

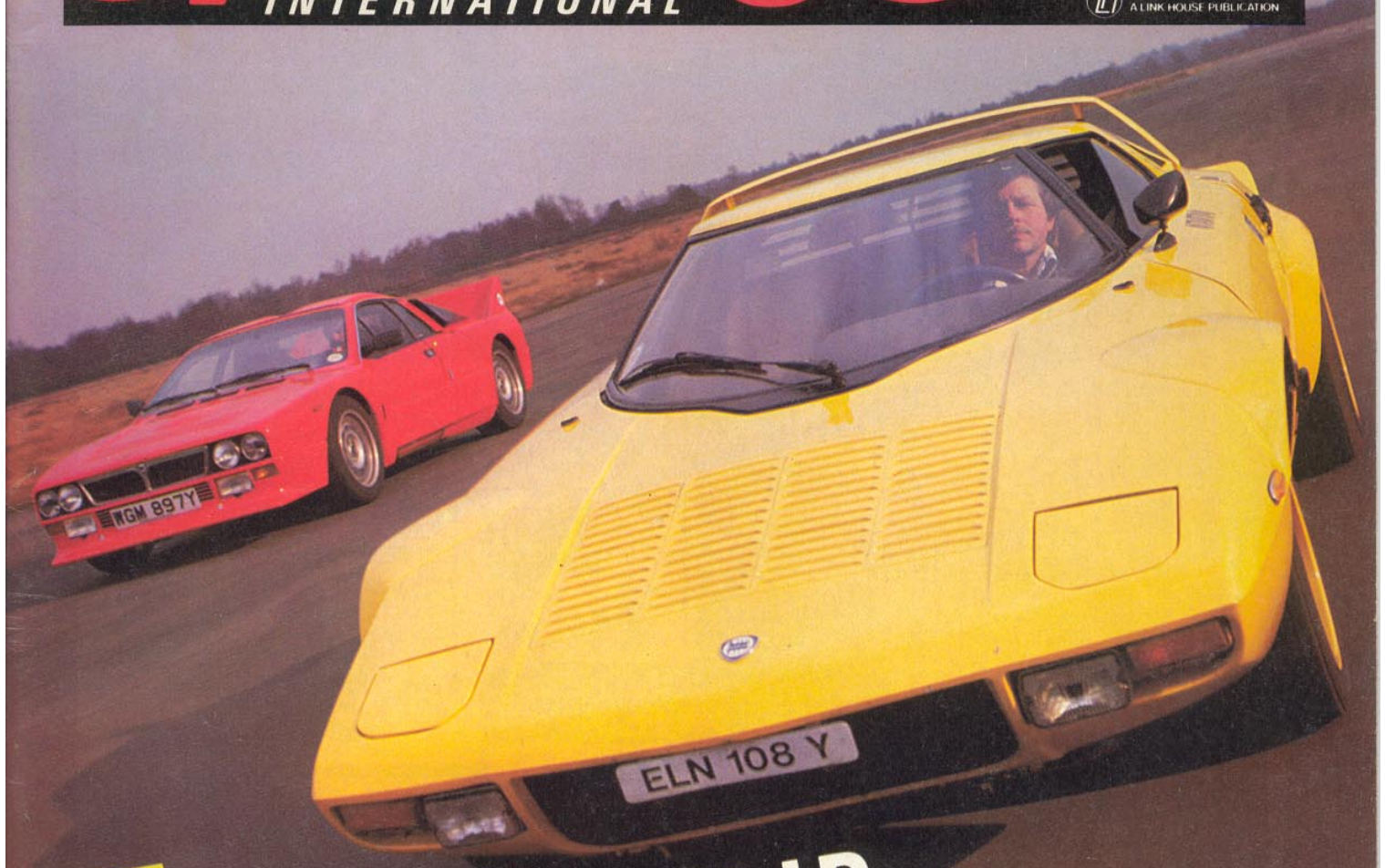
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# Sporting Cars

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## FAMILY AFFAIR

STRATOS RALLY CHALLENGE



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# ***A FAMILY AFFAIR***

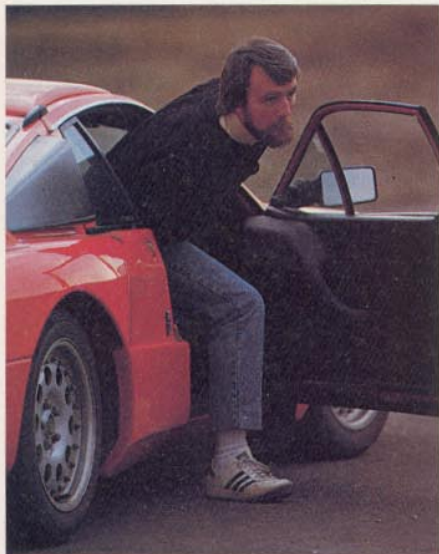


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*Two Italian thoroughbreds with class, style and panache. Mike Wilds pitted a Stratos against a Rally 037, two mid-engined masterpieces from the Lancia stable that deserve admiration, respect and offer a wealth of adrenalin in return*

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**The difference was staggering. Far more refined, the electric windows and neat, cosseted trim and upholstery subdue the senses. The Rally 037 lacks some of the charisma of the Stratos**



**I**t stands there, striking at your senses, defying you not to be impressed. The Bertone shape is as sharp today as it was at the Turin Show in 1970. It broke the mould then and can still cause cracks in contemporary two seater, mid-engined designs. Stratos. Little more needs to be said.

But alongside, the second Italian red sports car challenges Bertone's wedge. Pininfarina purpose holds its head high against the yellow projectile. Both are World Champions. The Stratos may be emotive, but as described elsewhere in this issue (page 47) it was also successful, winning the World Rally Championship three times. That's two more titles than the Rally 037, although many would argue that the Rally's victory over the all-dominant Audi Quattros in 1983, the German machines being the first of the new league of four-wheel drive traction-busting rally cars, was all the more impressive. Indeed, developing the Lancia Rally to meet the Group B regulations for the 1980s had proved difficult. There'd been Bettaga's fatal accident. Markku Alen, experienced with the Stratos, had commented during early tests that he was unsure about driving the Rally on the limit. But Lancia had the formula. Development progressed and much was changed from the ungainly models that debuted 1981. The 037 bore little family resemblance to the Stratos, far more to the Monte Carlo racers that had done so well in endurance racing. But it offered the same balance, the same traction bonuses of its older sister. The all red road-going versions had 205bhp at 7000rpm, but in rally trim the Abarth engineers produced over 300bhp at 8000rpm, and more importantly a staggering torque figure of 202lb ft at only 4,500rpm. It was this characteristic that enamoured Walter Rohrl to the car.

As the two Lancias stood side by side on the tarmac in front of Norman Hodson's cameras, you didn't need to know the history to appreciate. An old man walking his dog stopped and watched our photographic session – a session that went on too long. These cars are to be driven. To have them both at your disposal was a sporting delight. A time to savour; from behind the wheel.

But as we stood there, memories began to crash back. Not in a slow, soporific fashion but with a punch. Wilds had met a Stratos before.

It was way back in 1962, about three years before my motor racing debut, that I had the pleasure of working for Graham Warner's Chequered Flag Sports Car concern in Chiswick, West London. At the time, Graham was involved in running his own highly successful 'Gemini' Formula Junior Team, while during the latter part of my employment the team ran 'works' Lotus Elans for Jackie Stewart and Mike Spence. The Chequered Flag was really responsible for giving me my first taste of motor racing, injecting a love of the sport that remains as strong today as it was in the early 1960s when I travelled in the Flag's transporter as an enthusiastic helper.

Many famous race drivers have driven for the Flag over the years and I always wanted to belong to that exclusive club. The Flag's team raced single seaters but also some fantastic sports cars, there was Graham Warner's superb and highly successful Lotus Elite (LOV1), the Lotus Elans and who could forget Roger Mac hurling the team's fearsome AC Cobra around Goodwood. However, it was when the Flag eventually entered the world of rallying with a Lancia Stratos in the late 1970s that Wilds achieved a double ambition.

In 1978, Graham Warner telephoned, inviting me to drive his Lancia Stratos. At la



my chance to drive for the The Flag had arrived, unfortunately not in a competitive event, but the chance to drive a Stratos on a couple of stages in the RAC Rally as a demonstration before the actual competitors arrived was a chance not to be passed over. I accepted with a strange mixture of extreme excitement and apprehension. Never had Wilds driven any kind of rally car, never on any kind of tarmac or loose surface special stage and here I was accepting a drive in one of the world's fastest rally cars over two demanding stages of the RAC Rally. And all this in front of vast crowds of people! Boy was I nervous.

The two stages involved were Sutton Park and Donington. Sutton Park was a pure tarmac stage, whilst Donington utilised both part of the normal race track and the wooded infield area on mud and gravel. I have always had a great admiration for rally drivers. Their supreme car control over difficult terrain in impossible conditions and in vehicles often with more power than chassis, has always impressed this mere racer. All this and able to look as though they are enjoying themselves even at 0300am in the morning! After my attempt at driving the Stratos quickly through Sutton Park my admiration for them changed to disbelief.

It was pouring with rain as I arrived on the morning of the demonstration runs. John Miles, the ex Lotus Grand Prix driver, motoring journalist and now Jazz impresario, was also on hand to drive one of the works cars for an article he was to write for a magazine. Little did I think at the time that I would be doing the same thing years later! After a quick recce of the stage in a saloon car, yes, I know it was cheating, I was ready.

The Chequered Flag Stratos was very quick. Its two valve 2.4litre Ferrari V6 engine was reputed to deliver 270bhp at 8,000rpm,

which coupled to extremely short gear ratios, gave the driver plenty to do. The acceleration was quite staggering. You were looking at figures in the region of 0-30mph in 1.6sec, to 60mph in 4.9sec and 100mph in under 14 seconds. All this power within a very short wheelbase made this little machine an exciting, twitchy, mean motor car that one treated with a lot of respect.

The Stage started well, a very nice gent, gave us a count down of 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 seconds, then go! I dropped the clutch with the revs singing and catapulted into the stage looking very professional with armfuls of opposite lock on the wet tarmac. All went well until about halfway through the stage, along an undulating straight pulling about 8000rpm in top – rallying gearing making that around 110mph – when the brave passenger next to me shouted something, but the noise inside the car was such that I couldn't hear what he said. I turned across to him and saw the look of fear in his eyes! Back to the road, we crested a brow, where there was a 90 deg right through a farm type gate that I had completely forgotten! This was the point where Wilds found out that on rally cars, they put a lot of brake balance bias onto the rear. Great applications of centre pedal, much twiddling of steering lock and short stabs at the gear lever still saw Wilds suddenly going backwards at an alarming rate – between two rows of wide-eyed rally spectators. Luckily for me, my poor, bemused passenger and hundreds of, greatly amused spectators, the Stratos completed a 360 deg gyration, lost all it's speed and finished facing the very gate we had to go through! I promptly disappeared through the gate like a scalded cat.

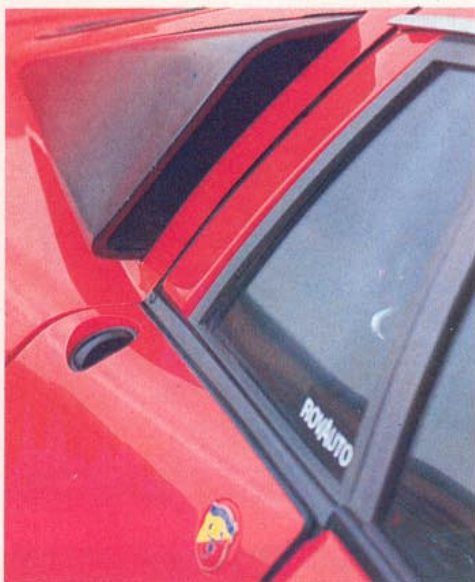
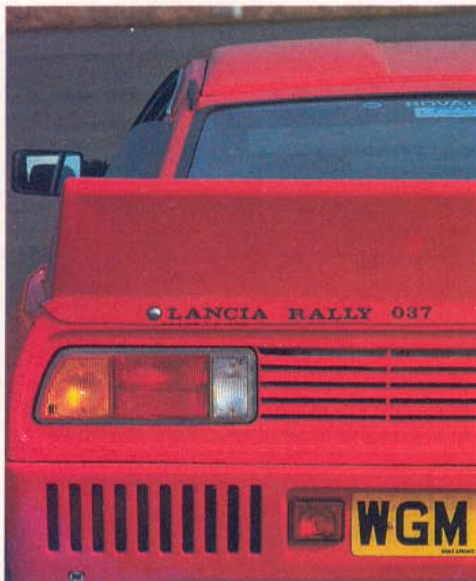
Five minutes later we arrived at the end of the stage and I got out of the car feeling as though I had just completed the Le Mans 24 hour race, single handed!

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***The racer's style; slow in, quick out. Punch the Ferrari V6 hard at the exit and the front will lift – momentarily. The Rally will tail slide. Lift the throttle, and the rear breaks away***

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**Bertone, Ferrari, Pininfarina, Abarth.**  
*The Italian sports car heritage seeps from these two cars. It is more than just detail, it is a lifestyle. They are Lancias of unrivaled tradition*

My more recent reunion with a Lancia Stratos was a shade less spectacular, but just as stunning. This time it was Karl Ludvigsen's road car which I collected from Finchley in North London for our test day with its 'keeper', former Chequered Flag chief mechanic Don Fenwick. Driving cold straight into the London rush hour, the car behaved very well indeed. In the ensuing jams the car was docile and as one would expect, yet attracted a great deal of attention from other motorists and pedestrians alike. Once out of the jams and on to the M4, heading to our rendezvous with the Rally 037 at the Mike Spence Garage near Reading, it was into fifth gear and a commuter cruise at the legal 70mph limit. At this speed the engine sounds incredible; beautiful but very loud, making you feel it can't be right. The mechanical roar sounds like you're approaching the rev limiter; 7000, maybe 8000rpm, but no there it was, reading about 3000rpm. At around 5000rpm, the Ferrari Dino V6 really does start to sound better, the cams sing, everything starts to smooth out. The best I saw during our test day in top gear was about 7000rpm and an indicated, but perhaps slightly optimistic speed of about 230kph (around 145mph).

This bright yellow road Stratos really had all the character of the Chequered Flag's 'tweaky' rally version, the identical striking Bertone design exterior, the big purposeful wheels, Pirelli P7 265/40 x 15 Corsa rear tyres, the uncomfortable seats and that glorious V6 engine albeit with considerably less power. The engine is in fact the major area of difference between road and rally. On the road, the 2418cc, twin ohc, triple Weber unit was rated 190bhp at 7000rpm, the full house 270bhp rally version could be driven in extremely satisfying power-oversteer attitudes. You had to be careful, but rather surprisingly the rally version was not as

difficult to drive quickly as was the road car.

During our all too brief test day, I found the road-going Stratos difficult to balance in a controlled oversteer attitude. In fact, the car was at its quickest by using the normal race driving technique of 'slow in, quick out'. Driving this way the car would understeer all the way through the corner but if the line was right, full throttle could be maintained throughout. If, however, you tried to get the car sliding by backing off the throttle on entry to the corner, in order to upset the car's attitude, the tail came out very well, but even with quick reversal to full throttle application, a controlled oversteer was not consistently possible, our Stratos either transferred back to understeer or continued to oversteer into a spin – a fact I found out on more than one occasion during our test day! Memories of Donington came flooding back. You needed more power to break the traction of those huge rear tyres to pull you through.

Another area that needed a lot of driver attention was the gearbox. When cold, the usual Ferrari Dino trick of pulling away in second had to be employed as the change from first to second is totally impossible until the unit is warm. The selection of gears is something that the driver, until quite familiar with the car, has to treat with great care as the linkage travel is long and not always as straight as you would think. For instance the change from first to second is taken on quite a curved approach. Something that takes time to get used to.

The Lancia Rally 037 is totally different. Not as outwardly striking as the Stratos but nonetheless, the Pininfarina design is still a fantastic looking supercar. This is a Lancia from a different generation, a far more refined motor car with electric windows, trimmed interior, comfortable seats and so on. Cossetted in new production techniques,



***Their balance, and their poise, is right. Looks may be different, but the purpose is the same. Lift the rears and the story continues to differ: V6 transverse is opposed to in-line supercharged four***

a sporting car without the rough edges, the 037 lacks the charisma of the Stratos.

The 037 is not as exciting to drive as the Stratos. The 1995cc four cylinder 16 valve engine with its Rootes principle supercharger provides good performance but is understandably not as 'punchy' as the V6 Ferrari lump and for the enthusiasts, it lacks that all important ingredient; mechanical noise. The Abarth symbol on the 037's flank doesn't shout as loud as the Ferrari camshafts. What it does have is far more torque, from as little as 2000rpm you feel this engine is really working.

The ZF five speed gearbox was an area that immediately impressed in the 037, it was a treat to use, the linkage providing a very short, precise gear change, which after a few short miles familiarisation was a joy to handle.

The longer wheelbase of the 037 ensures far more progressive handling than the sudden death attitude of the Stratos, although the overall characteristics of both cars are very similar, i.e. initial understeer, but when 037's throttle is lifted on the entry to a corner the transfer to preferred oversteer is far easier to control. The slightly narrower rear tyres allow the car to be driven through a corner in a nice controlled oversteer balancing happily with throttle and steering wheel. Just the way Wilds likes it.

Rear vision is poor in both cars for road use, but particularly in the 037, the huge rear spoiler fills the centrally mounted rear view mirror, all you can see is the reflection of the engine and rear space frame lurking just behind your shoulders. When driven on the public highway, both cars were quite lively at picking up all the changes in road surfaces and following cambers, typical competition car traits. The rose-jointed suspension transmitted lots of mechanical 'clonks' to the interior of both cars, not helped by the use of

quite harsh shock absorbers; in the 037's case the famous twin Bilstein shock absorber set-up each side at the rear. The Stratos felt as though some of the rear suspension rose joints were in need of replacement as there was a fair amount of rear wheel steering, giving the impression that the rear tyres were not matched properly. The result caused the car to veer strangely as one opened and closed the throttle, not a big problem, but it took a while to acclimatise! This Stratos is driven regularly, although our test drive was the first time it had been 'out' since the latter part of last year. As we dropped the two cars back to their respective owners, I felt very sad that there wasn't more time to drive these amazing vehicles; cars of great character.

Driving them together was an experience, you spanned a generation, and yet the links were unmistakable. The Stratos looks oh-so-light, but as our Kiwi driver-for-the-day Don Fenwick explained, the Chequered Flag rally version tipped the scales at exactly one ton. The Rally was also no lightweight. Power was not the answer to either cars' successes. Far more can be gained from Don Fenwick's memory of the weight distribution, the Flag's Stratos had a 40/60 weight balance; and that was the key, balance. A balance that extended to the position of the Stratos engine and the gearbox – almost directly over the rear wheels. That gave traction where none would normally have been found. And it was traction that matched and beat the opposition.

Was there a winner in our Stratos Rally Challenge? For this driver, the 037 is a sporting car I'd love to live with. The Stratos is a car I'd love, but find hard to live with. In truth the real answer to the question is yes and it's called the S4, the next generation of rallying supercars from the Lancia stable, and *Sporting Cars International* has been driving that too, just turn the page . . . ■