

1974 Lombard RAC Rally —

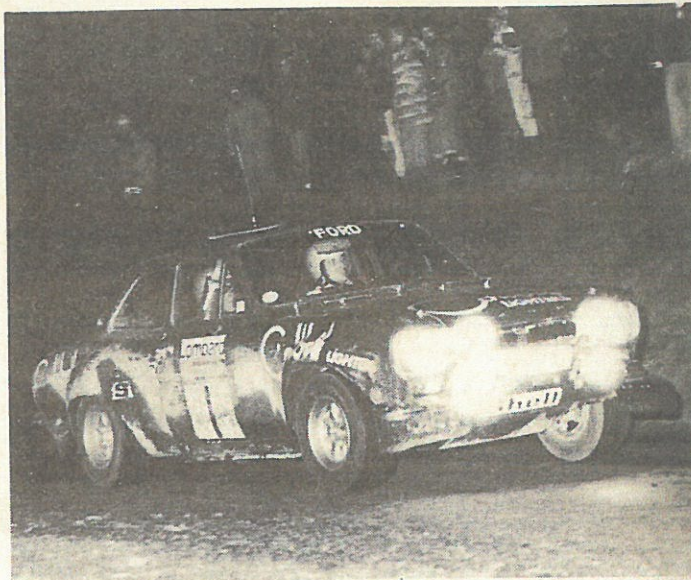
Ford and Opel shocks, Lancia Stratos sensation, Clark fights back



international
1974 RALLY
OF GREAT BRITAIN

The 1974 Lombard RAC Rally finished yesterday afternoon in York after five memorable days and nights struggle. This year has been a remarkable one on many counts; Lancia and Sandro Munari have proved that the fabulous Stratos is capable of lasting long distances on loose surfaces, as well as being spectacularly fast on tarmac; the FWD Beta coupé made its first appearance on a rally in this country; Saab proved that the venerable 96, in the hands of the inspired Stig Blomqvist, is still an international force to rival the best; the mishaps that hit the Colibri Fords served to show that in rallying there is never such a thing as total reliability; while the spate of retirements during the first day and night graphically illustrated the pace of modern International stage rallying. Printing schedules regrettably preclude the publishing of the final result, but it is hoped that the action portrayed here captures some of the event's unique atmosphere. Latest positions as we went to press appear below and in Special Stage, and we have included the mishaps that befell the principal contenders. Photographs by David Winter and Peter Newton.

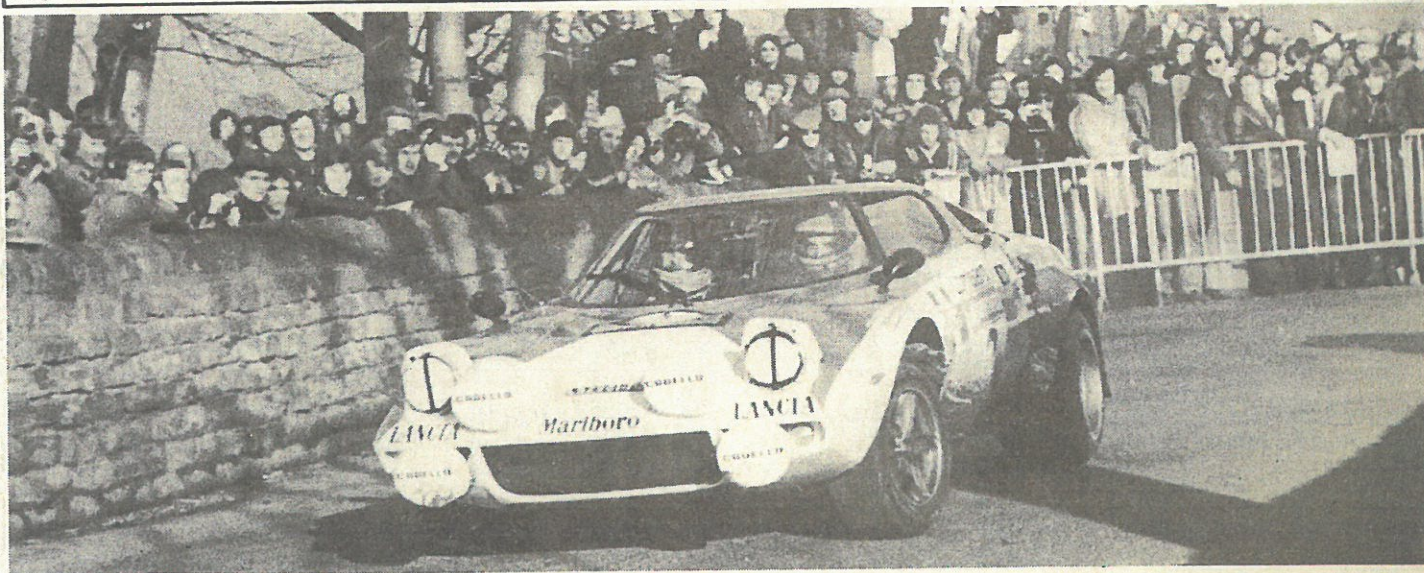
Tuesday night after 75 Special Stages. Positions and times: 1, T. Makinen/H. Liddon (Ford Escort RS), 408 m 11 s; 2, S. Blomqvist/H. Sylvan (Saab 96 V4), 410 m 35 s; 3, S. Munari/M. Mannucci (Lancia Stratos), 414 m 14 s; 4, B. Wäldegard/H. Thorszellius (Toyota Levin), 416 m 30 s; 5, P-I. Walfridsson/J. Jensen (Volvo 142), 417 m 38 s; 6, W. Rohrl/J. Berger (Opel Ascona 19), 419 m 32 s; 7, W. Coleman/D. O'Sullivan (Ford Escort RS), 421 m 23 s; 8, N. Rockey/R. Channon (Ford Escort RS), 404 m 46 s*; 9, R. Clark/A. Mason (Ford Escort RS), 405 m 37 s*; 10, C. Sclater/M. Holmes (Datsun Violet), 405 m 49 s*. (* after SS 72). Per Eklund broke a drive-shaft at the start of SS 75 (Grizedale) to dash Saab team prize hopes.



Above: Leader after 75 stages was Timo Makinen, just 2 m 24 ahead of the battered Saab 96 of Stig Blomqvist (below).



As the leaders returned to York on Tuesday night, Munari's Stratos (below) trailed the Saab by 3 m 39 s.





... but long before the ice can take control, another deft correction sends it screaming up the hill in a long full-power drift . . .

Stratos : advent of a rally supercar

PETER NEWTON looks at development of Lancia's purpose-built rally car

Wednesday, November 20, 11.45 am, the Yorkshire forests stand brittle in the watery Winter sunshine, the smooth tracks glisten and sparkle as the thick ice reflects its weak rays, and the breath of thousands of spectators rises in curling slow-motion columns among the silent pines on the crisp, still air. The faint drone of a thousand conversations is punctuated by the tramp of wary footsteps, treading cat-like on the treacherous surface; coats and scarves are wrapped tighter around shivering bodies, and the kaleidoscope of colour made by the assembled ranks brings the frost-tinged banks into sharp relief. Wykeham forest; the 84th and last stage of the 1974 Lombard RAC Rally; the final curtain on five days of international motorsport, the final conclusion to a struggle which has raged throughout the length and breadth of the country, and all eyes are fastened on the distant corner where the first car will appear, all ears strain in the clear forest air for the first distant sounds of a BDA, a Porsche . . . or the Stratos.

The tension in the morning air is palpable as the muted growl of whooping engines grows louder, suddenly the rally has caught

up with Wykeham and the tranquillity is ripped aside in an instant. Flocks of startled wood pigeons burst from the trees, a thousand cameras are re-focused for the nth time; the waiting is over. Harry Kallstrom appears at the distant corner. The little Datsun forges up the hill towards the crowds huddled above a series of fast left and right bends. Just before the first corner the red and white car flicks right, the brakes dab on for an instant, and in a flash of the old Kallstrom brilliance, the car is set up for the sequence. As the Datsun crests the rise on the apex of the right, the glistening ice carries it wide, more lock is twirled on, a flash of moustache half-hidden under a helmet, and the Datsun flashes by, its rear wheels scrabbling for grip off the edge of the track, the snarl of its engine receding as the car fishtails up the hill towards the finish.

Gradually the hubbub of conversation blends in with the receding exhaust, hand signals and wide grins designate signs of approval, cameras return to the limit of their straps and heads turn again to the distant corner. Today here seems to be a feeling of special expectation in the air and there is

not long to wait for its gratification. A musical throb grows among the distant trees, then with a bark of triumph, the Stratos bursts out of the gloom into the sunlight, the wheel flicks sideways, its driver corrects and red and white projectile hurls itself at straining watchers on the corner. The speed of its arrival still takes everyone by surprise, the sinister shape flicks through the trees, a blur of unforgettable action on retina. Two Bell-Helmeted figures crouch together behind the steeply raked screen of the tiny cockpit; the driver hustles through, a flurry of minute corrections on wheel and the shape streaks past. On crest of the righthander, the car hesitates in mid-stride, but long before the ice can take control, another deft correction sends it screaming up the hill in a long full-power drift; a cacophony of whirring cam gears, timing chains; and as quickly as it has arrived, the little car is just a memory, the strident howl of the exhaust echoing and receding into the never-ending forest. The spectators look around to each other in silence as they not certain what they have seen . . . advent of a rally supercar.

The sheer interest and excitement generated by the Stratos on the RAC surprised even Cesare Fiorio, Lancia's team manager, and it has caught the imagination of the public like nothing else for years. There can have scarcely been one person on the event who did not think that this "fragile" machine would break; it was only a matter of time. As the Saturday afternoon of the rally passed, the Stratos remained comfortably in second place. The pundits and the cognoscenti nodded sagely. These stages were just a mere warm-up for the real tests to come. On Esholt the Stratos took seven seconds off Mikkola to set fastest time of 2m 52s. This was of course tarmac, where the Stratos was expected to shine. Nobody imagined that it would be setting up fastest times five days later on ice in Yorkshire. According to Fiorio, a decision was taken at Machynlleth which undoubtedly affected the final outcome of the rally. That decision was to slow down. Sandro Munari was already beginning to feel the effects of food poisoning which was to necessitate a doctor travelling around to each time-control to make frequent check-ups on his condition. Secondly, it was essential that Lancia finished the rally.

The situation was an interesting one. In 1973 Lancia clinched the European Rally Championship thanks to Munari and his regular co-driver, Mario Munnucci. That year they won the Costa Brava in a Fulvia, the Firestone in a Stratos, the San Martino in a Fulvia, and the Tour de France with a Stratos, and were well placed on numerous occasions. This year, however, with comprehensive re-organisation on the home front, Lancia's rallying activities took a dive, and it was not until the beginning of October that the World Rally Championship began to be of interest to them. Thus the entries made for the RAC were originally intended as an experimental exercise with two still unproven cars (Stratos and Beta coupé). Little did they then realise how delicately balanced the situation would be by the time of the RAC. It was thus of paramount importance to finish the event. After 20 stages, it was clear to all that the Stratos was by far the quickest car on the rally. Fiorio maintains that they could have continued this pace or even hotted it up if necessary, but it would have been foolhardy to do so with the possibility of the car not finishing, and Munari already beginning to feel unwell. Now, thanks to a fine third place,

(and 10th place going to Simo Lampinen's Beta coupé) it is almost inevitable that, barring the most atrocious ill luck, Lancia will win the World Rally Championship—a very rosy situation and one which not even Fiorio dreamt of as late as September.

The experimental testing year has almost certainly yielded a championship, without apparent effort. At the root of this remarkable feat is the car itself; the apparently fragile tarmac racer that was not expected to last the first day of the RAC, let alone maintain the tortuous pace throughout the rough Lake District stages and finish the event on a superbly high note, setting fastest time at Wykeham.

It almost comes as something of a surprise when one remembers that the Stratos was designed as purpose-built rally car, and its construction endows it with immense strength and rigidity. Briefly, the Stratos is of steel monocoque construction, principally the work of chief engineer, Gian-Paulo Dallera. Two wide pontoons run the length of the car and are joined front and rear by full width hoops. Projecting forward and rearward of the central structure are square tube subframes which support the suspension mountings. A roll-over bar is integral with the structure, and this transverse square tubing has the dual function of bracing the side members and carrying the engine mountings. It is thus not difficult to see that the frame possesses great strength, and to this is added a steel skin at the centre section incorporating roof, front inner wheel arches, sills and skuttle. Front and rear bodywork is of glassfibre construction. The adaptability of the design to suit varying conditions is impressive. Front and rear ride height can be adjusted in an instant, as can the anti-roll bars at both front and rear. The whole design is entirely competition-orientated and the car has been in limited series production for some time now in order to satisfy the necessary homologation regulations.

This year has been primarily occupied with development and the car was somewhat hesitantly entered for the San Remo (which contains a fair proportion of loose). Munari won the event easily after the Fiats put paid to their chances early on. Then the Stratos went across the Atlantic and Munari won the Rideau Lakes as it liked after the Fiats again hit trouble. During the chaotic happenings of the POR, a shock absorber came loose and

rolled around inside the engine compartment before smashing the electrics. Thus, with two easy International victories to its credit, the Stratos came to the RAC with a major question mark still hanging over it; what would happen when the competition became really fierce over rough arduous going? The question does not now require an answer.

After the finish of the event at York we were able to have a quick word with Sandro Munari as he was preparing to dash off to Corsica. "The Fulvia was great but I like driving this better than anything else because she is quicker than everything else. It is better to do events like the RAC to show what possibilities the car has against international competition; because here you have got all the top cars and drivers. The Stratos has been tremendous; we never did any work on the car whatsoever." He was full of praise for the car's handling; "She's fantastic to drive on tarmac, on gravel, or on snow. In Chamonix we compared the Stratos to the Fulvia on ice and snow without studs, and the Stratos was still considerably quicker. In my mind it was easily the fastest car of the rally, but we could not go fast all the time as it was so important to finish well and get the points." For the future Munari is enthusiastic: "In the Tour de Corse there are three Stratos and one Beta coupé, and next year I think we shall have two Stratos in every major international rally."

Just as the Stratos programme is being stepped up, so is the power of the engine. "Up to now we have not used the (300 bhp) four valve units because we have had little time, but we will be using them on Corsica, and next year we will be using them on events like the San Remo, the Sweden and the RAC; I'm convinced of their reliability." As far as he is personally concerned Sandro Munari is quite clear about what will be driving: "you'll find me in a Stratos," he says, with a flash of a grin. While he is talking, a young girl approaches Piero Sodano and sympathises with him about how terrifying it must have been to be hurled through the forests in such a scary claustrophobic little projectile. . . . he turns to her with a smile on his face: "Signorina, it is my heart. . . . his arms cover his chest. . . . it is yours!" the arms reach out towards her in inimitable Latin style. The supercar well and truly arrived on the rally scene and the implications may well be more far-reaching than is yet believed.

Against top class competition the Lancia Stratos more than proved its worth on the RAC Rally.

