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Sierra Cosworth (Blomqvist!), Lancia Stratos (Munari!),
Escort RS Mk1, Jide 1600



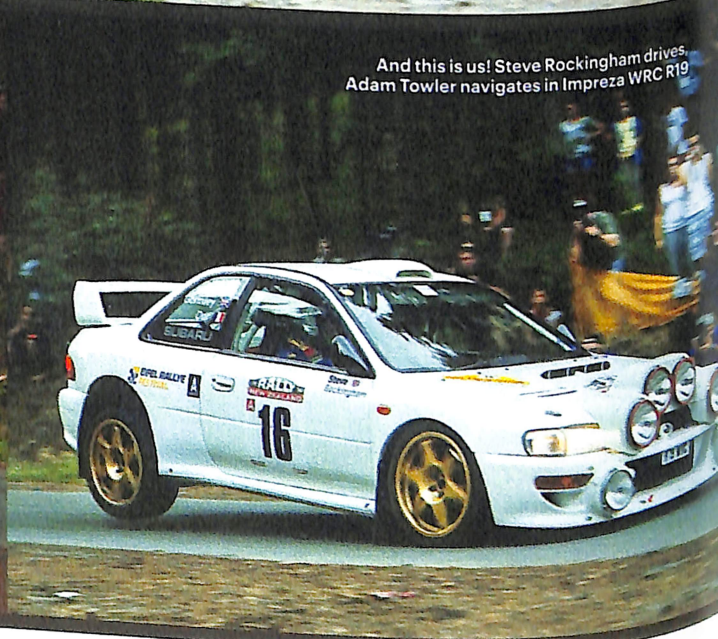
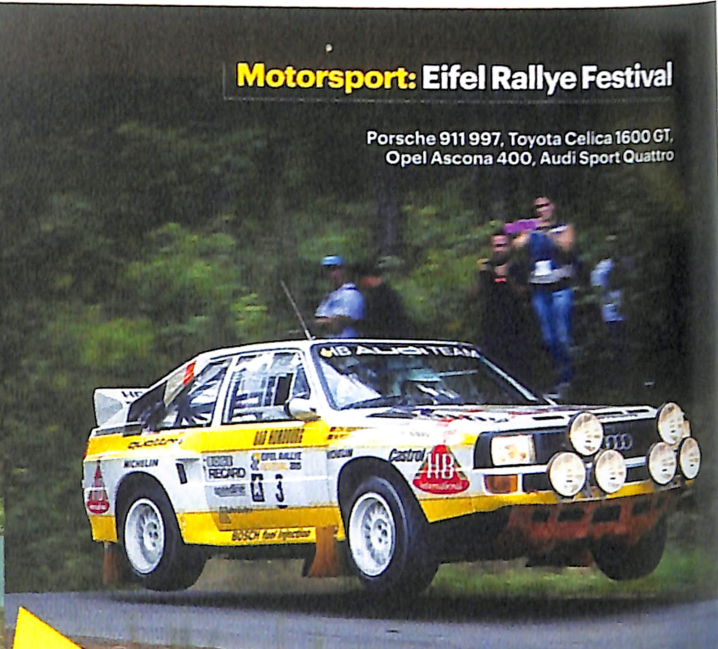
WEEKEND OF THE GODS

They're all here: Hannu Mikkola, Stig Blomqvist, Walter Röhrl... and us, in Colin McRae's Impreza. In a quiet German town for one weekend of frenetic action, the ghosts of rallying's golden past rise again

Words Adam Towler Photography Tom Salt

Motorsport: Eifel Rallye Festival

Porsche 911 997, Toyota Celica 1600 GT, Opel Ascona 400, Audi Sport Quattro



And this is us! Steve Rockingham drives Adam Towler navigates in Impreza WRC R19

CAN'T TALK. I don't mean in the metaphoric sense; I mean, I really can't talk. My mouth opens but only a pathetic croak emerges, interspersed at random moments with a crack that sends my suffering vocal chords soaring an octave higher. This could be a problem: in just a few hours I will be calling pace notes from the very seat where Nicky Grist once guided Colin McRae to victory in the 1998 Rally of Portugal. The ceremonial start of the 2015 Eifel Rallye Festival, a gathering every year of flame-spewing old rally cars and star drivers is just an hour or so away.

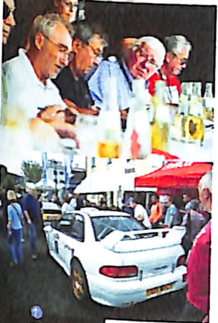
A surreal few days begins in a small hotel in the provincial town of Daun, Germany. I am sitting down to breakfast when in walks a kindly looking older chap with a deep, Floridian tan and piercing blue eyes. He looks straight at me, smiles quietly, and then ambles over to the cereal selection. It's Hannu Mikkola. The Hannu Mikkola, as in the 1983 World Rally Champion. As I turn back wide eyed to contemplate my dry croissant his long time co-driver Arne Hertz strolls past as if he's on the way to the hotel pool.

The man I'm here to share breakfast with arrives a few minutes later. The thick rimmed spectacles and sturdy physique are as unremarkable today as the polo shirt, shorts and canvas shoes of any sexagenarian on holiday, but in the mid '80s they lent this Flying Finn the nickname *Loyva* - 'slack' - for, when combined with his chain smoking habit, they gave the impression that Timo Salonen wasn't, perhaps, taking the sport as seriously as some of his rivals. His hissing raw speed soon made that epithet deeply ironic.

He tells me he hasn't driven a Group B Peugeot 205 T16 since the end of the 1986 RAC Rally - until yesterday that is. 'It felt like I have been making rally one week ago,' he says in a deep, clipped Finnish accent. Timo arrived in the 1985 Peugeot team as the understudy to Ari Vatanen's star turn, but the tables soon turned: 'I had no pressure, but after two, three rallies, Vatanen had big pressure. It was a big surprise to Ari that I was so fast.' It's a sentiment echoed later when I chat to Maurice Picqueton in the service park. He's here looking after the T16 that Timo will drive tomorrow, and was Timo's chief mechanic during that spine tingling '85 season he hasn't seen Timo for 29 years either.

There are over 150 rally cars entered into this festival of gratuitous oversteer: everything from a two-stroke Saab that billows blue smoke, to those ferocious Group B monsters of the 1980s, such as the MG Metro 6R4 and the short-wheelbase Audi Sport Quattro. There are Group A Integrales and WRC-era Corollas; drifting Group 4 Escorts; and Sandro Munari in the car forever associated with his driving genius, the Lancia Stratos in Alitalia colours. Walter Röhrl, naturally, is present, as he is every year. Even in just our little corner of ▶

Our man with Timo Salonen: Sugar right, 5 liver plates, cornflakes left, 3 don't eat etc.



Drivers do autographs, we wait outside in the Subaru





**Sandro Munari
in the car forever
associated with his
driving genius, the
Lancia Stratos**



Walter Riel signs autograph. How do you spell my name again?



Steve Rockingham all set in the Impreza. He's on his own, frankly

They don't release stage times, so the still-outlawed Group B cars can compete



It all comes flooding back: 1985 Audi Sport Quattro Group B car with period Audi factory driver Harald Demuth at the wheel

Munari in the
Alitalia-liveried
Stratos. We caught
him up!



the service park there are two Ford RS200s parked alongside and a three-door Sierra RS Cosworth driven this weekend by 1984 World Rally Champion Strig Blomqvist. The organisers do not release the stage times, which means the still-outlawed Group B machines can actively compete, but that doesn't stop everyone trying very hard indeed.

First, a confession: I have never navigated in a rally car before, a fact that seems absurd given the company I'm keeping and the car I'll be calling the notes from. That I'm here is entirely due to my friend Steve Rockingham, who owns 'R19' WRC. He loves rallying, started driving competitively in rally rallies years ago, and nowadays does the odd rally while regularly demonstrating his cars at events like this one.

"Don't worry if you get lost or you throw up," says Steve cheerfully, trying to be encouraging. "I've driven some of the stages before and it's meant to be fun. But I know that Steve, a successful and competitive bloke, will want to put on a good show for the thousands of spectators expected to line the special stages, just as I suspect Steve knows that I, as a rallying-obsessed car nut, will be mortified if I'm not immediately up to scratch, however unrealistic that might be."

'R19' debuted at Rally GB in 1997 with Kenneth Eriksson at the wheel, while Colin and Nicky won in a sister Prodrive Impreza WRC. 'R19' retired ingloriously on the very first stage. In 1998 Colin drove 'R19' to that Portuguese success, and in 1999 it did a full WRC season in the hands of Freddy Dor, a wealthy French businessman closely associated with Prodrive. He was not a man who required sponsors, hence the plain white livery the car wears to this day.

Steve doesn't have a lavish team of mechanics, so we have to share all the prep duties and pack everything into his works van. That's the same van we use for reccing the stages, which leads to the amusing sight of a Vito sideways on gravel. Steve's regular co-driver Fiona has photocopied her pace notes from previous years, but they need adjustment for this year's changes, and one stage is new anyway. Making pace notes is engrossing, but reading and writing on the move makes me nauseous, which bodes ill for tomorrow.

It's Saturday evening, and there's no time to worry about my disappearing voice now. It's the infamous Hilgerath 12.53 special stage miles begun at dusk. A large crowd sees us off from the town centre, while all

along the road route fans wave from the kerbside.

My nerves really spike as we reach the time control for the stage. After fumbling with intercom lead, headset, helmet and Hans device, finally I manage to connect everything, click together my belts, tighten them enthusiastically until my privates make me wince, and all just in time as we pull up to the start line. The crowd, five-deep in places, looks on animatedly.

We're next, and I'm sweating profusely. I glance across and observe Steve's face, reddish and perspiring behind the no-mex face mask, the eyes bulging with raw concentration and the breathing fast on the intercom, and I suddenly realise how psyched he is, how psyched you have to be to drive a proper World Rally Car with conviction on a special stage. This is going to be wild. And it is.

Go! Hilgerath begins with a long, high-speed section on a main road, and we're soon on the rev limiter in top gear, the transmission whining so loud it's boring a hole through my helmet. I remember this from the reccé: awkward braking at high speed while still exiting the 'left-four' of an S-bend. *Goof!* The water-cooled brakes bite so hard I feel the air compressed from my lungs – just as well, then, that I've already called the 'right-two' that leads off into the forest. Steve controls the inevitable wag of the tail with a snap of the wrists, then exaggerates it with a Scandinavian flick before judicious use of the 'bar' to make the next right.

The racket inside the car is immense, and aware that my vocal chords are giving up I shout as loud as I possibly can. For Steve, headset turned up to the appropriate volume, they're practically splitting his eardrums. Repeatedly he gesticulates to calm down while we slide perilously between trees, but I can't decipher a word, and continue to manically rasp out instructions. Eventually Steve bravely reaches behind his seat and turns me down, but not before I get mixed up with the notes, lose my place, and have to admit 'on air' that I'm merely a passenger, which leaves me stewing in abject fury with myself, compounded when I get us lost leaving the stage afterwards.

Nevertheless, the adrenaline means I'm deliriously happy as we return the Subaru, clanking and stuttering into the service park. By the time we've packed the Impreza away for the night the rain is hammering on the roof of the awning, and with most fans retired to the local bars, I find myself sharing a beer with Strig and Steve, the three of us chatting about the stage. ▶

Colin McRae won
the '93 Portuguese
Rally in this car. We
understand why



Then the unthinkable: we catch the Munari Stratos mid-stage. It's like 1990s Sega Rally



The 5 ages of World Rallying

1970-1981

The early years

First World Championship comprises classic events from the rally calendar. The '70s is the era of flamboyant heroes such as Munari, Clark and Mikkola. Regs permit a broad variety of cars, from mid-engined Lancias to heavy-weight 450SLC Merc coupes



1987-1996
Group A

Production-based cars mark the new era, which matures into a thrilling battle of various factory teams from Europe and Japan: think Integrae, Celica GT4, Escort Cosworth, Impreza and Civic. Etc. all with memorable TV versions



1982-1986
Group B

Low production numbers (200) combine with turbo power, 4wd and composite bodywork to create F1 acceleration on gravel. Popular, but dangerous for drivers and spectators, and Henri Toivonen's death in Corsica in '86 leads to the cars being banned



1997-2010
The WRC era

Cost forces WRC to move away from homologation and the sport makes a play for increased TV airtime. Night stages are dropped and rallies made much shorter. It works for a bit, then Sebastian Lueke's domination and declining entries scare TV off.



2011 present
Smaller is better?

WRC attempts to regroup, with smaller, more dramatic cars powered by 1.6-litre engines. VW and Hyundai factory teams do battle, with the former's big budget making them the new force. Still no big UK TV deal though.

Steve knows the Donerath stage well. Just as well, as our man's got his pace notes in the wrong order again

Veteran of the '74 Safari Rally, 911 Carrera RS 2.7 pushes on





of modern rallying in the dim light of a wet Eifel evening. It's one of those moments when you repeatedly punch yourself on the arm just to check you're not dreaming.

It's still raining on Saturday morning, and so we change to intermediate tyres. Ahead of us lie three stages, repeated again in the afternoon. After last night's baptism of near bewilderment, I'm doubly determined to raise my game.

The Keilberg stage is a beast, but thankfully nausea doesn't seem to trouble me, and things are going better until I lose my place again. I've written my new notes far too demurely packed together, inviting trouble. I should have written them out again in the hotel room last night but didn't dare to, in case I copied them wrongly.

Onwards, then, to the Demerach stage. Steve knows this one, and goes on the attack. I'm learning fast, but then disaster: my notes are in the wrong order, another daft mistake.

At Lehswald, SS5, the notes get wet when we dive through a particularly deep puddle, water splashing over the familiar snake mouth on the sunroof and splashing me through the slightly air passenger's window. The last two pages stick in the heat of the moment, and I'm too slow again with the next instruction.

On the penultimate stage of the day Munari suddenly appears as we quarter for the stage start, apparently having located a suitable piece of undergrowth to do the necessary. I ask him to sign my mudbook and he obliges, before his co-driver shouts over urging him to clamber back into the Stratos for the start.

Then the unthinkable: we've caught the Munari Stratos mid-stage. It's like Sega Rally in the arcades, back in the 1990s. The back of the Lancia now completely fills our windscreen, slowing violently left then right like a computer graphic driven in behind the car's view. The un-silenced bark of the Dino V6 nearly shatters the glass yet still I hear Steve curse at the blidpup, the admission of the moment temporarily superseding his natural respect for the legend. One turbocharged lunge and we're past, two wheels on the grass. Sideways. Gaa! Samba! I raise a hand in apologetic thanks, this is brilliantly ridiculous.

By the final stage of the day I just want to complete one run without any silly errors. And then... just for a brief moment, something clicks. Later, analysing everything, I realise I barely look up from my notes, sensing instead where we are on the stage by feeling the car's movement left and right, side to side, pivoting. My notes are in sync with the car and Steve, and it's a wonderful, almost ethereal feeling, perhaps a tiny, fleeting glimpse of that special togetherness Colin and Nicky always felt in R160WRC, both relying equally on each other to achieve something amazing through trust alone - and to stay alive. As we cross the finish there's sheer exhilaration, which has barely subsided by the time we return one last time to the service park, and the raucous bray of the Subaru finally falls silent. The mud is already drying pale and crusty. Six grins at me knowingly, and the beer tastes really, really good. **aa**

160 Ford RS2000 in the workshop area. To suffer you a Steve but we've only got 21 minutes!



Steph Blomqvist, 1994 World Rally Champion, has met some odd co-drivers at his time. Here he's with met Adam Toivola.