

100 YEARS OF SPORTS CARS—WE PICK THE TOP 10

JUNE/JULY 1986 \$3.50 NZ \$3.95

SPORTS CARS WORLD



944 TURBO

How Porsche's ace out-smarts the 911

As the car celebrates its 100th birthday we look back over the decades, and forward to the 1990s, to single out the stars of the sports car's evolution. We've looked past speed, glamour and expense to come up with a list, sure to be controversial, that is based on a simple criterion: these are the machines the sports car's world couldn't have done without

TOP

TEN

1970s

FIAT X1/9

IT WAS 1973, and supercars worth their salt were mid-engined. Seven years earlier Lamborghini had taken wraps off the Miura, and now Sant'Agata was a year away from what was to be, and remain, the ultimate expression of mid-engined art, the Countach. At Maranello, the '67-introduced Dino was about to be joined by big brother as Ferrari brought in the Berlinetta Boxer as a replacement for the mighty, but unfashionably front-engined, Daytona. By '73, de Tomaso was starting to establish the Pantera, Maserati the Bora.

For its weight distribution and for the freer hand it gave the stylists, the mid-engined layout was already *de rigeur* for cars which aspired to ultimate performance, handling and looks — strengths which would outweigh what was then, and still is today, a formidable array of disadvantages when the engine is installed behind the seats.

These disadvantages scared off every mass manufacturer with thoughts of an 'affordable' mid-engined sports car — except Fiat. Drawing on experience with Ferrari (Fiat built the V6 engine for the Dino) and enlisting Bertone as stylists, the X1/9 appeared in '73 as the first junior mid-engined sports car.

In looks, the car had far more in common with its supercar peers than it did with a conventional front-engined GT of the period, and in layout, too — transversely-mounted engine, targa top, all-independent suspension (even lower wishbones at the rear), all disc brakes, rack and pinion steering and a cosy little two-seater cabin — the X1/9 followed the established mid-engined supercar path. It also inherited the typical mid-engined car's weaknesses, and while these might have been easier to swallow when you had a good old 300 horses under the rear deck, the X1/9's cooking four-cylinder engine and four-speed gearbox made people wonder. Do we really need all the complexity and the compromises when all the right foot is capable of unleashing is a meagre 75 horses, 51 kW in the form sold in Australia? Enthusiasts answered quickly 'yes' (and continue to: Bertone still makes the X1/9 for some markets) but other car companies stayed away from the formula in droves.

With hindsight, Fiat was probably more foolish than brave to embark on the X1/9 project: it's doubtful the company made any money out of it. Certainly little money was invested in the model. There were mostly undesirable cosmetic updates and changes to meet emissions and crash standards, but what X1/9 drivers wanted, more power and torque and a fifth gear to cut down engine noise for cruising, took years to arrive. The 1.5-litre five-speed model went on sale in '78 (and Australia in '81).

The 1.5 engine gave 59 kW and 118

Nm of torque and, with the fifth gear, these made the car considerably more relaxing, though the quality of the performance was still mundane, the less than charismatic noise was still intrusive and against the stopwatch many ordinary family cars were quicker. Motoring philistines pointed to these things, and to the restricted luggage room and engine access and the near-impossibly tight driving position and non-existent headroom, and scoffed; in the stark light of day it was a hard car to justify, even at its competitive prices — and the X1/9 was never an expensive car by the standards of its front-engined rivals.

But put a driver with an open mind behind the wheel and the picture changed dramatically. To take an X1/9, preferably the generally superior five-



“To take an X1/9 over a demanding route was to live champagne motoring fantasies on a lemonade budget”

**TOP
TEN**

speed, over a demanding route was to live champagne motoring fantasies on a lemonade budget. It mattered not that the car was no neck-snapper for more than anything the little Fiat/Bertone was about feelings. With lovely handling, fine steering and braking and a good ride, those feelings were as grand as any you get behind the wheel of a full-blooded mid-engined supercar. The X1/9 was and is today an unashamed driver's car, and in a decade that saw the affordable sports car killed off the Fiat shone.

Justification of the concept has come too late for Fiat, and in any case it's doubtful whether any but the Japanese, even in the late '80s, could realise the full potential of the affordable mid-engined sports car. The Toyota MR2 brings the X1/9 concept bang up to date without relinquishing any of the Fiat's enthusiasm and panache. But for so long as we remember the X1/9 it is to Fiat and Bertone that we must take off our hats.