

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SEXTON

# max power



**Dropping throttle with Max Papis, the Italian heartthrob of Corvette Racing, who shares with us a new goal in life.**

BY HOWARD WALKER







Max at home with his pride and joy, his 1958 Corvette, which he restored himself with a little help from his friends. Left: Max loves tooling around Miami in his head-turning machine.

**IT** takes a lot to turn heads on Miami's super-hip South Beach. Ground-scraping supercars with the kind of throbbing exhausts that set off car alarms? Not even close. Bikini-clad super models on roller skates? Wouldn't get a second glance.

But a lipstick-red '58 Corvette cruising down Ocean Drive with a chisel-chinned Italian race car driver behind the wheel? Now that will stop traffic.

Max Papis flashes his big, beaming white smile and waves the wave to the constant sidewalk calls of 'Cool car, man' or 'What year is it?' No airs. No graces. Just the pride he gets from owning what he'll tell anyone who asks is the car of his dreams.

Papis is probably better known for the other Corvette he drives: the thundering C6.R race car. For the past couple of years he's been part of the Corvette Racing team, competing in the hard-fought American Le Mans series and at the legendary 24 Hours of Le Mans endurance classic.

"I get so much pleasure from this car. Growing up in Italy, a '58 Corvette was something really special. It was definitely a symbol of the American dream. I always promised myself that one day I would own one," said the 36-year-old Papis.

He found the car languishing at a classic car dealership in Fort Lauderdale back in 1998. "They actually had three '58 Corvettes, and this was one was definitely in the worst shape. But it appealed to me because it was the most original. We ended up replacing just about everything except the body. We rebuilt the engine, changed the transmission and replaced the brakes and the electrics. It took four years before I could even drive it."

And when Max says "we" he doesn't mean that he helped by opening up his checkbook. Together with a friend who owns a small auto repair shop in South Miami, Papis rolled up his sleeves and got involved with almost every aspect of the restoration.

AD

AD





RICHARD PRINCE

**As a C6.R driver, Papis trains like a triathlete, lifting weights and clocking up to 200 miles a week on his bicycle.**

and was selected for the Italian National Karting team at age 12. He quickly moved into Formula Three single seaters, then Formula 3000, before securing a coveted drive in Formula One with the Arrows team in 1995.

But the race that changed everything for Max Papis was the 1996 24 Hours of Daytona. Max was driving a high-powered Ferrari 333SP endurance racer along with teammate Bob Wollek. The car was running in second place and badly damaged when Max jumped in the car for the last stint of the race.

## Instead of cruising to a well-earned second, the young Italian proceeded to drive like a man possessed.

“Getting someone else to do the work had no appeal. I can only enjoy something mechanical if I know how it works. That’s why I love this car; I’ve been through the process of taking it from barely running to a car that’s a joy to drive.”

But don’t expect a 100-point restoration here. The crack in the steering wheel is still there from when he bought the car. There are chips in the paint, the odd ding in the chrome. The car’s windshield wiper motor is sitting on a hallway table at Max’s Miami home waiting to be rebuilt.

“I use the car as often as I can. We take it to the grocery store, take it to the beach. I really enjoy driving it. I never wanted it to be immaculate; the car was built in 1958 and if you make it better than new, then it’s no longer a ’58.”

When Max got the call from Corvette Racing to try out for the team at the Sebring track in central Florida back in early 2004, the sun was shining, so it was his old Corvette that he used to drive the 170 miles.

“It was funny, when I drove up to the team garage and got out

of the car, one of the mechanics looked at me and said, ‘Did you rent that to get the job?’ I’m sure it must have looked that way.”

His classic red and white roadster certainly ended up being a major good luck charm. He got the drive with Corvette Racing, and a few weeks later, in his first race with the team — the grueling 12 Hours of Sebring — he brought the C5-R home in first place in the GTS class.

Racing has always been in Max’s blood. Born in Como, Italy, in 1969, he started competing in karts in the early ’80s

Yet instead of cruising to a well-earned second, the young Italian proceeded to drive like a man possessed. He unlapped himself by sweeping past the race leader. Then, with less than 10 minutes remaining in the 24-hour marathon, and his car held together with duct tape, Max put in the fastest lap of the race.

Even though his red Ferrari didn’t win — after 24 hours the two lead cars finished just 64 seconds apart — Max’s stellar performance earned him the nickname “Mad Max,” which has stuck with him ever since.

AD



While driving Corvettes, new and old, will always interest Papis, his new goal is to be the first European driver to secure a NASCAR Nextel Cup ride in a Chevrolet.

"I'm sure 'Mad Max' is something that will always follow me. I was in Mexico recently, walking down the street, and people were shouting from their cars 'Loco Max.' I couldn't help it, but I shouted back 'Hey, I'm kinda crazy, but I'm under control!'"

"The only difference between now and 1996 is back then I was a kid. Now I've grown up. I'm a little more mature. Yes, I still have the fire to win. I still have the passion for the sport. But maybe I could go from 'Mad' Max to, say, 'Driven' Max. Though I would definitely not want to be called 'Calm' Max."

The 'kid' certainly has grown up. These days he's married to Tatiana — Tati, for short — who's the daughter of racing great Emerson Fittipaldi. And come July, Max and Tati will become the proud parents of a baby boy, Marco.

Home for the Papis family is an eclectic Mediterranean-style ranch close to downtown Miami that they share with two dogs and five cats, all adopted either from the street or the pound.

Under a canvas awning outside the house, and alongside the Corvette, are Max's other prized possessions, his motorcycles.

There's the fearsome Ducati Monster 900 super bike, built five miles from where Max grew up in Varese, Italy. There's also the California-built custom cruiser with wild paint and big V-twin motor — "I can't start it before 8 a.m. or the neighbors complain." And his favorite, the 2001 Harley-Davidson Fat Boy, presented to him by the grandson of one of the Harley founders, Willie G. Davidson.

But chances are you'll find Max on another kind of bike most days of the week. The one with pedals. Cycling is a key part of his grueling daily fitness

regime, clocking 200-plus miles a week. When he's home, he'll ride down to the Homestead race track and back, a hard 75 miles.

"To me, the most important thing people need to understand about motor racing is that the drivers are athletes. I consider myself an athlete first, a driver second. You need immense stamina and complete mental focus to drive a car like a C6.R. And in the same way the team expects the car to be in perfect condition, it expects the same of the drivers."

Ask him to describe the sensation of piloting his race

**“Life is a team sport, but live strong. I always want to live strong and be part of a great team.”**

Corvette at a demanding circuit like Le Mans in France and he smiles that big smile.

“It feels like being in a tumble drier. Everything is shaking. Everything is happening so fast. And it’s hot. In last year’s race, the outside temperature was 105 degrees. Inside it was over 130.

“And the braking is simply beyond belief. The car decelerates from 200 mph to 55 mph in less than 300 feet. Hit the brakes hard and you pull over 2.5g, or two and a half times your body weight. You have to be an athlete to cope with that.”

Max hopes that his remarkable physical fitness coupled with his years of experience will help him with his next goal in life — to be the first European driver to win a NASCAR championship.

He’s already tested the 900-hp Nextel Cup Chevrolet Monte Carlo with Hendrick Motorsport at the Road Atlanta track, and has more tests scheduled this year.

“I see NASCAR as the next chapter in my life. Yes, I will always

be driving in endurance racing. There is always going to be Le Mans in my life.

“But to be the first European driver to drive in NASCAR with the Chevrolet brand would be like Paulo Maldini of AC Milan playing with the Miami Dolphins as quarterback and winning the Super Bowl. It would be something quite amazing.

“And I’m a persistent kind of guy. If there is any chance of me making it happen, I will. Everything I’ve achieved so far I’ve fought for and made happen.”

On Max’s wrist, he wears two simple rubber bands. The bright blue one was given to him by race team owner Rick Hendrick and carries the motto ‘Life is a team sport.’ Next to it is the yellow band he got from fellow cyclist Lance Armstrong, with the script ‘Live Strong.’

“Those two bands represent a lot of what my life is about right now, with my family, my friends and my racing; Life is a team sport, but live strong. I always want to live strong and be part of a great team.” ■

AD