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The Stratos remains one of the most attractive and effective rally cars ever born.

The most successful WRC manufacturer: Lancia

Manufacturers' week - Part five: Lancia

Take your pick from Lancia's beautiful rally cars. There really hasn't been a bad one among them. And all except the Beta has won at the highest level. The story has to start with the Fulvia, which dominated Italian rallying in the mid to late 1960s and transferred that into wins in what would soon be known as the WRC events in Sanremo, Portugal and the Tour de Corse.

Despite Sandro Munari's 1972 Monte win in a Fulvia, the writing was on the wall for the car. And there was some radical new thinking going on in the Lancia factory under the watchful eye of legendary team boss Cesare Fiorio. That radical new thinking came in the shape of a door-stop. A door-stop with the engine from a Ferrari Dino in the back. This was the Stratos, one of the most attractive and effective rally cars ever born.

The 270bhp motor was installed just ahead of the rear wheels and on top of the gearbox, offering as neutral handling as could be expected from something with that much power going through the rear wheels. The car won as a prototype from 1973 and then homologated into Group 4 from the following year onwards. And it was still winning - in the hands of Bernard Darniche - on the 1981 Tour de Corse. In between times, it garnered three manufacturer titles for Lancia (1974-1976).

Clearly sold on the virtues of purpose-built rear-drive rally cars, the Rally 037 was a shoo in for the Italians. There weren't many similarities between the Stratos and the 037, but the addition of a supercharger to a now longitudinal engine aided power, response and handling at the beginning of a turbo era where an unwanted by-product for many cars was terrible turbo-lag. Markku Alen and Walter Rohrl combined to deliver another makes' title in 1983. But, by this time, the four-wheel-drive revolution was well and truly underway and while the 037 won on into 1984, Alen's Corsican win of that season would be the last for the rally-bred racer.

Lancia's response to need for more driven wheels was typically flamboyant. The Delta S4 arrived in time for the 1985 RAC Rally. Resplendent with bulges and wings and ducts here, there and everywhere, the mid-mounted engine had one chief benefit over its contemporaries: it was turbo charged and supercharged. With

immediate throttle response and seemingly endless power, the S4 rocketed through the British forests to finish first and second with Henri Toivonen and Alen.

Toivonen repeated that win first time out in Monte Carlo the next season, but he and co-driver Sergio Cresto were later killed in a tragic accident on the Tour de Corse. Lancia continued with its season and claimed a world championship for Alen. Unfortunately for the Finn, he would have to hand that title to Peugeot's Juha Kankkunen when the Sanremo Rally results - an event which Kankkunen had been excluded and Alen had won - were annulled.

With its road-going Delta HF 4WD, Lancia was in pole position to make the most of the more production based Group A regulations imposed from the start of 1987. With an already rich rallying history, Lancia had just entered its purple patch. The Delta started winning manufacturer titles in 1987 and didn't stop until the end of 1992 (by which time Lancia had officially withdrawn from the WRC and the cars were being run by the Jolly Club). And in those six glorious years, Lancia netted two drivers' titles apiece for Miki Biasion and Kankkunen.

After throttling the opposition in 1987, the second Group A Delta - the HF Integrale - made its predecessor look nothing more than mediocre. In 1988, the car complete with bigger turbo and wider arches was only beaten once. And, to the eternal glory of Lancia's hierarchy, this was the car which finally delivered an Italian World Rally Champion in the shape of Biasion.

The various incarnations of Group A Delta notched up 45 wins between 1987 and 1992, but it was the final version, the Super Delta HF Integrale or the Deltona as it was known, which really made its mark. Down the years, the Delta had evolved from being a fairly humdrum family runaround into the deeply mean, wide and moody looking machine which was wheeled out of Turin in time for the 1992 season. It remains something of a mystery quite how Didier Auriol missed out on the 1992 title, having taken what looked like a near unbeatable Lancia to six rally wins in the season. But miss out he did.

Andrea Aghini holds the honour of being the winner of Lancia's 74th and final WRC event in Sanremo, 1992.

Lancia's stats:

Wins: 74 (this includes Markku Alen's annulled 1986 Sanremo win)

Most successful driver: Miki Biasion, 16 wins

Most successful car: Stratos/Delta HF Integrale, 16 wins

