

CLASSIC DRIVER

Too Fast to Race - Ferrari 288 GTO Evoluzione

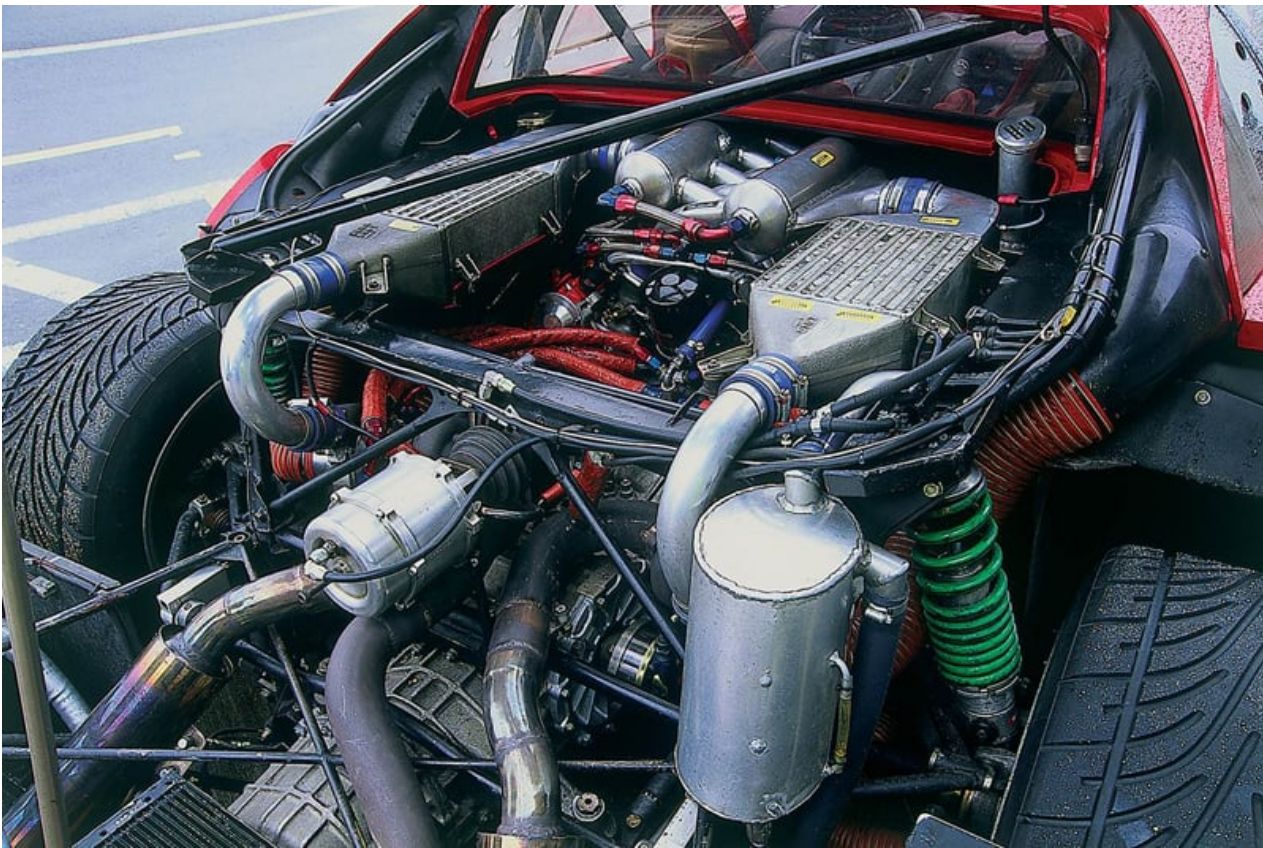


This is the race car that never raced. Ferrari's glorious foray into Group B saw the creation of the magnificent but menacing 288 GTO Evoluzione, a 1980s car which was all set to take on the world when Group B was - for very good reason - dropped.

The sad truth was that the rallying world had seen too many tragic deaths courtesy of the 600bhp-plus 4WD Group B rally monsters and when, in May 1986, the heroic Henri Toivonen and his co-driver joined the list of fatalities, the industry decided that enough was enough. Group B rallying was axed, and that sounded the death knell for Group B racing too.

Which left the world with six examples of the Ferrari 288 GTO Evoluzione that had never turned a wheel in competition. They were outrageous machines, with sublimely ridiculous quantities of power in ultra-light bodies.





From the front, the car looks simple, aerodynamic, not very inspiring; but walk round to the back and suddenly the world changes, because it's at the back that everything happens. Lift up the entire rear section of the bodywork, hinged so far along the roof that it looks like a piranha with its mouth open, and nestling beneath is the 2855cc V8 engine, force-fed by twin IHI turbochargers to produce - what? Well, it depends on how high you set maximum boost. I was lucky enough to take a passenger ride around the Nordschleife in one, and was reliably informed that it was putting out around 650bhp at 7,800rpm that day.

That's a lot of horsepower (and a lot of revs) but take into account that the car's tubular steel frame, aluminium floor, and carbonfibre body panels keep dry weight down to around 940kg, and you can imagine what it does to your spine when the driver puts his right foot down. Well actually, you probably can't - not unless you've been in something with a similar power-to-weight ratio. It was certainly news to me, that memorable day on the old 'Ring, when I discovered that compared with a full-blown Group B racer on slicks, a road-going Ferrari F50, say, is the sort of car you might want to drive for your sighting lap. Before things start to get quick.





It's not just the sheer quantity of horsepower that makes it feel as though someone has kicked you – hard – in the back when the 'Evo' unleashes its full acceleration. It's that the engineers running the car admitted the difficulty of mapping the ECU to let that power come in progressively. You don't want those turbochargers suddenly piling in when you're sliding nicely through Aremberg or Bergwerk, your slicks just reaching the limit of their grip, do you?

I still recall what my driver said to me that day. "It's about as progressive as heavy artillery. You just point it and fire it."



So what happened to the six examples of the 288 GTO Evoluzione when their raison d'être evaporated? While most (possibly all) survived, spread in collections across the world, their principal legacy was the Ferrari F40. At least one of the six 'Evos' was used as an F40 prototype in 1987 – so the development of Ferrari's fierce Group B racer was not entirely in vain.

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