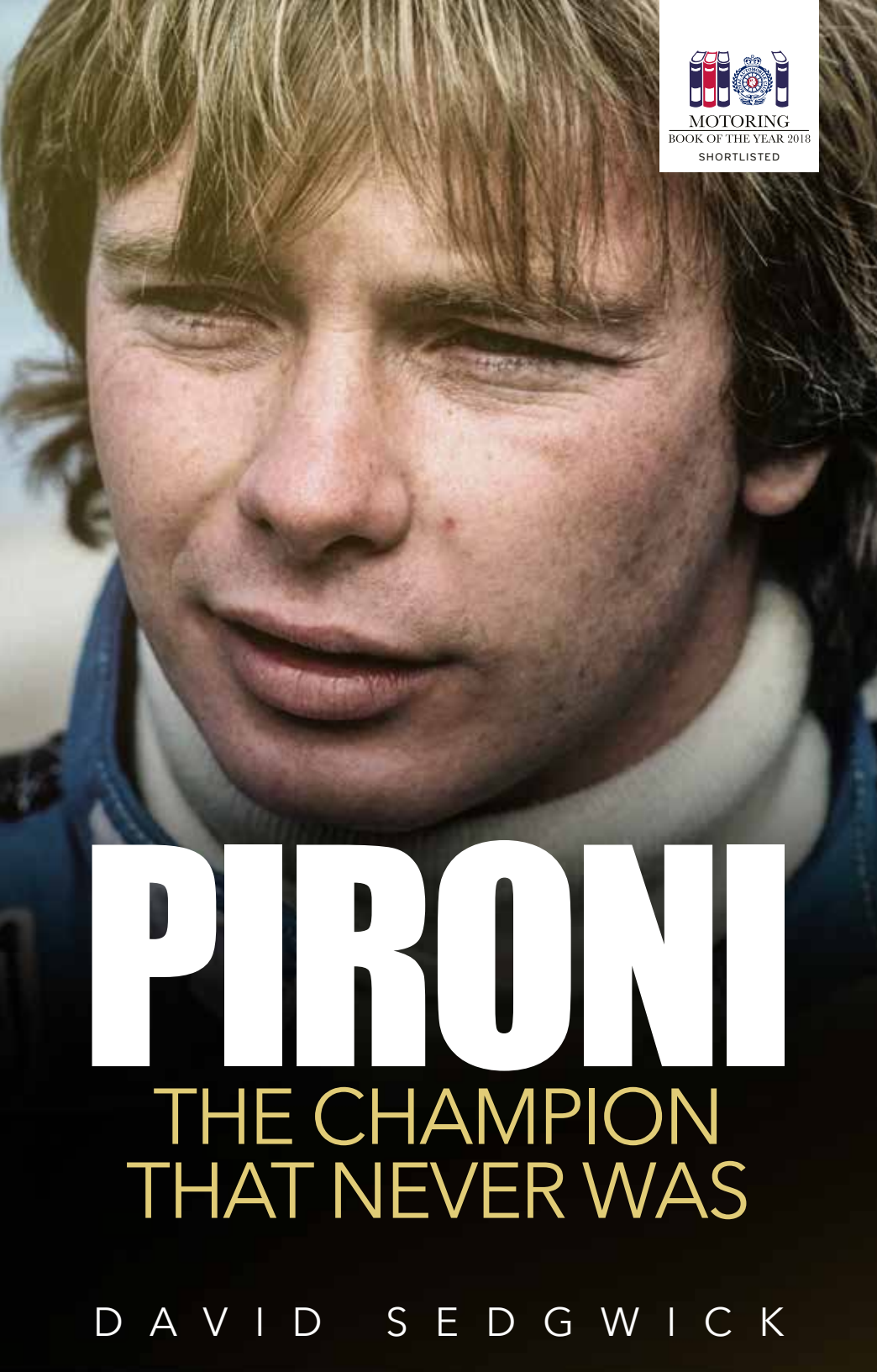

PIRONI

THE CHAMPION THAT NEVER WAS

DAVID SEDGWICK

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OUR story starts in rural Italy, to the north-east of the country to be exact, in the years that followed the First World War. In common with customs and beliefs of the time, the family of Antonio Weffort increased its number annually with the addition of yet another child to an already burgeoning brood. Eventually, the family would number 14 children in total, all boys! In common with other families in the region, the Wefforts eked out a living from the land, but with so many mouths to feed times were tough.

Italy in the early 1920s was a country characterised by austerity. In the aftermath of war, food rationing was just one of many hardships endured by a bruised and battered population. Inflation spiralling out of control, it had even been necessary for the government to set a fixed price for bread. This volatile economic situation would lead directly to the infamous 1922 March on Rome, a revolt that would catapult Mussolini's fledgling Fascist Party into power. For Italians, these were uncertain times.

Antonio's second-born son, Giuseppe was just one of hundreds of thousands of young Italians facing an uncertain future, more so for those inhabitants of rural areas like Friuli, the region of north-east Italy bordering present-day Slovenia and Austria, and which the Weffort family had called home for well over a century. Like his brothers, Pepi – as he was known – had been born under the flag of Austria during the period when the Austro-Hungarian Empire had

been in the ascendancy. At the outbreak of war however, 18-year-old Pepi had fought on the Italian front against the might of that very empire.

Upon his return home, Giuseppe promptly married his sweetheart Santa. The birth of three daughters consolidated a marriage that would last the rest of the couple's lives. Eldest daughter Ilva was born in 1919, Imelda in 1923, while Maria (b. 1921) did not survive infancy. The joy of fatherhood was, however, tempered by the economic realities of the times. Italy's transformation from poor relative to leading economic powerhouse was still several decades away. For a man with a wife and young family to support, the chronic shortage of work in post-war Italy would have been of serious concern. Labouring and agricultural work, where it did exist, was invariably poorly paid, and anyway Pepi had always been ambitious. His thoughts thus turned to France, to Paris.

The prospect of steady, relatively well-paid work abroad had been luring Italians from their homeland for a century and more. The United States, Germany, France, Argentina, the natives of Virgil's golden land had never been afraid to seek a better life elsewhere. Stability, perhaps even prosperity awaited those willing to take the plunge. There was, however, a price to pay: the heartache of leaving loved ones behind. Indeed, by the time of Giuseppe's departure from Italy in the mid-1920s, several branches of the Weffort family were already established in faraway Brazil where they continue to prosper to this day. Leaving the tightly knit community of Villesse would be a wrench, but it was a price that Pepi and others must have thought worth paying.

Busily establishing itself as the cultural cradle of the modern world, the Paris of the roaring twenties was a city of innovation and creativity – an ideal location for a young émigré intent on making his way in the world. Post-war gloom shed, the city was blossoming. Writers such as Scott Fitzgerald and Hemingway had made the city their home. Picasso was also resident. Paris symbolised a new energy surging through the continent, a heady brew of optimism and opportunism that would continue throughout the decade right up to the Wall Street Crash of 1929. It was into this dynamic hub that Giuseppe and his young family arrived.

Initially, Pepi took work wherever he could find it. Paris in the 1920s was a city in the process of reinventing itself, many of its buildings and tenement blocks being in drastic need of refurbishment. This was also the era of Art Deco. Demand for labour – immigrant labour – was high.[1] Over time, the young Friulian worked hard. As their fortunes increased, the family was eventually able to move out to the suburbs where Pepi formed his own company, Sud Est Travaux (South East Building).

Around this time – towards the end of the Second World War – Ilva met a dashing young man by the name of Louis Dolhem. The couple fell in love and married. Soon enough Louis had joined the family business, bringing his own not inconsiderable talents to the table. Intelligent, resourceful and urbane, Louis's abilities combined with those of his father-in-law enabled Sud Est Travaux to expand ever more rapidly. In 1944 Louis and Ilva welcomed a son, Louis Joseph (José) into the world.

Louis's antecedents are somewhat obscure. Save for the fact he seems to have originated from northern France, his family background is indeed rather sketchy. For here was a young man who conducted his affairs with the utmost discretion. If he tended towards reserve – on occasion reticence – such dispositions were more than offset by action and endeavour. As far as Louis was concerned actions spoke louder than words, a tendency both his sons would come to share. In his youth, he had harboured ideas of racing cars, but strapped for cash had been unable to pursue his motor racing dreams. Instead, he had taken up long-distance cycling. Events such as the gruelling 156km Montceau-les-Mines race attracted not only amateurs such as Louis, but also the likes of Jean-Jacques Lamboley who would progress to national and world championship glory. Competing was in Louis's blood, another trait that he would pass on to both his sons.

Cycling achievements aside, he first comes to prominence during the Second World War when fighting for the French Resistance. After capture by the Nazis, the resourceful young man promptly escaped from Dachau concentration camp riding a bicycle, disguised as a German soldier! A little while later he became a prominent figure in the French Forces of the Interior (FFI), the resistance groups who did so much to aid the allies from 1944

onwards. Louis became commander of the Livry-Gargan group taking part in and organising espionage and sabotage activities that involved a high level of personal risk; bravery – yet another quality he would pass on to his progeny. While performing these critical duties he made contact with another young man of equally fierce independence and patriotism, Charles de Gaulle. The two men would remain connected long after war had ended. Later, as his political ambitions increased, Louis would become acquainted with the great and good of French politics including future president, Jacques Chirac. War hero, athlete and businessman, Louis undeniably oozed charisma. In post-war Paris, the name of Louis Dolhem was one to be reckoned with.

Post 1945, business was booming for the Franco-Italian enterprise. Amongst their many other gifts, Italian émigré and French freedom fighter were imbued with a definite entrepreneurial bent. Ably supported by the female half of the family, Louis and Pepi steered Sud Est to ever more prosperity. At its peak in the 1960s, the company would boast a workforce of several hundred, many of them, like Pepi, Italian expatriates to whom the firm were only too happy to offer employment.

Such was the success of the venture that the family was able to buy a plot of land in leafy Boissy-Saint Léger, a commune ten miles south-east of Paris. In former times, Boissy had been characterised by forests and lush countryside where wild boar and deer had freely roamed. By the 1940s, it had developed into a town of tranquil villas, yet to be fully engulfed by the metropolitan sprawl of Paris. When a photographer for *LIFE* magazine took a series of images of post-war Paris, he drew attention in imagery to what he referred to in words as the 'tragic beauty' of the city. Boissy then would have been a breath of fresh air, literally. A suitable plot of land purchased, Pepi could use all the tricks of his trade to design and build a family home to his exact requirements. Even for affluent Boissy, the house on the corner of Rue de Valenton and Rue de la Procession was a striking edifice, a labyrinth of multiple bedrooms and offices as well as outbuildings, which served as garages to the company's fleet of bulldozers, trucks and other commercial vehicles. Number 40 Rue de Valenton was a statement house, a celebration of hard work, endeavour and acumen.

By any standards, Louis Dolhem was a handsome man. A photograph taken in the 1940s, after he had become a father for the first time, depicts a poised, assured individual exuding confidence. It is no exaggeration to say there was surely a touch of star quality about this immaculate Parisian. Certainly, women succumbed all too easily to his charm and film star looks. Precisely what went on inside the castle in those post-war years will forever stay within its very commodious walls. Louis had an eye for a pretty woman, that much is certain, and by 1952 Imelda was carrying his second child. What Ilva thought about the union between her husband and younger sister is anyone's guess.

Fast forward to spring that year and at three o'clock on the afternoon of 26 March, Imelda[2] gave birth to a boy, Didier Joseph Louis. It was a time of great joy, but also some anxiety.

1950s Paris was a very different place to the cosmopolitan city of the 21st century. What may be considered as a mere trifle to modern sensibilities would have been a real dilemma in conservative post-war France: two sisters, two sons with just a single father. As pillars of the local community, Giuseppe and Louis would have been understandably keen to avoid even a whiff of scandal. Mud, as they say, has a habit of sticking. Prior to Didier's birth, the castle had echoed to the sound of endless discussions – many of them heated. How to avoid a scandal? Family honour was at stake.

Eventually Pepi, Louis and the sisters reached a solution, of sorts. A surrogate father needed to be found, one furthermore who would be prepared to marry the young girl. At this stage, love was not necessarily on the agenda. Step forward the shadowy figure of Valdi Pironi.

This mysterious individual was known to Giuseppe through a business associate. Of Friulian extraction himself, Pironi ticked many boxes. Imelda could now marry within her circle thus avoiding the stigma attached to childbirth out of wedlock. In the eyes of Monsieur and Madame Weffort, Valdi was the perfect solution to their problem. Elaborate as this plot now seems, in the context of the times, it must have seemed like an eminently sensible course of action, one that ensured the family's reputation would not be tarnished. Valdi accepted the conditions. Did the promise of becoming an integral part of this upwardly mobile family of

émigrés with their booming construction business and shiny castle prove just a little too hard to resist? Not until he was a university student would Didier finally discover the identity of his real father. Until that time, Louis would always be 'mon oncle'.

Whatever the ins and outs of this complicated domestic situation, when the time came to register the birth in the nearby district of Villecresnes, it was not in the name of Dolhem that Didier's birth was registered, but rather in the name of 'Pironi'. The family secret was safe. With the arrival of Didier and his surrogate father, the population of the castle had expanded to eight: six adults and two children. Business continuing to expand, theirs was a busy house. Louis's involvement with both sisters made it an unconventional one as well.

Family secret notwithstanding, by the 1950s the family could rightly be proud of their achievements. Twenty-five years ago, Pepi had arrived in Paris with little else but a dream. In the ensuing decades, with his son-in-law's assistance not to mention connections, he had established one of the largest building companies in the whole of the city. Not only did he now drive a sleek Mercedes-Benz – a brand to which the family would always remain loyal – he would later acquire a Piper Navajo aeroplane, the same plane in which both his grandsons would one day learn to fly. Among the many family cars, Didier and José would vividly recall a Ford Vedette, a luxurious American sedan designed in Detroit and manufactured in Poissy. Family holidays were taken in the south of France in a sumptuous villa up in the St Tropez hills complete with stunning views over the Mediterranean. Skiing became another favourite pursuit. Winter holidays included trips to the fashionable resorts of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region of the country. Life was good.

Despite his success, the businessman never forgot his Friulian roots. Such was his reputation among his kinsmen, trips back to Villesse had all the hallmarks of a state visit. Surrounded by a throng of excited villagers, the prodigal son would roll into the village in his gleaming sedan – invariably a shiny Mercedes. Though only a small boy at the time, Moreno Weffort still recalls the awe such occasions inspired: 'The whole village was in turmoil, it was a magical moment as we carried our best fruits

and drink up to the family house in his honour. To this day, I can still remember the excitement those visits generated.' Moreno also warmly recalls the generosity of an uncle who believed in looking after the family he had left behind in Friuli. In later years, the businessman would thrill his family and neighbours by arriving in his private aeroplane.

Whether by chance or design neither of Pepi's daughters would give birth to any more children, by the standards of the time an unusual phenomenon. The same was not true of the dapper Louis, of which more later. It is hardly surprising therefore that Imelda formed a particularly strong bond to her only son. Didier literally became the centre of his mother's world. Adored, cosseted and yes, a trifle indulged.

Family wealth of course provided material benefits. In some quarters, it also provoked envy. Throughout his life, Didier's privileged upbringing would prove problematical for certain rivals who had not been similarly blessed and who clearly resented this urbane Parisian his somewhat pampered background. Money, both a blessing and a curse. Critics could and did claim that family money rather than talent had bought Didier a place at the top table of motorsport. 'A lot of people were jealous of Didier,' recalls an old school friend, 'jealous of his family and his background, jealous of the big house, the money.' The solution? To prove the critics wrong, repeatedly.

It was here within this somewhat eclectic Franco-Italian milieu, within the gilded walls of a fabulous Parisian castle, that José and his younger 'cousin' Didier grew up. It was undeniably a charmed existence, but one not devoid of the usual vicissitudes of family life, perhaps more so considering the somewhat unorthodox domestic arrangements. As a member of the Parisian bourgeoisie, a life of comfort and relative ease lay ahead. Along with José, Didier would surely one day take over the reins of the family business, expand its horizons, increase its fortunes further.

Not so Didier. Since his earliest years, the pleasure he derived from playing with his collection of toy cars had been apparent for all to see. These models captured little Didier's imagination like nothing else. Cars, cars, cars. At the dinner table soup bowls would transform into temporary steering wheels, cutlery would

take the place of a gearstick. At the sort of tender age when infants are intent on exploring the world around them and discovering its secrets, young master Pironi was already well on the way to finding a nirvana all his own.