

# News Notizie

10.04.2005 THE LANCIA STRATOS IS THE STAR OF BOTH THE RALLY STAGE AND STREET – AUTO ITALIA MAGAZINE BRINGS THE STRADALE TO MEET THE GROUP 4 – FOR A BACK-TO-BACK TEST



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Somewhere in the Land Of The Rising Sun there's a piece of my heart. It's a blood-red wedge, surgically removed nearly 12 years ago (it's called a lottadoshtomy); but I still get the occasional twinge of discomfort. The odd tooth, some hair, countless pickled brain cells – they're all gone and forgotten. But a Stratos is like backache: once you've had it, it's with you forever. So, the call from His Wardship offering me not one, but two of the little monsters to play with, one of them a pukka Group 4 example, was like that first fag after a long-haul flight, you suddenly realise how much you've missed it.

And talk of addiction brings me neatly to Christian Hrabalek – a man with no *bad* habits, I should add (that I know of, anyway), but one in thrall to chronic Stratosphilia. Not content with owning seven of them (it was 11 once...), he has now masterminded the inspired 2005 Fenomenon 're-interpretation' – you saw it here first – and signs of remission are hard to detect. This Pirelli car is his, as was the red *stradale* until he sold it to Gordon McCullough three or four years ago. The cars cohabit not far from Goodwood, allowing me to re-Stratify myself in the road car on the way there, before blowing my mind (and the circuit's three 'drive-by' microphones) in the Gp4, both on the track and on the way home.

## The Road Car (chassis no 1778)

This mint machine was born on September 17th 1974, destined for the German market, and represents the Stratos in its purest form – Gandini's sublime shape unspoil(er)ed by any bolt-on addenda. The optional wings have always polarised opinion aesthetically, but they work – Gordon says his car feels decidedly 'wobbly' at 190km/h...Only the competition-pattern 15-inch Campagnolo wheels are non-standard, and next to the fully kitted-out rally car (its senior by 19 days) it looks almost effete. Mind you, so does Darth Vader. With its bloated rear arches and massive P7s, its spoilers, roof air vent and auxiliary light pod, the Gp4 looks downright scary.

And sounds it. Chris takes it to Goodwood, leading a four-car convoy, and the sublimely outrageous noise assaults my eardrums three cars back where, driving the *stradale*, I'm already wallowing in a tsunami of memories – from the corkscrew-contortions needed to climb aboard to the familiar, skew-whiff, just-left-of-centre driving position. The non-standard Bordigari competition seat has a hard lateral ridge under the thighs and could do with a longer squab, but otherwise it's just like coming home.

Ahead, the swoopingly-curved 'dash' and seven-dial binnacle butt up to a screen which is a geometrically perfect, constant-radius cylindrical section (to minimize distortion). Combined with the wonderfully slender A-posts (impossible nowadays, sadly), it affords a view for'ard as panoramic as that aft is pitiful. The re-acquaintance is swift, lines of communication soon re-established. Your relationship with that fabulous V6 is more intimate in a Stratos than in any Dino, its distinctive, restless sound



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ZOOM >



'Fun' doesn't come close to describing a Stratos. It's got it, it flaunts it, and Chris knows as well as anyone what a tough act his Fenomenon has to follow. In any Stratos, every journey's a special stage – very special.



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fluctuating wildly in pitch and intensity in response to the throttle. Eager to confront the 7500 red line, it has great flexibility lower down, too, optimised by the sub-tonne weight.

Here again is that light, ultra-precise steering that redefines 'feedback', the chunky gearchange and the rather dead-feeling, but ultimately powerful, brakes. The suspension is as alive as ever, the usual muffled clonks and bangs reminding you that this is no all-mouth-and-trousers poseur. But this one rides beautifully, too – always a sure sign of a well set-up Stratos, with the right blend of compliance and stiffness.

Tolstoyan quantities of verbiage have been written about the Stratos's 'tricky' handling, and mastering the range and degree of adjustability built into the suspension requires skill and experience. When a Stratos is good, it is very very good; but when it is bad... In a nutshell, it's about getting enough bite at the front end to hold its own against stupendous grip and traction from the back (weight distribution is roughly 40/60% front/rear). Power understeer of cosmic proportions is common – we're talking exiting-roundabouts-via-the-grass-verge stuff. Conversely, with a wheelbase barely longer than its track, a Stratos can react with alarming alacrity to ham-footed power reversals – it's the only car I've ever spun on a public road. But not this one. Like the Pirelli car, it was prepared by Luigi Foradini. Between 1970 and 1980, Biella-based 'MFS' – Foradini, sandwiched by (Claudio) Maglioli and (Piero) Spriano – worked wonders with Strati, both for the factory and, later, French privateers Chardonnet. The 'F' touch is clearly still intact, for here is virtual Stratos perfection.

Chris holds us to a stately pace, so I hang back periodically, trying to goad the car into misbehaviour. I try all the tricks, loutishly manhandling both throttle and wheel with all the subtlety of a Little Britain sketch. But both ends work together beautifully, the sharp steering responses unimpaired by any waywardness. The front really bites on turn-in and, once settled into a bend, it's at the back you feel the lateral loading. But the modestly-proportioned Michelin TB15 road/race tyres – the *sine qua non* of '70s/'80s club-racing, now being re-manufactured – have grip enough to keep the tail in line. They look pleasingly similar to the original Pirelli CN36s, too – but won't last as long.

There's only the one roundabout to negotiate on our short journey but it's dauntingly tight, and I hang back again. It demands fast, accurate directional changes, and that's just what you get – we're through in a flash, leaving a virgin verge. Never was the hoary old 'go-kart' analogy more appropriate. And never, in my experience, was a road Stratos better set up. Appetite wetted, I'm ready for the rude version...

#### The Group 4 Car (chassis no 1723)

Stratoses wore Pirelli colours only in 1978, their last 'official' season, when Fiat itself came out to play with the 131 Mirafiori.

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They judged their repmobile to have far more profit-making potential than the elitist Lancia – and nicked its trademark Alitalia livery for good measure. The Stratos's enforced retirement was at best premature, at worst plain daft; but at least the bean-counters had to suffer the embarrassment of watching the old girl accumulate yet more silverware for several years to come – much of it courtesy of Chardonnet... and MFS.

Chris's car, originally also a red *stradale*, began its competitive career with the Grifone team (painted red with a white roof), had a spell with The Jolly Club (in a white and lime green ensemble) and thereafter appeared regularly in Italian national events crewed by such stalwart journeymen as Cola, Pons and Alberti (second in the 1979 Rally Autodromo Monza and eighth in 1980's Giro D'Italia stand out). When Chris bought it, in 1991, it wore Alitalia livery and was in need of total restoration. Foradini duly obliged, re-building it to 1978 works specification. Both four-valve per-cylinder engines and straight-cut gearboxes were outlawed that year, so it features the latest-evolution two-valve engine and a gearbox with notional synchromesh – plus bigger Lockheed brakes and, of course, Pirelli colours.

Corkscrewing into this beastie takes you into a very different environment. Gone is the prominent binnacle, in its place a conventional full-width dash, chock-a-block with stuff, all with its original Italian labelling. I lost count of the light switches (a navigator's nightmare), there's a pull-knob for ignition, a rubber starter button and two fuel pump switches (left and right tanks) – all sharing a wonderfully precision-engineered feel. In the centre, a large knurled aluminium wheel controls brake bias, while two Halda Tripmasters confront the co-driver.

At his feet, an alloy footrest matches the driver's perfectly placed pedals, and both have grippy Sparco seats best suited to bums a trifle narrower than mine. Like the road car's Bordigari, it won't distract me for long. Rear visibility is even worse here though, the interior mirror filled by the monstrous glassfibre airbox which obscures both engine and outside world alike.

After its aural bombardment of West Sussex I didn't rate our chances of getting it onto this most noise-conscious of circuits. But Chris was well prepared, producing two exhaust mufflers the size of buckets and sailing through the 'static' test. However, the three circuit mics aren't as easily fooled, and its first expedition, with Gordon at the helm, earned it a red flag (er, black, surely?...).

No problem, we were told – just back off at those three strategic points and you'll be okay. No problem in a familiar, 'ordinary' car perhaps, but first time out in a Group 4 Stratos it does nothing for your concentration and flow. I'm ready for anything as I ease out of the pitlane, Chris beside me, but the surprises are all nice. It's set up as a 'tarmac' car, requiring grip and precision, and of the pendulous back end – de rigueur for loose surfaces – there's little sign. With so short a wheelbase, the massive rear P7s have a big part to play here (the smaller-than-standard fronts look almost lost by comparison) and,





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although well stricken in years, they perform impressively.

Being 'live on air' makes for some jerky old laps, though. Blat through Madgwick (at its skittiest here) – lift for the mic; flat through Fordwater (beautifully stable), composed and agile through St Mary's – lift for the mic; boot the tail hard to tighten the exit from Lavant, then flat down the straight... and some respite. Here, the ultra-low gearing (there are numerous alternatives) is obvious. Around 120mph is your lot – there's no speedometer – and I'm clean out of revs by Woodcote. It's as sharp as a knife into the chicane, inviting a bootful out on to the straight... er, lift for the mic.

Frustrating, all this, but the message came over loud and clear. You have to be masterful with this car; give it large – plenty of everything – and it delivers. Rock solid with the power on, surprisingly well-mannered on lift-off, it was far nicer than I'd expected on the circuit. The steering is usefully higher-g geared than the road car's, the clutch surprisingly light and progressive, the brakes *unsurprisingly* heavy but effective. The gearbox's regulation-compliant 'synchromesh' (nudge, wink) is largely illusory in practice, and the shorter-than-standard lever throw requires a firm but deft hand (and probably no clutch, though I thought better of trying it).

Then there's that engine – still flexible, but demonic above about 4500rpm. Its 280bhp matches a 24-valve motor's output in 1977 (such is progress) and it's clearly quicker than the road car – although on the wide-open spaces of Goodwood it didn't feel all that fast by today's standards. On a narrow forest dirt track, in the dark, it'd be a different story...

And on the road, where it's a bit of a fish-out-of-water, its uncompromising competition credentials are all-too apparent. The engine is docile enough, but the very *un*-muffled crash-bang-wallop from the all-steel suspension (gone is the road cars' rubber insulation) and awkward low-speed gearchanges would soon sap your energy. And it was on the way home that I experienced the scariest moment of the day – pulling out of a petrol station. Rear three-quarter visibility was not a priority.

But, road and track, it was great to be back. 'Fun' doesn't come close to describing a Stratos. It's got it, it flaunts it, and Chris knows as well as anyone what a tough act his Fenomenon has to follow. In any Stratos, every journey's a special stage – *very* special.

Test by Simon Park / Photography by Michael Ward

This feature appears in Auto Italia, Issue 117. Highlights of this month's issue of the world's leading Italian car magazine, which is now on sale, include road tests of the new Alfa 159 and Fiat Grande Punto Sporting 1.9 JTD, as well as features on Batman's Lamborghini Murciélago and a pre-war Alfa Romeo 1750SS. Call +44 (0) 1858 438817 for back issues subscriptions.

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