



The world beating Delta HF integrale

Champion's story



Victory for Miki Biasion at the 1988 Olympus Rally

Miki Biasion led Lancia to an unprecedented seventh World Rally Championship this year. Martin Holmes spoke to him. ▶

Miki Biasion in a crowd is a person hard to spot. Quiet and well-mannered – he is the antithesis of the popular image of an Italian hero – only his short size gives a clue that maybe he comes from south of the Alps. At the wheel of a rally car he is much the same, calm and attentive to the smallest details. It is these characteristics which help make him someone quite special in Italian eyes – the first Italian driver at the wheel of an Italian car to become world champion for 35 years.

Alberto Ascari died three years before Miki was born; he had gained the Formula 1 World Championship two years before, in 1953, at the wheel of a Ferrari. Since then Italy has only had one other motoring world champion – Roberto Ravaglia, who won the one-and-only World Touring Car Championship, at the wheel of a BMW. Ravaglia's title passed almost unnoticed in Italy, something quite the opposite to Biasion being given rallying's crown. "Formula 1 and Rallies are all the Italian tifosi really enjoy", Miki explains. "Endurance, Touring cars and other sports do not count in their eyes".

Lancia's rallying policies have changed each year. The 1987 season was a remarkable year when the Turin company had been possessed of three of the greatest existing rallying talents available: Markku Alen, Juha Kankkunen and Miki Biasion. Team chief Cesare Fiorio saw that they had the car which mattered and they could expect to win the Manufacturers' title without much opposition. He noted also that unless he held a strict reign the drivers were going to fight each other all the way. "So last year we devised a system of 'equal opportunity'. Each of these drivers would enter the same number of world championship rallies, and, when the interests of Lancia demanded, we would give orders freezing the positions among the team members". This worked well. Team newcomer Kankkunen took time adjusting but eventually came out best, Alen for whom many felt sympathy at losing his '86 world title after only 11 days, fell at the final round to third – and Biasion was second.

For '88 the Lancia domination continued but the driver situation eased. Markku had a reduced programme, Kankkunen moved elsewhere and Biasion alone had the chance to compete for most of the season. The policy changed, this year, 'guest drivers' were engaged. "The theory was simple", Miki continued. "If one driver does a lot of events he does not have time to do much testing beforehand. What's more there are always a lot of drivers who are very good on their own events. So Lancia invited Bruno Saby into the team for Monte Carlo, Vic Preston Junior for Safari, Yves Loubet for Corsica, Jorge Recalde for Argentina and so on". Because of the reduced level of opposition, it looked very likely that the driver's champion in 1988 could gain the crown by consistently high rather than regularly winning performances. "This is what I imagined would happen this year. These local guys

have the chance to do so much more practice than we can. If anything has come as a surprise this year, it is that I have still been able to win many of the events!".

For years Miki had been running in the shadow of his friend and rival Attilio Bettega. Attilio had been with the Fiat and Lancia teams for many years, and one sensed Miki was for some while a yardstick for Attilio. It was a terrible day when Attilio died. "It was the sort of accident that any one of us could have, and do have, all the time. I have often thought about it. You know, it was the same with Henri Toivonen. We lost both of them when they were absolutely at the top of



Miki Biasion – 1988 Drivers World Rally Champion

PHOTO: MARTIN HOLMES

Miki Most

| | |
|------|----------------|
| 1972 | Lancia |
| 1973 | Alpine-Renault |
| 1974 | Lancia |
| 1975 | Lancia |
| 1976 | Lancia |
| 1977 | Fiat |
| 1978 | Fiat |
| 1979 | Ford |
| 1980 | Fiat |
| 1981 | Talbot |
| 1982 | Audi |
| 1983 | Lancia |
| 1984 | Audi |
| 1985 | Peugeot |
| 1986 | Peugeot |
| 1987 | Lancia |
| 1988 | Lancia |

their careers". The loss of Attilio put a special mantle on Miki's shoulders. He was forced into the spotlight of being Italy's number one rallyman.

Miki's rallying pedigree is, by Italian standards, immaculate. 'Spotted' by the legendary Virgilio Conrero and taken into the Opel Italian team, first in Group 1 then with Group 4 Ascona 400 cars, he was later lured back into the Italian fold by Jolly Club. His first season with them was 1983 when he won the European Championship at the wheel of a Lancia Rally. Five world championship events followed the next year, and he finished 6th in the series; four events the following year included a most impressive second place in Portugal. From this he was then invited into the official Martini team for '86 at the wheel of the remarkable Delta S4 supercar. He was fifth in the world series – and scored his first world rally win, in Argentina.

It was in Group A that Miki really gained his spurs. The '87 season netted him three world wins, and it is with Group A that he feels Lancia's interests are best served. "It is my belief that the Group B Delta S4 did nothing other than create an awareness of the marque. It was the Delta HF 4WD and now the HF integrale that created the mystique about the Delta. The company were thinking of ending production of the model until suddenly there was a huge upsurge of interest in the car, and that all came from competition". The development that rallying has forced is remarkable. "With Group A cars we can now go virtually as fast as Group B. And when you consider the production advantages, you can sense there are many good reasons for Group A".

Still only 30 years old, Miki is a youngster in rallying terms where champions usually earn their titles towards the end of their careers. He has been lucky with the people he has worked with, many of them are giants in the business. His boss Fiorio is one of the best team managers a rallyman could have. "Right or wrong, with him you know exactly where you stand". Of Alen, his friend and teammate; "He taught me there was life beyond the next special stage. He helped me to take an overall view of my career". But perhaps his greatest affection comes for the man who probably has done more to achieve Delta rally success than anyone else, engineer Claudio Lombardi. "He is incredible, so human. He checks everything, has such a clear mind. If I ever had to give up motorsport, the most immediate thing I would miss is working with him".

Editor's Note. This feature contains extracts from a full length interview with Miki Biasion due to appear in Pirelli World Rallying II annual book, to be published in December this year. This book covers the world championship season in full as well as rally sport throughout the world.