# TWO DAYS WITH THE 'ROSSIN BOYS'
# STORIES AND MEMORIES FROM THE 1970s–80s

*by Antonio Bertone*

*From left: Claudio Marra, Domenico Garbelli and Bruno Galli*

We had the pleasure of spending two days with three protagonists of Rossin during the 1970s–80s: Domenico Garbelli, founding partner, then company executive alongside Mario Rossin; Bruno Galli, who worked at the company from 1980 to 1985; and Claudio Marra, who joined Rossin in 1978 and stayed until 1991. We would like to sincerely thank Domenico, Bruno and Claudio for their time and for the precious memories they were willing to share with us and with the entire community of enthusiasts.

**First stories**

On the first day, we meet Domenico Garbelli at his home. We quickly retrace the well-known events[1] that led to the creation of the brand: Ernesto Colnago facilitating Baronchelli's move to Scic, causing discontent within the Itla team and creating the circumstances for the birth of Rossin. But what effect did this episode have on the relationship between Garbelli and Colnago?

- "We have always remained very good friends".

And where was Rossin initially located?

- "The first factory was a space of 110 m² in an apartment building, a shop with a workbench built there, and behind it was the garage where we built the frames. There was no gas supply inside. Those were the years 1974–75–76, which included production of the Montreal model. Then, in 1977, Rossin moved into the town center, into a workshop of about 200–250 m², where it remained from around 1977 to 1987. At that point I saw a plot of land for sale along the motorway, where the new, modern factory would eventually be built. We bought it, and one day Mario Rossin went there with Amedeo Colombo, Shimano's representative in Italy, to put up a sign saying: 'the new Rossin will be born here'. It was as big as this wall. Just as they were putting up the sign, Ernesto Colnago happened to drive past and saw them. Shortly afterwards he called me to comment on it. The new workshop opened in 1987–88 with new technology. It was entirely glass-fronted; Ugo De Rosa and Merckx also came to see it to make one like it".

We move into another room. Domenico finds some documents and begins leafing through them. He has not looked at them for a long time. Then he stops at a catalogue:

[1] Rossin history 1970s-80s: https://www.registrostoricocicli.com/en/registri/registro-storico/rossin/

- “Why did everyone strictly wear black shoes? A company that produced imitation leather for car interiors and other applications supplied us with the material to make colored shoes”.
- “Overshoes? I was the first to use them. Before that, people used to put plastic bags over their shoes. One winter Saturday, while walking around Bergamo, I saw a sporting-goods shop putting mannequins in the window for Christmas with neoprene diving equipment. I asked how many they had and bought gloves, hoods and overshoes. The latter were closed underneath, so I opened them up to allow the cleat to pass through, and the next day I gave them to my riders. They were the only ones out in the snow riding at 50 km/h because they weren't cold”.

Then, taking out a few objects:

- “This was the first radio making the team car and the rider talk. I bought it in New York in the United States and put it on Paganessi for a time trial, transmitting data to him. This was the first computer in the world for monitoring heart rate, used only in hospitals. In Europe it was available only in Switzerland, otherwise you had to go to Tokyo to find one. And this here is the hard-shell helmet. One day, while training with the riders, we passed some rock climbers who were getting dressed and I saw their helmets. I then bought six identical ones in fiberglass and two weeks later put them on the riders at the Italian 100 km team time-trial championships, which we won”.

As we leaf through the catalogues, it is impossible not to linger over one in particular, dedicated to ‘mountain bikes’, which were introduced in Italy with Antonio Colombo of Columbus.

- “This is the most beautiful catalogue in the world. They took 20,000 copies away from us at the Milan trade fair”. The date is uncertain: “I don't remember... perhaps 1984... this was the most beautiful mountain bike in the world. We displayed one for the first time, equipped with Shimano, although not entirely because the components did not exist: the handlebar was handmade, the brake levers came from a motorcycle company in Turin, and calipers were the French Mafac. There was also one equipped with Campagnolo, with a Valentino derailleur and Sugino crankset, components normally found on sporty touring bicycles, but we used them to build the mountain bike”.

*Mountain Bike Catalog*

**Hard to remember everything**

We talk about frames, tubing, models. Some memories come back, others do not, and are postponed until the following day, when we will be with the other former Rossin colleagues. There are indeed many questions, far too detailed to remember everything. Many years have passed since then, and for Domenico these pages have long since been closed. He comes across a photograph of time-trial bikes and Garbelli remembers how the idea was born at Rossin:

- “At the 1981 World Championships in Prague, Czechoslovakia, we caught sight of the East Germans’ frames with reversed handlebars and a smaller 26-inch front wheel. We photographed them and, when we got home, looked at them with Mario Rossin. From there we made the sloping frame with a 24-inch wheel, nobody had ever done it before. With these bikes the Italian national team won the 100 km team time trial at the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984. Then, after the Olympics, the UCI banned them. Later, we used a handlebar mounted directly onto the fork crown with a 26-inch wheel, with which Ekimov broke the hour record on the Moscow track in 1986”.

We return to discussing the first models and look at Rossin’s characteristic lugs:

- “They were pantographed by Silva, whom many people used. The first fork crown was already investment-cast and sloping, Cinelli was the only company making it. They sold it unfinished and then everyone had their own name pantographed onto it. A few years later we moved to a new investment-cast fork crown, made by us, with a more rounded edge compared with Cinelli’s, which was more squared”.

And regarding the forks that came later, with the characteristic reinforcement typical of Rossin, as well as the other reinforced lugs, starting with the distinctive square bottom-bracket shell:

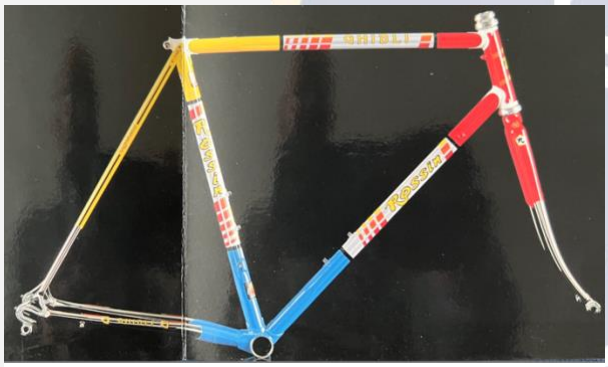
- “Why did they have to be like all the others? We wanted to do something different in terms of function and design. The bottom bracket made this way was stiffer, with the edges opposing each other and a more technical function than the other investment-cast components, which were more aesthetic. The finned fork crown was different from every other fork in the world. We were looking for functionality and aesthetics but also wanted to be different from the usual designs and introduce something new. And indeed, nobody else made it that way and it became known to everyone. It was the most beautiful fork we made at Rossin.”

What were the main markets for the high-end frames?

- “They went mainly to Italy, obviously, but also to Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. Complete bicycles were rarely sold. Mechanics started with the frame and fitted whatever they wanted. On a Ghibli, for example, they could even install an inexpensive groupset. Naturally, the catalogues showed complete bicycles, mainly for advertising purposes. We did, however, supply complete bicycles to professional and amateur teams, which wanted them ready to race”.

Yet, at a certain point, less expensive frames began to appear, with lower-grade tubing and different components:

- “We didn't make them ourselves. We had them made in Padua because we were losing too much time and it wasn't worthwhile for us. Silva still did the pantographing, but the designs were different so that it was clear they were cheaper frames. Sometimes some of them weren't even fully pantographed.”


*The famous Ghibli model — desert wind*

As for the various models produced, basically there was only one model until the mid-1980s, then suddenly a multitude of names appeared:

- “All these names were my inventions. Where did Ghibli come from? I don't remember. Ghibli is the south wind, the “scirocco”, perhaps from a trip. I do remember one model, the Ghibli ‘Vent Noir’, named in honor of a French girl I was dating. There is only one example, but who knows where it ended up”.

We move into the garage, where we admire and discuss some frames. Looking at the time, we realize that it has become late. The day has gone by quickly and it is time to say goodbye. We arrange to meet the following day in Claudio Marra’s office, where Bruno Galli will also be present, for a reunion that promises to be very interesting.

**The great ‘reunion’**

The following day we meet Claudio at FSA, the company where he is Director, in front of the framed cycling jerseys of today’s champions. Bruno arrives as well. We go up to the office and start talking. It is not clear when the three of them last saw each other together, but surely a thousand memories will surface in no particular order…

- “There he is… Domenico… Galli… it's you, it's you… how many years has it been since we last saw each other… We saw each other at Vittorio Ghezzi’s funeral. How many years ago was that?”

Many names and events are recalled as the discussion progresses. First of all, they remember the founding partners:

- “Who handled the administration and accounting? … Who hired me back then? … Vittorio Ghezzi and Carlo Inzaghi were the partners in the two companies, Itla and Iclas. Their sons were with us at Rossin: Giuseppe and Daniele Ghezzi and Marco Inzaghi…”

We know that Domenico was there from the beginning, but what about Claudio and Bruno?

- Bruno: “I started filing frames for Rossin when I wasn't an employee yet. I would go to the first shop, collect the frames, file them at home and bring them back because they needed the help. I think that was after I had stopped racing. Then, after they moved to the other workshop, I left the company where I was working and joined them in 1980”
- Domenico: “You weren't racing anymore. We were looking for people, and I told you come and work for us”
- Claudio: “I joined in March 1978. The first job I did was filing”
- Domenico: “Yes, I was there when he arrived. He was 14 years old”

How were the responsibilities divided between Domenico and Mario?

- Domenico: “In the early years I looked after the Itla team, and the Rossin partners wanted me to concentrate mainly on that. I nevertheless went to the Rossin workshop every day and stayed there with Mario, although at first I wasn't involved in the day-to-day management, he did everything”

And who else was in the workshop? The voices become confused as they look at some photographs on the table:

- “…there was Madaschi, who welded frames and did everything… then there were the Poletto brothers. One made the forks and the other did the filing, they came to work there part-time in the afternoons… and then there was Scaroni. Mario taught us how to weld, there was nobody like him, he was extremely good… We grew at Carrera, there were seven or eight of us, four or five permanent employees. Then we moved and in 1986–87 we went to the new workshop along the motorway, the new factory. In this photograph we had already been there for a year. That was one corner of the company, at that time, we had the finest workshop in Italy, including the paint shop, with DuPont… This is Claudio. This photograph was taken beneath the first frame-brazing carousel, then there was another one over here… it was 1989…”

**It is easier to remember together**

Between one story and another, they try to clarify some details of the bicycles that require answers. The memories are not always clear, but their commitment is admirable: “Maybe together we'll manage to figure it out”. First of all, they examine the fork crowns, from the earliest ones through to the Ghibli and Prestige models. The initial model was supplied by Cinelli, with an R inside three pentagons pantographed onto it. A few years later, the new in-house design was introduced. But they also discuss lugs, chainstay bridges, bottom-bracket shells and so on:

*New fork crown being developed from the late 1970s*

- Claudio: “I remember that when I started, Mario Rossin was working on a new investment-cast fork crown, carrying out various tests on the model that would be used to make the mold. There was a debate about whether the central bone-shaped section might be too thin and not robust enough, and I remember that brass was added to it and then filed down to make it thicker. It was the late 1970s, around 1979”
- Domenico: “We invented the Ghibli fork crown with Mario Rossin. We discussed it and then made a cardboard model”
- Claudio: “The first seatstay cap remained until the early 1980s, then we moved to the new one, which was paired with the second fork. The kit was this one. The third reinforced, investment-cast seatstay cap arrived with the Ghibli range in 1987–88”
- Bruno: “Mechanically speaking, the second type of downtube lug was much easier to work with because you could run a continuous groove down it, whereas the first one was pantographed. I remember that when you were brazing it, you had to be careful not to let a drop of brass fall inside, otherwise it would fill up and afterwards you couldn't get it out”

- Claudio: “I remember that the cable routing was initially on top, then we moved it underneath, I think in the early 1980s. I even remember that we had to tack the cable guides in place before brazing them”
- Bruno: “We had to tack them — that is, fix them in place first with an electric spot weld — and then they were brazed with brass. Because if you brazed them directly and let them go, the brass was still liquid, so they would come loose and fall down”
- Claudio: “From around 1985, investment-cast components began to appear, including the first version of the square bottom-bracket shell. Initially it was produced in Umbria. Then came the second version with pantographing on the side produced by Microfusione Italiana, from approximately 1987–88”

*The square bottom-bracket shell, Rossin’s trademark*

We go back to other subjects, there are plenty of things to discuss. For example, the new models that at a certain point began appearing in Rossin catalogues.

- Domenico: “All the names found in the catalogues were my work. I had to rack my brains because every two years there was the Milan trade fair, and then also the one in Cologne. We also produced special models exclusively for certain foreign dealers, for example the Columbia for Petermann in Germany, entirely in yellow. This became easier once we brought painting in-house and no longer depended on third parties. I had gone to America to see how it was done, at DuPont they were already painting using protective suits, which was unthinkable here. We also built special tanks: initially, with the powder-air process, we had to collect the powder and throw it away, later we built an external tank”

**Other bicycles**

Naturally, mountain bikes must also be discussed. While internationally bicycles with such characteristics were still in their infancy, in Italy Rossin had actually been at the forefront of their development.

- Domenico: “I remember the expression ‘baker's bike’, which had been coined by a well-known framebuilder”
- Claudio sees a brochure on the table: “This brochure is…?”
- Domenico: “This was the first brochure, when we went to the Milan trade fair where we presented the mountain bike. Nobody in the world had ever made a brochure like this, not even the Americans… Would you say 1982?”
- Claudio: “Perhaps a little later? 1983?”
- Bruno: “We also made mountain bikes for the Torino football team, coached by Radice, remember? Before the football season started, he sent the players out on mountain bikes to ride through the woods. He had first had one made for himself, then had them made for the whole team”

But how difficult was it to build a bicycle that, in effect, did not yet exist?

- Claudio: “I remember very well that the great nightmare with these bicycles was the handlebars …”
- Domenico: “Made by us”
- Bruno: “Yes, yes, all brazed with brass, piece by piece”
- Domenico: “I had sent them to Cinelli because they didn't have any handlebars, they simply didn't exist”
- Claudio: “We had to make the handlebars by hand and they cost us a fortune”
- Domenico: “At that time this was the most beautiful mountain bike in the world. Even the Americans weren't making them like this”
- Bruno: “Bear in mind that when we made the first mountain bike, this type of bicycle didn't exist in Europe. The derailleurs didn't exist, and the brakes were motorcycle brakes …”

- Domenico: “On the first groupset Shimano had produced, the marking AL11 could be read behind the crank arm, so we called it that. We got the idea for the mountain bike around 1982–83. I had a bicycle shipped over from the United States by Mike Neel. Then one day Antonio Colombo called me and said he had been to New York and had bought two mountain bikes from Japan. They were in his office, heavy and ugly because they had been assembled with whatever could be found, using Sugino and Suntour cyclocross groups. We decided to make this type of bicycle too, it had to be heavy and sturdy because it was intended for riding in the mountains. However, the first problem wasn't finding the tubing, but finding a rear triangle that widened as it came out of the bottom bracket to accommodate a wider wheel. Later, around 1984–85, during the period of the great snowfall, when my riders went out on mountain bikes around the Bergamo area, they were the only bicycles on the roads. I remember the military tanks behind the line of riders very clearly, breaking up the sheets of ice that prevented people from getting around.”

And what about Pogliaghi? Why did Rossin acquire it? How many years did it last? How many bicycles were made?

- Domenico: “Sante Pogliaghi had decided to close down and sell the company. We also acquired the equipment for making tandems. For a year Sante came there to show us how to do it …”
- Claudio: “When we sold it to Basso it was around 1990. There were about 300–400 semi-finished frames there; we sold them all… It lasted roughly from 1984 to 1990”

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- Domenico: “We also sent bicycles to Belgium and America”
- Bruno: “When you took over Pogliaghi, I was still there. Sante would come and teach us how to make track bikes and tandems. There was a special jig for the tandems”

And speaking of the ‘bullhorn’ time-trial bikes”:

- Bruno: “Who had won the world championship when we went to the World Championships in Prague? Mario Rossin had come too. We took measurements of the French and East German bullhorn bikes… It must have been 1981…”
- Domenico: “They used to hide them, and I secretly photographed them. They had a 26-inch front wheel. When I got home, we had 200 photos stuck to the door of the office at Rossin. Mario looked at them too, and one day we said, ‘Let's make them.’ But if they make them with 26-inch wheels, we'll make ours with 24-inch wheels. Then, when these were banned by the UCI and Ekimov had to attempt the hour record, the Russian technician came up with the idea of the handlebar being welded to the fork, so we went lower again… With our bikes, at the 1982 Baracchi Trophy, Kuiper–Oosterbosch finished second behind Gisiger–Visentini, while among the amateurs a Belgian pair won.”

**Time to say goodbye**

Time passes quickly. The conversation never seems to run out and could in fact continue for days, with a thousand memories constantly surfacing. But several hours have passed and unfortunately it is time to say goodbye, even though nobody knows how to bring things to an end and everyone remains silent for a few seconds. In the end, Bruno finds the right words: “Eh, boys…!”. And that is exactly what they are: a few years older, but still boys. The Rossin Boys.