

MAGIC NUMBERS

ERIK COM4S LANCIA STRATOS

WORDS CRAIG BLAKE-JONES
IMAGES JENNIFER SCHAUERTE

Third on my list of all time favourite cars sits the Lancia Stratos HF. Why not first? Because the top two are the Lamborghini Miura SV and the Ford GT40, so behind those two, third is a very high rank.

I've always loved the Stratos, since I first saw it as an eight year old in 1972 when Lancia released the Bertone designed master piece on the world. The concept car came two years previously in the guise of the Lancia Stratos Zero and its distinct wedge shape looked very much like the car on the opening credits of the TV show of the time 'The Pink Panther'. It was clearly a design exercise by Bertone, with access to the passenger seats via a lift up front windscreen. When the first Stratos HF was unveiled at the 1971 Turin Motor Show it was still in prototype form, its crescent shaped wrap-around windscreen being one of its signature design features. This prototype had three different engines during its development period; the Lancia Fulvia engine, the Lancia Beta engine and finally the V6 Ferrari Dino engine - mid mounted and producing 190hp in road trim.





Enzo Ferrari saw the Stratos as competition to his own V6 Dino, so, in true Ferrari style was reluctant to sign off on the engine supply. As the Dino production was coming to an end Lancia eventually received 500 engine units for its Stratos HF and the legend was born.

This car started a new era for Rallying as the Stratos was the first car specifically designed from scratch for this kind of competition. Designed and developed by Bertone's designer Marcello Gandini (who was also responsible for my number one car), Lancia team manager Cesare Fiorio, British race engineer Mike Parks and works rally driver Sandro Munari. Between 1972 and 1973 production commenced on the 500 production cars for homologation in Group 4 and the Lancia Stratos was fully homologated into Group 4 for the 1974 World Rally Championship season.

The road version was called the Lancia Stratos HF Stradale and production ceased in 1975, it is thought that only 492 were actually made. For Rally use the Ferrari V6 engine had its power output increased to 275hp on the original 12 valve versions and 320hp on the twin cam 24 valve units. The Stratos successfully campaigned as a rally car right up until 1982. It took the championship by storm in 1974, 75 and 76 winning consecutive World Championship titles at the hands of Sandro Munari and Björn Waldegård.

Two years ago I was lucky enough to take part in the World Stratos meeting in Biella, Italy with a Californian friend of mine, Mark Ketcham who had just restored an amazing Group 4 Stratos. The meeting was organised to mark the 40th

anniversary of the car and was based in Biella, a small medieval town about half way between Turin and Milan, which is seen as the spiritual home of the Stratos. This is where Claudio Maglioli set up his garage in 1977 to continue development of this legendary rally car after the Lancia works team withdrew from competition. French Lancia importer Chardonnet went on to secure titles and ensure the cars legendary status as a private team.

The organiser of the event was Zenith Watches brand ambassador, ex French Formula 1 driver Erik Comas. Erik, born in 1963 fell in love with the Stratos when, as a boy he attended the Monte Carlo Rally; Being French he was supporting Bernard Darniche, the French driver for the Chardonnet team, whose pale blue Stratos was prepared in the Biella workshops of Claudio Maglioli. Watching the Frenchman dominate the snow bound stages of the Monte Carlo Rally was the turning point in young Erik Comas's life. This was the point he realised that he wanted to drive, race and win.

As Erik turned 18, he started racing karts. Talented and courageous he soon established himself on the karting circuits, but the next key point in his life was the 3rd November 1984 when out of 300 entries in the driving competition 'Volant Elf' he won bringing much needed funding from oil company 'Elf' for a seasons racing in Formula Renault. This was the real launch pad for Comas's career. The wins came often for Comas, whose natural talent made it look easy in Formula Renault. So much so that Formula 3 and Formula 3000 welcomed him in, where he rose through the ranks over a four year period, winning the Formula 3000 in 1990 in the Marlboro sponsored Lola.

This propelled Erik onto the world stage, racing in Formula 1 for French team Ligier Gitanes in the V12 Lamborghini engined Ligier JS35. Erik raced 59 Formula 1 races during his four year stint with Ligier. He scored 7 points, but never managed a podium, but after his first entry at the United States Grand Prix in 1991, it was his crash at Spa Francorchamps in 1992 during qualifying that left a mark on both Erik and history. Comas had a massive crash at the Blanchimont corner where his Ligier spun finishing in the middle of the circuit after finally bouncing off the tyre wall. Eric was unconscious, but the next car to arrive on the scene was Ayrton Senna, who stopped his car on track and leapt out to help Erik; Senna shut down Comas's car and supported his head to keep his airway open until the medical team arrived at the scene. He was the only driver to stop and help Erik who has been quoted many times as saying "Ayrton Senna saved my life".

In 1994 the next key moment in Erik's life occurred. It was the 1st May, the Italian Grand Prix at Imola when he was mistakenly waved out of the pits to drive onto the circuit that had been red flagged following the fatal crash of Ayrton Senna. Marshalls frantically waving him down through the Tamburello corner Eric stopped his car safely, although it is widely reported that he narrowly missed the attending vehicles at the crash, but this incident placed Erik directly at the scene of the fatal accident of the man who had saved his life the previous season. Erik Comas retired from that race, and after much soul searching finished the season, but then retired from Formula 1.

His career continued in Japan racing super GT, but the Lancia Stratos that had motivated him all those years ago still played in his heart. So he followed his passion and original dream to become not just a rally driver, but a Stratos driver.



Erik managed to acquire himself a Lancia Stratos and proceeded to campaign her in the Historic Rally Championships, winning races such as the French - Tour Auto, exactly 40 years after the Stratos won it in 1973. It was to pay homage to this car that Erik founded Lanciastros.com and organised the World Stratos Meeting in 2016 where he and I first met.

Two years later at the Blancpain GT Series race in the South of France at Paul Ricard circuit I parked my car in the team car park and was about to walk to the paddock when I ran into Erik. We walked together talking about the event in Biella and he told me he had just had his Stratos certified by the constructor to prove its provenance as an original car. As we walked to the paddock Erik invited me to come over and see the car again. I really didn't take much convincing to travel to Italy to see Eric and his Stratos, especially as we were due to be in Italy for the next Blancpain race.

Jenny and I arrived at Milan airport where we rented a Fiat 500 (when in Rome...) and drove to Biella. Erik and partner Raffaella had booked us into Ralais Santo Stephano, a fabulous hotel owned by friends of theirs near to Biella and close to where Erik stored his cars. Erik and Raffaella were just making the final arrangements for their imminent wedding whilst we were with them.

We met for breakfast and then followed Erik to the garage where he stores his cars, not only were we going to shoot the fabulous white Zenith Stratos, but his championship winning Lola Formula 3000. This would be the first time anyone had photographed the two cars he won his two championships in together. The building itself was fantastic, a typical old Italian workshop. Inside was a treasure trove that would have had Henry Cole salivating... Cars, bikes and a Willys Jeep. This was basically Erik's life story told in wheels.

As he drew back the covers on the cars each one had a story, but maybe one of my favourites was the one he lifted from the shelf. His first single seater, as he joked, this was a pedal car his father had made him as a child, all metal, with full independent suspension. This clearly demonstrated where a young Erik Comas got his love of automobiles and the engineering behind them.

We rolled the cars around the workshop to get our pictures before Raffaella arrived to take us all to lunch, we ate in a simple family run restaurant in the small town close to the workshop, whilst we talked about cars and Lancia Stratos's in particular.



ENZO FERRARI SAW THE STRATOS AS COMPETITION TO HIS OWN V6 DINO - IT WAS TO PAY HOMAGE TO THIS CAR THAT ERIK FOUNDED LANCIASTRATOS.COM



Erik and I share a common frustration, that so many historic races now are allowing replicas or not originals to enter, a lot have been rebuilt in a way that takes them into as Erik puts it "another world" they are too different. His Stratos was originally prepared by Maglioli himself and he had gone to great pains to keep it original. Comas is a strong and vocal supporter of the FCA Heritage department who have a programme of certification for vehicles to prove their originality and provenance. This should be key to any collector and especially in view of the investment such cars now represent, a means to verify the authenticity of an historic car, by certification issued by the constructor. He is committed to conserving his Stratos as much as he reasonably can whilst competing in the car at the highest levels. He takes part in gatherings and revocations of events wherever possible and actively encourages and invites collectors to get their cars certified so as to create a clear distinction between the world of authentic cars and 'the rest', a factor Erik thinks the FIA should be looking at seriously in its rankings of these races.

After lunch we have scouted our shooting locations, one being a fabulous 1970's cinema, which the owner had driven back from Turin to open up for us, when Raffaella called him. "You want to shoot a Lancia Stratos on my terrace? I am on my way, I see you in one hour" such is the currency of this car around Biella.

So our next task is to get the Stratos out of the garage. She is usually loaded from the back of a transporter and the ramps are very steep, and not quite wide enough. So with it precisely lined up, rear wheels hanging over the edges of the ramps Erik and I carefully guide the car. I am now in the



car, foot on the brake, as Erik lifts the back with a trolley jack to clear the ramp, once we are clear I gently allow the car to roll down and off the ramps.

Now we can start her up. Eric cranks the engine, the fuel pumps prime, she turns over and coughs and splutters then bursts into life. The sound of the Ferrari Dino V6 is amazing in itself, but in Group 4 rally trim, with the 24 Valve head and very short rally pipes it is loud, but loud in a good way, like a symphony of mechanical engineering working in perfect sync. A blip of the throttle sends shivers down our spines... this is true petrol hedonism. We are going into town to the cinema first, so I suggest Jenny jumps in with Erik to get the flavour and feel of this car she has already fallen in love with. I follow behind in the little Fiat whilst memories of the World Meeting almost two years to the day come flooding back.

We shoot the car on the cinema terrace, before leaving to take some shots in the old town of Biella, a short drive of about 15 minutes. This time Jenny drives the Fiat and I am with Erik. The Stratos is not an easy car to drive, not in rally trim anyway. You have to actually drive it, the dog box requires a bit of heel-and-toe to change down and the gears need a firm, but precise hand. We talk about 'real driving' and how motorsport is one of the few sports that has fundamentally changed in the last 10 years or so. He comments how we have gone from three pedals to two, and that we used to have three pedals, a steering wheel and a gear stick. He



loves the old days where the skill of driving was that dance between, gear stick, steering wheel and pedals in perfect synchronicity, so you would be driving with one hand on the wheel, whilst changing gear and your feet would dance across the pedals to brake and balance the throttle for perfect down changes. This to Erik was half of the pleasure of driving, this was the art of real driving.

I have to agree, although I do love a paddle shift on a modern car and applaud the technology and advancements in automotive engineering, but I fear there will be a day when these skills are forgotten. This was this reason I bought my son a classic car to learn to drive in. It is a skill that any driver should have, this I think is why I have gravitated back to classic cars for enjoyment, you have to really drive them and I think it was two years ago when I was thrown the keys to Mark's blue Group 4 Lancia Stratos to 'go play' in the hills around Biella, that really brought it all back.



Even as we approach the old town in Biella, I can see Erik's feet dancing around the pedals as we navigate through the narrow streets into the square, the sound of the engine bouncing off the buildings as we attract admiring looks from the locals. We spend a while shooting the car around the square and surrounding streets, before we say our goodbyes and Jenny and I drive to Modena for dinner, en route to Misano and Erik and Raffaella made the last arrangements for their forthcoming wedding.

They were married just after we did the shoot and had a caravan hooked up the Zenith Stratos for their 'Wedding', which you can see in a great witty little movie on the lanciastratos.com instagram pages.

We wish them both happiness in their life together and many more rallies in the now fully certified Lancia Stratos AR0001826, all original and pure legend, both man and car.