

Salon

# Lancia Stratos

The mighty maverick from Turin

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**T**HE TWO MEN COMPARING NOTES IN the back seat of the Lancia Flavia sedan speeding east on the A21 *autostrada* carried with them much of the modern tradition of Italian motorsports. The younger man, intense, dark-curly-haired and with striking aquiline good looks, was a second-generation Lancia executive. His father, Sandro Fiorio, began competing in Lancia cars with an Ardea in 1951. Teaming with E. Christillin, Fiorio rallied successfully in the immortal Lancia B20 coupe through the Fifties.

When Lancia looked for a man to head its press office, the genial Sandro Fiorio was an obvious choice. He gave the Turin company a proud world profile out of all proportion to its modest production. He also gave his son Cesare a keen interest in cars and racing.

In 1963 Lancia introduced the V-4 Fulvia, which with its front-wheel drive showed promise for rallying. Cesare Fiorio's canny stewardship of the HF Squadra Corse led to its 1965 absorption by Lancia as its official race and rally preparation center. Lancia in turn was absorbed in 1969 by Fiat, headed by Gianni Agnelli, a school friend of Sandro Fiorio. Fiat's takeover of Lancia led to the presence in the back seat of the speeding Lancia of the other man, Dr. Ing. Pierugo Gobbato.

Pierugo was the son of Ugo Gobbato, a hugely experienced and capable engineering and production expert who had equipped and organized Fiat's Lingotto factory. After a stint in Russia, the senior Gobbato was named to head Alfa Romeo when it collapsed into state ownership in 1933. Enzo Ferrari, who ran the independent *scuderia* that raced Alfas, welcomed Gobbato's new broom at the Milan firm but saw his team brought under Alfa's umbrella as part of Gobbato's streamlining of the company.

After the war the elder Gobbato, although acquitted of collaboration with the German occupiers of Italy, was gunned down and killed on a Milan sidewalk. His son, Pierugo, also an engineer, made a career with Fiat. In 1965 Enzo Ferrari, whose company was in rough waters, asked Fiat to lend him Gobbato as managing director to help steady his ship. The tall, balding, elegant Pierugo Gobbato happily renewed his link with a brief racing career of the Thirties. In 1969, however, Fiat retrieved Gobbato. It had just bought Lancia and needed a skilled and experienced executive to run it.

Two years later, in 1971, these two men were being driven from Turin to Maranello on one of the toughest missions that they had ever attempted: to ask a favor of Enzo Ferrari. Although Ferrari's company was now under the Fiat wing as well, it was still run autonomously. Fiat people were extra-careful to avoid aggravating the "sorcerer of Modena"; he still hurled a mean lightning bolt. But Fiorio and Gobbato had no choice: Ferrari had the one, the only, engine that they had to have if they were to build a new rally-winning Lancia.



Under the direction of Cesare Fiorio, promoted to head Lancia's marketing but still looking after the Lancia Squadra Corse, Lancia plunged into rallying with its plucky Fulvia coupes in the late Sixties and found the water fine. But by early 1971 they were swimming upstream. The specialized Alpine-Renaults were getting stronger, as were the Porsches.

Against such cars, Fiorio and Pierugo Gobbato knew they'd stand no chance with a Fulvia, no matter how modified. To stay competitive they'd have to design and manufacture a completely dedicated car. Starting from scratch provided a rare opportunity, Fiorio realized. He convened a conclave of his drivers, mechanics and engineers to ask them what they personally wanted in their ideal rally car.

"First I had a meeting to introduce the idea, to ask them what they thought," he recalled. "Then we had another meeting to hear what their ideas were, to develop them further. Finally I synthesized everything in a *cahier de charge*, a document that showed what was needed. It was quite a big book, 100 and more pages." Fiorio's colleagues mentioned such points as small size, good outward vision, erect seating position and good access

to the mechanical elements for changes and repairs.

In the meantime Fiorio's men had been testing a car made by a sister Fiat firm, the Ferrari Dino 246GT with its mid-mounted transverse 2½-liter V-6 engine and 5-speed transaxle.

Cesare Fiorio set his heart on using this Dino engine in his new car. The first hurdle was the easy one: "When I proposed it to Mr. Gobbato, he immediately thought it was a good idea. But he and I were *completely alone* on this project. That was the biggest problem we had. On the Fiat side they just didn't want to know about it. Many in Fiat were *absolutely against it*. They were in motorsports too, and they feared that we might have something very good."

Arriving at Maranello, the pair hadn't to wait long in the infamous "green room" before being received by Ferrari. They set out their plans and made their request for at least 500 Ferrari-made engines that would be fitted to a non-Ferrari that didn't yet exist.

"This was the difficult part of the whole project," said Fiorio, "to convince Ferrari to give us the engine. But on the spot he agreed. Ferrari wasn't one to delay a decision like that. It was a nice day, and on the way home, com-

ing back with a positive answer, we really felt great. It was very important to us. Of course after that it got quite complicated!"

Now they needed a car to put the engine in. Lancia's own engineers went to work on a suitable suspension design while Cesare Fiorio turned to an old friend to get ideas for the shape of the car-to-be: Marcello Gandini. "I knew Mr. Gandini very well," said Fiorio recently. "I thought then and I think now that he is very good." Gandini was then working at Bertone, for whom he had designed the Lamborghini Miura, among other Bertone classics. "I spoke to him about it," said Fiorio, "and he prepared various designs."

Needing an outside partner to help build the car, Fiorio found Bertone keen to tackle this job. Bertone also cooperated on the design of its chassis frame. A sheet-steel frame was designed, a fully enclosed monocoque coupe from the front end back to the firewall, from which box-section beams reach back to enclose the engine and support the rear suspension.

Around the structure a body of fiberglass was fashioned. Painted a brilliant matte-finish red, the first prototype of the new car was ready for showing on the Bertone stand at Turin in late 1971.

■ At left, a peek at the transversely-mounted 2.4-liter Dino V-6 that gave this most-famous Lancia the snarl to match the musculature of its Bertone-penned bodywork. Owned by Guido Avandero, the Stratos is given regular workouts by legendary rally champion Sandro Munari (below and lower right).



Called officially the Stratos HF, it looked absolutely sensational.

The styling signature of the Stratos is the daring sweep of its windshield, curving into its side windows "like a jet plane" as an admiring Italian said. Made by Glaverbel of laminated safety glass, the windshield is formed on a constant radius, as part of a conical section, to avoid distortion, and in fact there is none worth mentioning.

So Fiorio had the beginnings of a car—but was it a rally winner? This was nail-biting time. Within Fiat, both Gobbato and Fiorio had bet their reputations on this car. "We had a big fight with Fiat," remembered Fiorio. "If we had not been successful in rallying with the Stratos we would both have had big problems in the company"—problems up to and including the old heave-ho. "We had a tremendous battle to get it out and not to have to stop the project halfway."

Before it was produced and homologated, the Stratos could compete in

prototype form; this would give a hint of its potential. Fortunately Cesare Fiorio had at his disposal what he needed to verify that potential: a world-class rally driver. Sandro Munari had been racing and rallying Lancias since 1966.

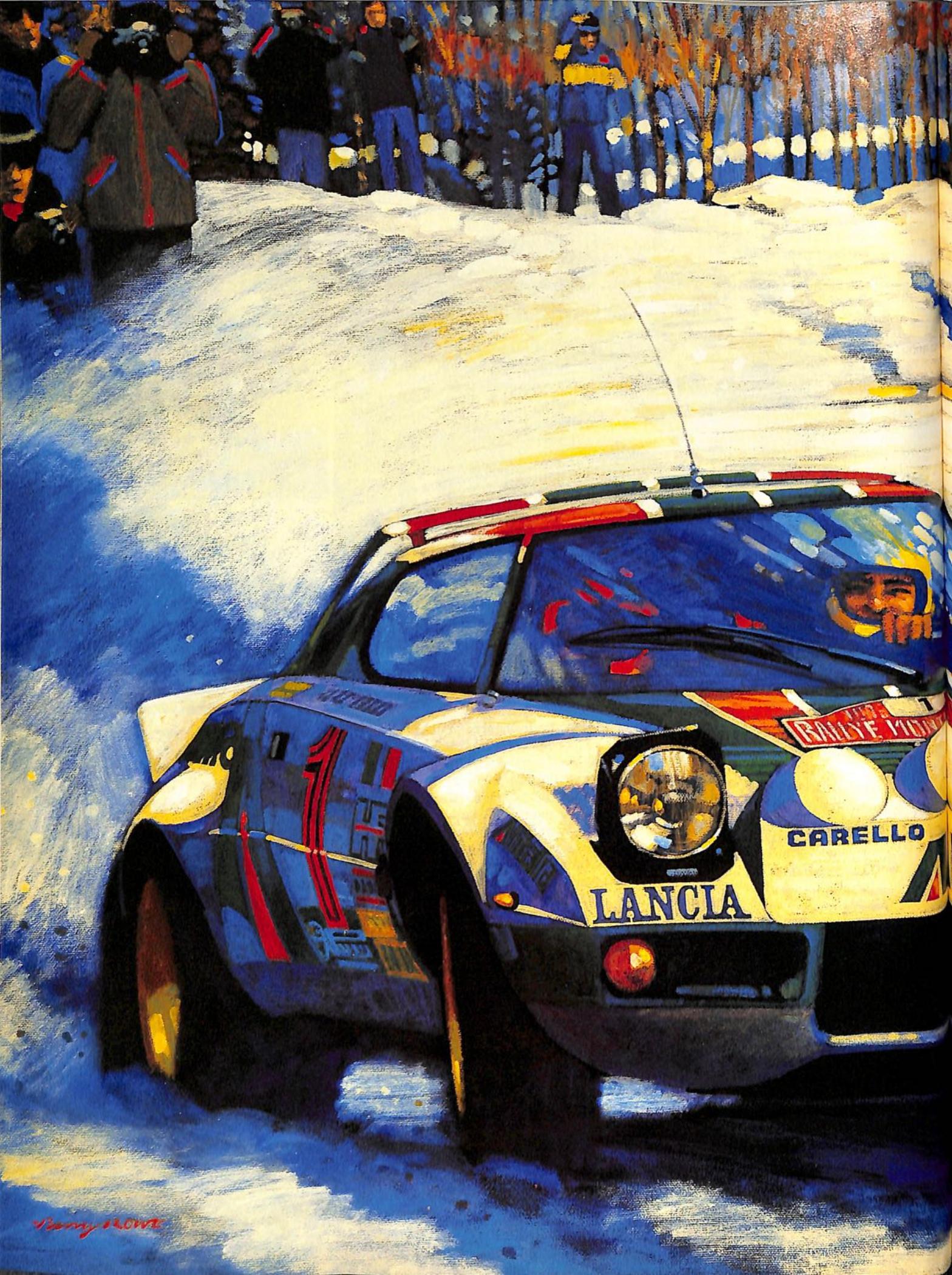
Two rallies entered at the close of 1972 with the Stratos ended with retirements, in one when Munari was leading—some small solace to tide them over the long winter nights. Its next outing in Spain in April 1973 brought the victory that Fiorio desperately needed to give his project a chance to succeed. Marlboro-liveried Stratos placed second in the Targa Florio (May), in spite of broken driver's seat mountings, and won the demanding Tour de France in September using a prototype of the

roof-mounted boundary-layer-control device that was fitted to the production cars. The Stratos was beyond doubt a quick little car.

A first few cars were assembled in February 1974; production started rolling



OVERLEAF: ARTIST BARRY ROWE DEPICTS THIS STRATOS' FINEST MOMENT, POWER-OVERSTEERING ITS WAY TO WIN THE 1977 MONTE CARLO RALLY WITH MUNARI AT THE WHEEL.



*Tony Stone*



**ROAD & TRACK**

in April, and by October, 502 frames had been completed by Bertone, enough to warrant the car's Group 4 homologation. Official assembly by Bertone and Lancia continued until May 1975, when 457 Stratos were on wheels. Thereafter the remaining chassis punts were still available as spares or as armatures for cars built up by the works rally team and by specialists.

In 1974 the Stratos sold in Italy at a list price of \$16,195. That was about the same as an Alfa Romeo Montreal, a Maserati Merak or a Porsche 911S in Italy. It was more than a Pantera and less, by a little, than a Ferrari Dino 308GTB or Lamborghini Urraco. It was enough, however, to discourage people from buying such an oddball auto in the depths of the first energy-crisis years.

However, the jobs of Gobbato and Fiorio were secure. The Stratos was, thank goodness, hell-for-leather on the rally circuit. The list of its first places under drivers like Munari, Bernard Darniche, Bjorn Waldegaard, Tony Carello and Markku Alen is pages long.

Joining the team in 1974, former Ferrari team driver and engineer Mike Parkes was credited with the rigorous development that brought Lancia the World Rally Championship in 1974, 1975 and 1976 and the European Championship in 1977 and 1978. Not much more could have been expected of a car whose Group 4 homologation expired after the latter year. Sandro Munari won the most prestigious event of all, Monte Carlo, three times running in 1975-76-77.

So overwhelmingly successful was the Stratos as a competition car that its assets as a road car are easily overlooked. Driving a road Stratos is a university-level refresher course in what a sports car is all about. It's easy to forget that a real sports car should be as close to a pure racer as possible, carrying no excess bulk and weight. This is the Stratos exactly: a precision tool for the high-speed transport of two people and their baggage over any road that's passable for cars. In other words, a sports car.

The combination of the lively V-6 with the Stratos's curb weight of only 2155 lb. yields exceptional results. Built and geared for quick response, the car accelerates to 60 mph in 6.8 seconds, to 80 in 11.5 and to 100 in 17.6 sec. Revving to 7500 gives

speeds in the gears of 40 mph in 1st, 58 in 2nd, 79 in 3rd and 106 mph in 4th. Its top speed is just over 140 mph, not all that fast but its shape was designed for stability, not speed.

And what a joy that Dino engine is! It is 2418 cc (92.5 x 60.0 mm) of Ferrari power, with twincam heads of aluminum on a cast-iron block and triple twin-throat 40-mm Weber carbs. The six is as happy running slowly as it is flat-out: It has no awkward periods or flat spots. It pulls well on full throttle above 2500 rpm, starts to come on strong above 3000 and above 4000 booms forth in a deep-chested roar. As the tach flicks past 5000, curious crackling sounds join in, and then at more than 6500 rpm the exhaust is a joyous chorus of ebullient soaring sound,



a potent scream like a swarm of 911 Porsches.

Its combination of big tires, short wheelbase and the concentration of masses in the center gives the Stratos an agility, an immediate response to the wheel, that is usually found only in racing cars. This plus an absence of roll in corners makes it unbeatable through snaky, twisty road sections.

Stratos steering is very light at all speeds, pleasantly so, with the precision feel of a micrometer. Even when cornering hard it offers little additional resistance, little indication of how much grip there is, or isn't, at the front wheels. Yet over bumpy roads it can kick back strongly, forcing you to grip the wheel tightly to hold the line you want. Strong hands help.

As a Stratos keeper for a decade and a half, this author drove a yellow example as far afield as Cornwall and Loch Ness in Britain, and in France, Germany, Austria and northern Italy.

One trip took the Stratos to the St. Kassian district in Italy's German-influenced Southern Tyrol, in the heart of the Dolomite Mountains. There in September 1986 a trio of German fanatics had organized the grandly titled World Stratos Meeting. In fact it was pretty global with representatives from four continents and 11 countries bring-

ing 67 Stratos to the courtyard of a rustic hotel.

One yellow Stratos was spotted leaving the hotel early on the last morning of the meeting, skipping the tour of the local roads laid on for that day. Due in Paris that night, its driver wanted to make an early break for the Brenner Pass. The sun was already bright but the air was cool as the squat Stratos sped down the sparsely trafficked roads with an arrogant metallic snarl from its twin exhausts.

Soon the road snaked through the jagged Dolomites, clinging to cliff-sides and switching back, forth and back again incessantly between rock hillsides, shallow stone retaining walls and through narrow tunnels and bridges. The Stratos driver was working hard now, punching the shifts through, squeezing the brakes hard into the tight, blind turns the car attacked so eagerly. Short straights brought full throttle to which the light car responded with a shrill whine that echoed through the gorges.

Sun, shadow, sun, shadow—an occasional companion, notably a hard-driven 16-valve Mercedes-Benz 190—the Dino winding out and out to that exhilarating zone beyond 7000—slowing sharply for small towns, just waking up—pointing the Stratos's nose into the turns and feeling the shudder of grip through the tiny wheel—a seemingly never-ending mountain road, climbing and falling, just the kind of road this car was built to conquer.

The terrain began opening out, relaxing, flattening. The road and the yellow car tracing its surface swerved out of the mountains and onto a plain. The sun higher, the driver could feel its warmth. He realized he was perspiring. The road was straighter now, no challenge. He braked gently to a stop at a crossroads and switched off the ignition. Swinging the ultra-light door open, he unbuckled, stepped out, stood and looked down at the bug-spattered Stratos, its metallic parts clicking and pinging as they cooled. Holding out his hands, he saw them tremble.

It had been a great drive, one of their best ever together. Neither would ever forget it. And happily, Paris was still many kilometers away. ©