

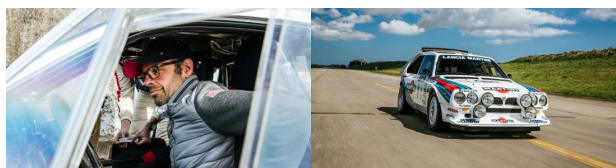
CLASSIC DRIVER

Which Group B Lancia would drift into your dream garage?

Lead

Recently, the guys at Classic Driver dealer Girardo & Co. called to ask if we'd settle a debate – which factory Group B Lancia would fill the vacant space in our dream garage, the 037 Evolution 2 or the Delta S4? Where better to make up our minds than an abandoned airfield? Let battle commence...

Call it magic



Grainy and oversaturated footage of ballsy drivers in Martini-liveried Lancias cresting 'yumps' and drifting through switchbacks, parting frenzied crowds as Moses did the seas and treading the ultra-fine line between precision and peril. Equal parts magic and mystique, Group B really was an epoch like no other. And today, these potent rally cars command mega money because of their rarity, provenance, eligibility, and the memories and emotions they conjure from their impressionable owners.

On that note, let's introduce our competitors. In the two-wheel-drive corner and weighing in at 980kg is the Lancia 037 Evolution 2, in which Henri Toivonen claimed third overall in the 1984 Rally of the Thousand Lakes in Finland. In the *four*-wheel-drive corner and weighing in at some 90kg less is the 1985 Lancia Delta S4 Corsa, the very first example to be officially homologated under the Group B rules. Both are significant ex-factory machines, beautifully preserved exactly as they were the day they were retired from active service, warts and all.

Gentle giant?



Intimidated – that's how you feel when you approach the [Lancia Delta S4](#). Its aggressive stance is so poised and purposeful and the awkwardly tall rear end only serves to remind you of the circa-500bhp, twin-charged engine lurking beneath. Remember, the S4 is the car in which Toivonen and his co-driver Sergio Cresto perished in the 1986 Tour de Corse and, to a certain extent, ended Group B rallying. Its reputation well and truly precedes it.

"The S4 is so special because it's like the girl that got away," comments Max Girardo, who understands the appeal of these cars only too well. "It had such a short racing life and so few were built as a result. But the best thing is that, despite looking so daunting, it's actually more approachable than its looks would lead you to believe. Don't get me wrong, when you bury your foot it picks up and takes off like a rocket. But its power steering makes it easy at low speeds and you could genuinely drive it around London."

Style and spoils



On the face of it, you might think that the fearsome and flame-belching Delta S4 has its predecessor licked in almost every way. And yes, in a head-to-head race it will wipe the floor with the 037 – take a look at [Girardo & Co.'s drag race](#) for proof. But peer a little closer through the panel gaps and the comparison is actually pretty interesting.

“On the one hand, the 037 is the ultimate rear-wheel-drive rally car and the Delta S4 is the ultimate four-wheel-drive rally car,” comments Girardo & Co.’s Marcus Willis, who’s firmly in the former’s camp. “But I think the 037 is the prettier car and it’s the only one of the two to win the title.”

Indeed, the 037 claimed Lancia the manufacturer’s world title in 1983 and six victories in total – not bad for the marque’s first foray into Group B. While the S4 was an extremely successful car, claiming four World Rally victories in the hands of Toivonen, Markku Alén, and Massimo Biasion, its potential was ultimately thwarted when Group B was disbanded in 1986.

Still on the naughty step



As the 037 buzzes frenetically at idle in front of us, you can’t help but fall in love with its shape. The proportions, from the angular nose of the Monte Carlo to the steep rear spoiler are simply spot-on. This car is the final ‘Evolution 2’ model, with the water-injected 320bhp engine (it’s no slouch, believe us) and slightly tweaked bodywork, and belongs to Max himself. If you’re a regular reader, you might remember [the time we actually took it to Duke’s in London for Martinis](#) – drifted, not stirred, naturally.

The other department in which the 037 has the S4 trumped is its eligibility. And there’s a simple reason for that: four-wheel-drive Group B cars are still banned from competitive historic rallies. “But doesn’t that add to the S4’s mystique?” questions Willis. “They’re still too fast to be legal and everyone wants the car you’re not allowed to race, right?”

Martini time!





The 037, on the other hand, could be raced in a host of events, including the Tour de Corse, Rally Legend in San Marino, and the Eifel Rally in Germany. “If you own a 1980s touring car, you take it all the way to Spa for a 20-minute race,” comments Girardo. “But if you enter Rally Legend with your Group B car, you sit and drive it for three entire days, on the roads and the special stages. It’s really good fun.” What’s more, the slightly less powerful 037 is reportedly a little easier to handle at the limit, which makes it a particularly competitive historic rally car.

At the end of the day, closing arguments are made and it’s time to decide which of the two we’d drive home. Given we don’t have a budget to worry about, we can disregard the fact that the S4 is around a third more valuable than the 037, despite the latter’s provenance and eligibility. We actually found that quite surprising, but Girardo reckons rarity is king.

Heroic Henri



Ultimately, both are moving glass-fibre and Kevlar time capsules that transport you spectacularly to that most magical of motorsport eras. Their perfection is in their imperfections – the almost comically bad build quality, the nicks and scratches that each tell a story, the crude interiors with their abundance of period electronics, and the seats, each emblazoned with the names of the cars’ heroic pilots.

It’s this that edges the 037 ahead of the S4 for us. It’s the fact that Henri Toivonen actually sat in this very seat wrestling this very car at the Thousand Lakes. “He actually jumped this car so high that he injured his back,” Willis exclaims. “There was zero fear – it was real men going racing.” Forget any concept of the term ‘cool’ you’ve got in your head and replace it with this brace of Martini Racing Lancias. Now, someone get us a Martini!

Photos: Tom Gidden for Girardo & Co. © 2018

Gallery

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