during the race, which was on rough seas, while his teammate Niccolai placed third behind the Betty Cook and Bob Nordskog.

In 1978, the team was once again engaged on every offshore racing front - Italian, European and world championships. Cosentino lost Niccolai, who went off to form his own team, but acquired De Angelis, and it was an intense, exciting racing season. Cosentino won the difficult Getingloppet in Sweden driving the 36' Cigarette, which used to belong to his old teammate, Balestrieri, who had retired from racing in 1975. He won the Italian Championship and the European Championship, but most importantly, in the world championship finals on the rough seas of Mar del Plata, he won a difficult, harrowing victory among a fleet of hardened competitors, the very best that international offshore had to offer. Well supported by t-man Diridoni and by local navigator and expert driver Jorge Pagliettini, Cosentino, the veteran of all drivers there, gave it his all and this time, in contrast to what happened at Key West a year earlier, he decided to keep on going even after banging his mouth on the steering wheel, and it turned out to be the right decision. This well-deserved world title sealed a long and glorious career of dues-paying and experimentation, such as the all-Italian "Volpe d'Argento" in 1968, or the cats in the early seventies. For the first time ever, a boat made in Italy, not the United States, won the prestigious Sam Griffith Trophy, all thanks to Cosentino.

The triumphant arrival at Mar del Plata, Argentina, on board the 38' CUV. A long career crowned by the 1978 World Title.



After sixteen years of racing on seas around the world, winning one world title, two European titles (one of which was unofficial), two nationals and several international races, Francesco Cosentino raced his final race barely a year after that victory at Mar del Plata, in Venice for the world championship offshore finals in 1979, aboard a new cat which Bill Seebold had designed and built for Halter-Cigarette, turning back to the story which had been interrupted several years before, when he and a handful of other visionaries were the only ones with the word 'cat' on their tongues.



***The Gentleman and Lady of offshore. Cosentino was among the first to experiment with cats.
Cook was the first to win the world title on a cat.
Both World Champions: she in 1977, he in 1978, and she once again in 1979.***