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## Eminence Front – Volta Lancia 037 returns 37 years after TdF podium

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*Thirty-seven years ago, in September of 1983, the Frenchmen Bernard Darniche and Alain Mahé raced this Eminence-liveried Lancia 037 to third overall in the gruelling Tour de France Automobile. After three dormant decades languishing in a garage, the car has finally been restored to its former glory...*

Gent's underwear. That's what Eminence, the French brand that's plastered all over this Lancia 037, is famous for, just in case you were wondering. In hindsight, it strikes us as the perfect sponsor given the sort of bottom-clenching speeds at which the car was being hurled across the special stages of Europe.

The car was delivered in desirable Evo I specification to the Abarth-affiliated privateer outfit of Giuseppe Volta exactly 37 years ago. And nope, the timing is not a coincidence. Eminence had reportedly tried to strike a deal with Abarth directly, but Martini had already staked a claim to the official Works backing. The respected Volta team was the next best option.



The Costa Brava, Costa Smeralda, Ypres and Hunsrück rallies were the first four events tackled by the Lancia, but a combination of bad luck, mechanical gremlins and simple driver error meant a finish eluded it in each. In Hunsrück, the young Italian hotshot Andrea Zanussi took the wheel, although his talent promptly ran out and he crashed heavily, badly damaging the driver's side door.

A hastily performed repair was carried out before the Lancia took to the starting ramp for the fifth time, this time in the prestigious Tour de France Automobile. In what was a bit of a coup for Volta, the driving duties were assigned to the French Tour Auto specialist Bernard Darniche, who was making his comeback after he'd suffered a bad accident the previous year while testing a BMW M1 Procar in Corsica.





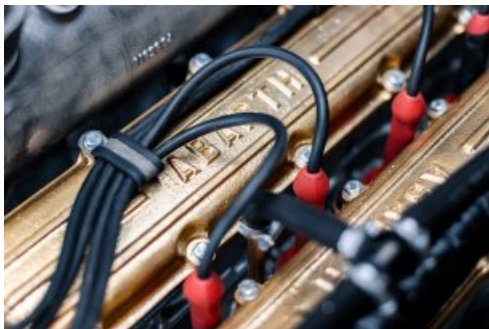
Despite not being in tiptop physical shape and complaining that the 037 did not feel as agile and spritely as when he'd tested it in Italy before the Hunsrück debacle, Darniche more than proved his worth. With the help of his co-driver Alain Mahé, he brought the Lancia home in third place overall, behind a Works Opel Manta and a Renault R5 Turbo. It was a fabulously French affair and a proud day for all involved, especially Eminence, who no doubt sold many more pairs of underwear as a result of the success.

The Lancia escaped the line of fire during the 1984 season. This time was instead used by Giuseppe Volta to evaluate the chances of a potential rallycross entry, although Abarth quickly put paid to that idea because of the emergence of its new Delta S4.



Undeterred, Volta upgraded the Eminence 037 to full-fat Evo II specification and lent it first to Andrea Aghini to tackle the 1985 Coppa Liburna and second to the Jean-Jacques Benson Team. The latter was a fruitful move – piloted by Jean-Pierre Balmer and Denis Indermühle, the car won the 1986 Critérium International Jurassien in Switzerland outright. It was to be its last competitive outing.

It's at this point when the story takes a sad twist. For reasons unbeknownst to us, the Lancia was tucked away in a garage and left languishing for almost three decades. Yes, it was rusting away and no, it didn't even start, let alone run. But for the man who discovered the car and negotiated its purchase, there was one magic attribute that rendered it worth rescuing, and that was its startling originality.



The renowned Italian Lancia specialist Andrea Chiavenuto from Biella was charged with restoring the Lancia back to the exact Evo I specification in which it contested the Tour de France Automobile in 1983. For the first time since that year, the chassis was stripped and acid-dipped, and the damage inflicted by Zanussi's accident was finally repaired properly.

"The great thing was that nobody had touched the car since 1983 and it's therefore remained very original with many Works team details," explains Chiavenuto. "The Sabelt seatbelts, for example, are the originals."



Where original features were lost, the new owner has taken the liberty of reproducing them in painstaking detail. The carbon-Kevlar seats were specially built by Sparco and the MOMO wheels, which were prototyped for 15-inch Michelin tyres at the rear (unlike the 16-inch Speedlines) and only ever fitted to this specific car, are also identical. The finished result is nothing short of extraordinary.

Giuseppe Volta tragically died on the Torino-Milano autostrada in 2017 aged just 71, and his loss was greatly felt by the rally community, both in Italy and beyond. That the veritable Lancia legend did not live to see what his most important car reborn exactly 37 years after its legendary Tour de France podium, is desperately sad. But we're sure that he would have been extremely proud to see the Eminence-liveried Lancia looking every bit as good as it did on the day it was delivered to him in 1983. Now, pack your spare Eminence underwear because there's a special stage that needs attacking. Until next time...

*Photos: Kevin Van Campenhout © 2020*

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