

Scuderia del Grifone

Gold Standard

The livery of this prominent Italian rally team appears in the UK for the first time on a newly restored Lancia 037

Story by Peter Collins Photography by Michael Ward and Martin Holmes

In contrast to Doctor Johnson's contention that the best thing to come out of Scotland is the road to the south, the best part of arriving at Genova is getting off the plane. After an approach that would do justice to Alton Towers or Sardinia, the hapless passenger is treated to the sight and novel experience of thinking that the plane is going to land on an aircraft-carrier or on the docks. For me, it is a high-of-relief time.

Genova has a seriously rich history of which its airport is only a tiny footnote. Perhaps one of its most important inhabitants used the sea as exit and entrance. Christopher Colombo (more commonly known as Columbus) wasn't as popular then as he is now, mainly because he was thought to be a bit, er, eccentric. After all, letting everyone know that you planned on reaching the East by going west, the exact opposite direction from the one Marco Polo had found reasonably successful, wasn't going to win him many friends. A bit like starting from Dartford on the M25 and heading for the M1 via Heathrow although, come to think of it, that's probably not so stupid. Anyway, the wealthy of Genova in the 1400s weren't sufficiently impressed to stump up the sponsorship cash so he travelled to Spain and the rest is history. Later, in 1782, Niccolò Paganini was born in the city and soon violin, viola and guitar music would never be the same again. On April 13th 1924, a relatively unknown racing driver called Tazio Nuvolari achieved his first ever overall car race win at the Circuito del Golfo del Tigullio in Rapallo, 1st down the road from Genova. Despite overturning and having to get back onto the circuit, he still brought his Bianchi Tipo 18 home first, having averaged 52km/h or over four hours.



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LEFT: The 037 is captured during its high speed demonstration at the 2007 Race Retro event

to develop the talents of young drivers in Italy. Fabrizio was overall winner in 1978 and, from there, with the Grifone team, he moved on to drive a Lancia Stratos, with which he was second in the Italian Rally Championship.

In international rallying, a big change was coming with the introduction of Group B. The new regulations would require completely different types of car to those previously entered by the leading manufacturers. Amidst considerable controversy over whether the new rules were acceptable and/or workable, let alone financially justifiable, the first constructor to throw itself entirely behind the new concept was Fiat.

The new car was designed by Ing Sergio Limone and, after amassing considerable development kilometres, Fiat decided it should be called the Lancia Rally. As with all new Abarth projects, however, it took on the next available special project number, which was 037 – a universal appellation ever since.

The first public appearance of an 037 on an international rally was in April 1982, immediately after the type's FIA homologation. On August 1st came the homologation of the Evolution 1 version and very soon Grifone was able to take delivery of an example. Fabrizio Tabaton debuted it in September.

Fabrizio told me "...the car came just after the Stratos, which was the car I loved more than any other in my life for many reasons. Nevertheless, 037 represented a huge evolution, above all in easiness of driving, speed and ease of maintenance – especially

under stressful conditions. The car was extremely versatile on all types of surface despite the fact that it looked good and had a 'sports car' image.

"My first rally with an 037 was in September 1982 on the Piancavallo Rally with a car in Martini colours. In 1983 I used one on the Italian Championship in Wurth livery, and in 1984 we ran in Olio Fiat colours (the car you see here). In 1985 our 037 was painted in black and gold Esso livery."

Fabrizio's first 037 win was on the 1982 Rally d'Aosta.

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and he went on to win the Italian Group B title in our featured car in 1984, before taking the Italian Championship in '85. All these cars were run by Grifone and the team was also active in helping Dario Cerrato, Carlo Capone, Tony Fassina, Adarico Vudafieri and the late Attilio Bettega.

In 1986 Grifone achieved its best result so far, with overall victory in the important European Rally Championship. For this, Fabrizio was driving a fearsome Lancia Delta S4 in the now-familiar Esso black and gold colours. Abarth designated six teams capable of working with the factory, supplying cars of an equivalent standard. Grifone was one, alongside Jolly Club, Tre Gazzelle, Astra, A.R.T. and Nocentini. In 1991, Luigi Tabaton retired and left the business in the hands of Fabrizio who founded 'HF Engineering' in Busalla, near Genova, in 1992.



So, Genova has a lot of history to offer and in 1958 a new legend was born there. Competitive regularity events were popular in Italy, especially after the carnage of the previous year's Mille Miglia and the two teams that featured most frequently at the top of the results lists were Scuderia Camogliolo and Mediolanum. Sometimes a third group of drivers under the name of Scuderia Quarto would join the pack and 11 of them broke away to form their own team. They called it Scuderia del Grifone. The griffin featured on the flag of Genova and the mythological animal was supposed to guard an eye containing items of fabulous value – the keeper of the gold. The Scuderia's lair was set up just outside Genova. Since 1948, one Luigi Tabaton had been competing as a private entrant but a good result at the Pontedecimo-Ciolo hillclimb gave him the impetus to enter the racing world and he became friends with Sig

Berio, who was one of the instigators of the Grifone team that, at first, used Alfa Romeo Giulietta saloons. Together they worked to create a world-class organisation, their first major international event being the Monte Carlo Rally. They must have felt justified in their decisions in 1953 as they beat the favourites, Scuderia Camogliolo, to the Italian Motorsport Teams Championship. This led, in 1955, to a change of name to Grifone HF, reflecting the fact that they had linked with Lancia for its involvement and support. Under this arrangement, Grifone collaborated with the Jolly Club and many successes were to follow. In 1977, a new company – HF Grifone Srl – was set up to manage the team's official participation in rally events with Fiat. At the same time, Luigi Tabaton's son, Fabrizio, was starting his competition career in the Autobianchi A112 Championship that had been set up

The closing down of Abarth and the decision by Fiat that official participation in rallying should stop resulted in a change of direction for Grifone. Unlike Christophoro Colombo, they looked east and forged links with Team Toyota, running Celicas and later Corolla WRCs, these latter being handled by Marco Tempestini as well as ex-integrale men Andrea Aghini and Piero Longhi.

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After using Peugeot 206 WRC cars, a reflection of the past has occurred with the low-key return to rallying by Fiat with the Punto Super 2000, as well as the continuation of the Tabaton and Bettega names as sons Luca and Alessandro have tried their hand with Grifone.

Lancia 037 chassis 412 first came into the UK when arch Italian rally car enthusiast Mick Wood bought it at auction 'on a flyer'. He oversaw its restoration to competition standards and took it to many rally-retro events. "It's the ultimate hooligan's car. Just so quick..." he told me, but he had bigger projects in his mind so he sold it to current owner Rob Whitehouse. After a lot of research into the car's history, the net result was very little as is so common with Italian competition cars but a chance comment from someone led to the discovery that 412 should have been the car acquired by Grifone

BELOW: Tabaton and Tedeschini drove their battle-scarred 037 to fourth place overall at Sanremo in 1984



for Fabrizio Tabaton to use during the 1984 season. Thus Rob has had the classic Olio Fiat livery re-applied.

One of the most important features of the Group B rallying rules were that upgraded Evolution cars was allowed each year, to enable manufacturers to incorporate improvements to keep the cars competitive on the world's rally stages, at the rate of 10% of the total production. To be eligible for the category, 200 cars capable of being driven on the road had to be built; so, for each Evolution, 20 examples needed to be constructed. The first Evolution was homologated on August 1st 1982 and ran through to January 1st 1984 when Evolution 2 appeared. Evo1 cars were built in the chassis number category of 300 to 320 and Evo2 cars were from 400 to 420 and yes, of course, there were variations on this.

In terms of competition, the 037 died internationally,

along with all other Group B cars, on December 31st 1986 but thanks to initiatives by the Slowly Sideways group and others, we are able to see and hear these fabulous cars once again.

Rob Whitehouse: "The 037 is a car that inspires great confidence, both in driving and engineering terms... It has instant torque from about 4000rpm and always has power for any occasion... The gearbox is quick and the brakes superb."

In short, Ing Sergio Limone's 'baby' achieved exactly what Fiat required of it. It took the 1983 World Rally Championship for Constructors from under Audi's nose and went on to win many other prestigious rally championships throughout the world. Job done. This feature includes extracts from *Lancia 037. The development and rallying history* by Peter Collins. Published by Veloce in February 2008. 

