

CLASSIC DRIVER

Race on Sunday, restore on Monday with Ferrari guru Ronnie Kessel

Lead

From following his late father's racing as a baby to helping arguably the biggest business associated with Ferrari in Europe, Ronnie Kessel is a dyed-in-the-wool Tifoso. We hopped on his never-ending – and very fast – carousel of Prancing Horses to talk all things Kessel...

Ronnie Kessel might own a Swiss passport, but judging by the boundless enthusiasm and gesticulative nature with which he shows us around his company's sprawling Lugano HQ, Italy (whose border is just a stone's throw away from the picturesque lakeside town) is where his heart really lies. As its marketing material so aptly suggests, Kessel is a 'car lover's playground'.

Ferraris of every generation and discipline quite literally litter the premises. One minute we're in an eerily quiet racing department (most of Kessel's engineers are in action at Le Mans at the time of our visit) ogling battle-scarred GT3 racers, while the next we're drooling over an exquisitely restored 275 GTB. "Just listen to the door-shut on this car," Ronnie proudly exclaims, prompting us to open and close the sculptural and beautifully trimmed doors.



The Kessel empire has become synonymous with Ferrari over the past four decades, coming to encompass a global motorsport department, a flourishing multi-brand dealership, and a renowned classic car restoration hub. And Ronnie – a man who'll be the first to admit he's work-obsessed – is the perfect man to front it: dashing, charming, hands-on, and, above all, passionate.

In 2010, Ronnie's world was flipped on its head when his father, the former Formula 1 driver and company founder Loris Kessel, sadly passed away, leaving him to fill a very large pair of shoes at the helm. But, fuelled by a lifelong passion for cars and armed with an insatiable work ethic, he's done a truly fantastic job of growing the Kessel group into the global business it is today – and we're sure his father would wholeheartedly agree.

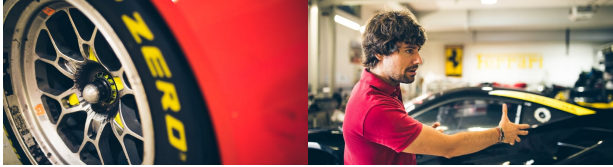


What are your earliest automotive memories?

I followed my father's racing together with my mother so I really did grow up in the motorsport environment. When I was a baby, the sound of the cars would send me to sleep and a few years later, when I proved harder to settle, my mother would actually play me a CD called 'Mechanic Symphony' – essentially a collection of Formula 1 engine noises. To this day, if I hear the noise of a racing car and I've just eaten lunch, for example, I begin to fall asleep. Engines really are in my blood.

Could you tell us about your father and the origins of the business?

My father Loris raced in Formula 1 from 1976 until the 1980s. While he drove for Brabham, Gordon Murray was actually his race engineer. When he stopped, he took advantage of his newfound recognition and opened a small garage here in Lugano, detailing and selling cars. He soon hired an engineer to repair the cars he was selling and, before long, he employed around 10 people. That's when Ferrari approached him. It had been looking to open a dealership in the Lugano area and, because of his racing background, asked my father if he'd be interested. Of course, he said yes.



How did racing become such a core aspect of the business?

When Ferrari established the Challenge championship, they asked my father to be involved. From a marketing point of view, it made complete sense so Kessel Racing was established in the year 2000. He began with a 360 Challenge before graduating to a 360 GT2 and then a 575 GTC and so on.

When the GT3 formula was introduced in 2006, we asked Ferrari if we could develop a car from its F430 Challenge. We increased the size of the wheels and the bodywork, swapped from carbon ceramic to steel brakes, and added a big spoiler. When we took the first car racing, we got over 100 requests from teams wishing to buy one. We were ordering Challenge cars from Ferrari, converting and homologating them, and then delivering them around the world. We had to invent the spare parts and aftersales departments. Today, we cover Challenge and GTE cars, too, though we officially manage all of Ferrari's GT3 cars across the world.



Were you ever tempted to follow in your father's footsteps as a racing driver?

I raced professionally for 10 years. Because he couldn't afford the time away from the business to take me karting every weekend, my father promised that as soon as I was tall enough to drive a Ferrari, I could start racing. Every single day I would come home from school and sit in the cars to try and reach the pedals. Sure enough, he kept his promise - when I was 12, we went to Dijon in France and I did a day of testing and then got my license. I started racing in an Italian championship when I was 14 and then in the Ferrari Challenge when I was 16. I'm still the youngest person to have ever competed in an official Ferrari championship.

Why did you stop racing and do you miss it?

My father passed away in 2010 when I was 22 and that's when I stopped because I had to start managing and growing the business. I used to miss it a lot - it was like a drug that was impossible to be without. But I had to find an alternative challenge, which is why I've pushed like hell with the business. It's just like being on the track as there are no moments when you're doing nothing. There are no straights in my life. There are customers, emails, planes, sponsors, circuits, and more emails - it's pure adrenalin.





How does a typical day in the life of Ronnie Kessel look?

I'm here in Lugano during the week and fly to the circuits at the weekends, but every day is show time – I never know what's going to happen. Every moment is an opportunity and I move like a ping-pong ball from left to right and left again.

How would you summarise Kessel today?

The easiest way is with the word CAR. 'C' denotes Classic, for our classic department, which we officially opened in 2010 and handles Classiche-certified restorations undertaken almost entirely in-house. 'A' denotes Auto, for the modern sales side of the business, which comprises Ferrari, Maserati, Bentley, and Pagani. And finally, there's 'R', which stands for Racing – a global racing department assisting customers in Europe, America, and Asia.

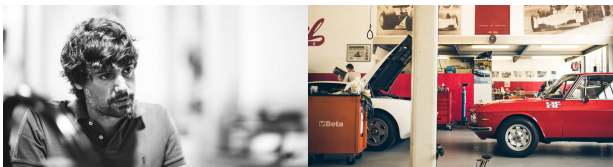


What does Ferrari mean to you?

It's the core of our business. From a historical perspective, it's the connection with my father and the reason Kessel became such a big player in the Ferrari world. But personally, I just love the cars – when you're a child and you draw a sports car, you almost always draw a Ferrari.

What is your dream car, regardless of budget?

I think either the Ferrari 250 GTO or 250 GT 'SWB', because both look amazing from any perspective, or my father's first race car, an Alfa Romeo Giulia Sprint GTA, which he kept and I still own!



Of course, there's a crossover between the departments – for example, we just returned from the Grand Prix de Monaco Historique, where we raced my father's ex-Clay Regazzoni 1976 Ensign Formula 1 car. What's more, a customer might be buying a street-legal Ferrari and then graduate to a Challenge car or a historic rally car.

How does it make you feel to continue to grow the company and continue your father's legacy?

It makes me incredibly proud but, just like him, passion is the greatest driving force in my life. When my father passed away, we had around 50 employees, and now we have over 100. Of course, we've capitalised on the growing interest in classic cars, the burgeoning GT3 series, and Ferrari's ever-expanding range of new cars. But ultimately, I do it to stay close to my passion, so we can take the [SP38 Deborah](#) to Villa d'Este, race my father's Formula 1 car at Monaco, or help a customer to win Le Mans. We're selling a Ferrari dream, but believe me, I'm living an even greater one.

Photos: Tom Shaxson for Classic Driver © 2018

Gallery

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