

DELTA ON WINGS

As Lancia drivers battle for rally honours, Pentti Airikkala goes to Italy to drive a potent Delta

THE WORLD'S TOP RALLY teams were worried at the end of 1986, for the phenomenally fast Group B cars, which had caught the imagination of rally fans the world over, had been abruptly outlawed. After several fatal accidents involving spectators and finally, the tragic crash in Corsica which claimed the lives of Henri Toivonen and Sergio Cresto, FISA banned the supercars.

For 1987, then, everything was up in the air. Previous world rally champion, Peugeot, was effectively ruled out since there wasn't an appropriate Group A car in its stable, and the same applied to Austin-Rover, whose efforts with the Metro 6R4 had been prematurely terminated. Ford looked to be in reasonable shape with the Sierra RS Cosworth and the XR4i4, but undoubtedly the strongest challenger, at least on paper, would be Lancia with its Delta HF 4wd.

It certainly seemed to have all the right ingredients — 2-litre, turbocharged, intercooled engine, sophisticated four-wheel drive system incorporating central torque splitter, Ferguson viscous coupling, self-locking front differential and Torsen rear differential, large ventilated disc brakes front and rear and a kerb weight of 1120kg (2469lb).

If you were a betting man and had put your money on Lancia at the

beginning of the season, you would now have every reason to smile. After the seventh round out of 10, the Rally of Argentina, the Italian company had taken the world manufacturers' title and now, with just the Lombard RAC Rally left to run, the question is simply which of Lancia's Finnish drivers, Juha Kankkunen or Markku Alen, will land the world drivers' championship. There can be no argument, then, that the Delta has proven to be a potent rally car in Group A trim and it is difficult to conceive of another car winning this year's RAC Rally.

But exactly how good is the Lancia? Has it proved to be a winner this year simply by being the best of a mediocre lot or is it a very competitive car in its own right? These were the questions which Autocar wanted answered when it sent me to Italy to drive the Delta.

The day after the Sanremo Rally had ended — won, incidentally, by Biasion-Siviero in a Delta HF 4WD — we drove into the hills above Sanremo and as arranged met with a Martini-Lancia service van and 'representative' Group A Delta. Despite having the names of Bruno Saby and Jean-Francois Fauchille on the front wings, a little bit of detective work revealed that this car had been built to gravel rally speci-



World class rally driver Pentti Airikkala: Lancia must start favourite for 1988

Lancia's Delta comes into its own in the Sanremo hills



fication for the Olympus Rally, in the US, and had been used by Allen in Sanremo as a practice car. The engine was subsequently damaged and replaced before the event and it was in this form that I drove it.

Power output of the engine was between 240-245bhp, the peak occurring at 6250rpm, according to the Lancia technicians. The Deltas which actually competed at Sanremo were producing about 200bhp, thanks to slightly different cam shafts and changes to the engine management system. This car was also about 30-40kg heavier, but it was otherwise quite representative of the Deltas which have won the World Rally Manufacturers' title for Lancia.

As with all Group A cars, there is little to distinguish it outwardly from its brothers in the Lancia showroom, the main differences in the case of the rally Delta being the larger diameter wheels — 15ins and 16ins, depending on whether the car is in tarmac or forest trim — the provision for roof-mounted air inlets to improve ventilation in hot rallies, large sump shield, mud flaps front and rear and the replacement of the standard car's twin tailpipes by a single, mortar-sized exhaust.

The most significant of these changes undoubtedly concerns the wheels. Lancia has had a problem from the outset with the Delta, and that is to get sufficient wheel movement. It is difficult simply to find enough room under the wheel arches to achieve the sort of suspension travel that is needed — there is not enough room between the tyres and the body — and for this reason the evolution Delta HF 4x4, the Integrale, has bulged wheel arches similar to those on the original Quattro. In its present specification, the tyres are allowed to touch the wheel arches which, although not likely to affect the tyres adversely in a rally, is still not an ideal solution.

Inside, the picture is again as you would expect of a Group A rally car. The most significant element is the roll-over, which is a very clever design: not only does it protect the occupants in an accident, but also strengthens and supports the whole bodyshell. The tubes of the cage, which are of steel in gravel specification Deltas and titanium in tarmac cars, are bolted into the sills, the roof and the front and rear suspension turrets, which makes for a very rigid structure.

The rest of the interior hardware consists of competition seats and harnesses for driver and co-driver, twin fire extinguishers, ignition master switch, an array of fuses and circuit breakers, electronic time and distance readouts, two-way radio for communication with the service crews, and Velcro-flapped bags on either side of the roll-over into which essential odds and ends can be chucked. Lancia also fits large fire-retardant blankets over the rear bulkheads of its rally Deltas to minimise the risk of flaming petrol



Biasion-Siviero on the loose with the Delta HF 4x4



Cockpit is entirely functional. Note robust gear lever and handbrake

getting through to the passenger compartment in an accident.

Once you climb in over the side members of the roll-over and settle into the form-fitting seat, you discover the Delta has a very comfortable driving position. The instrument binnacle, which can be seen clearly through the three-spoke, leather-rim steering wheel, has been modified compared with the standard road car. The instruments now include a turbocharger boost gauge, voltmeter and large rev counter which shows the yellow warning zone beginning at 6750rpm with the redline set at 7250rpm.

To the right of these are warning lights for oil and water temperature, fuel and oil pressure, and alternator failure. Next to the driver's knee is a turnwheel which controls brake balance, the counterclockwise direction providing more bias to the front brakes and clockwise, to the rear.

Two items with a particularly sturdy appearance are the gearlever, which connects to the remote section of the linkage running above the central tunnel, and the handbrake lever, which was to provide a surprise later on. On the co-driver's side, there is a carbonfibre footrest, against which he can brace himself, and a foot-operated switch to control lighting dip and main beam.

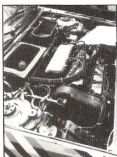
While we were warming up the car, I asked about the suspension and it was explained that, although this Delta was to gravel-rally specification, it was on tarmac suspen-

sion settings — lower and stiffer than forest spec — with 210/565-16 Pirelli P-Zero tyres rather than slicks. This was something which would have to be borne in mind when taking the car on the loose, which I certainly wanted to do, because it meant the Lancia wouldn't be to an optimum specification for that sort of surface.

As I trundled the car up to the first section of road where I wanted to experiment with it, I took the opportunity to check the steering. It turned out to need two turns from lock to lock, significantly quicker than the standard car. Even so, the steering could have been a little quicker still for my taste.

First impression of the gear-change was that it could be better — it was bulky getting out of the gears without the clutch — but I soon changed my opinion. The technique turned out to be very brutal with it, the quicker and harder you used it, the better it was. When used that way, it was near-perfect. The brakes, too, were very impressive, with very good balance. These seemed to bite slightly more at the rear, but you always felt as though you were getting the maximum stopping power on all four wheels.

I also tried a small experiment with the handbrake and found, to my surprise, that it worked beautifully, spinning the Delta on its axis with great ease. This is unusual for a four-wheel drive rally car, in my experience, and most impressive. It



Turbo engine put out 240bhp

allows you to go really deep into road junctions and then use the brake to help you out. Obviously it's also a great help if it's slippery.

I tried the Delta first on a short forest stage where, because it was on tarmac suspension, its behaviour was understandably not particularly impressive, grip being noticeably lacking. Traction, however, was absolutely phenomenal, the car rocketing forward in first gear on the loose.

From talking to the team and from my own knowledge, I know that the initial traction of the Group A Delta is actually better than with the Group B S4. This may sound amazing, but it's true, and is a direct result of the positioning the engine.

In the Group A car, the engine is over the front wheels and this means you get excellent traction, and therefore acceleration.

If you have the engine in the back, as you did with the S4, then you have only got perhaps 30 per cent of available power going to the front wheels and therefore traction is not so good. It's not a big difference, but it is noticeable.

The Group A car's performance tails off in the higher gears compared with the S4, but even so, there is no turbocharger lag providing you stay above 4000rpm, which is easy to do when the gearbox is as good as this one. The ratios are well chosen and first gear is low enough to keep engine revs above 4000rpm, even on tarmac.

Once out of our little forest stage and onto the tarmac, the Delta came into its own. The suspension was out of this world, there was very little roll, and the tyres provided terrific levels of grip. The speed had clearly been set up for the roads around Sanremo and, combined with that gearbox, which just invited you to play tunes with it, the Delta was incredible to drive.

In answer then to the question, "How good is Lancia's Group A rally car?" the reply would be, "Exceptionally good." It has won the World Rally Championship this year on merit alone and with the Integrale available for next year, Lancia must start as hot favourites for the 1988 title as well. ■