[Legends: Audi Sport quattro]

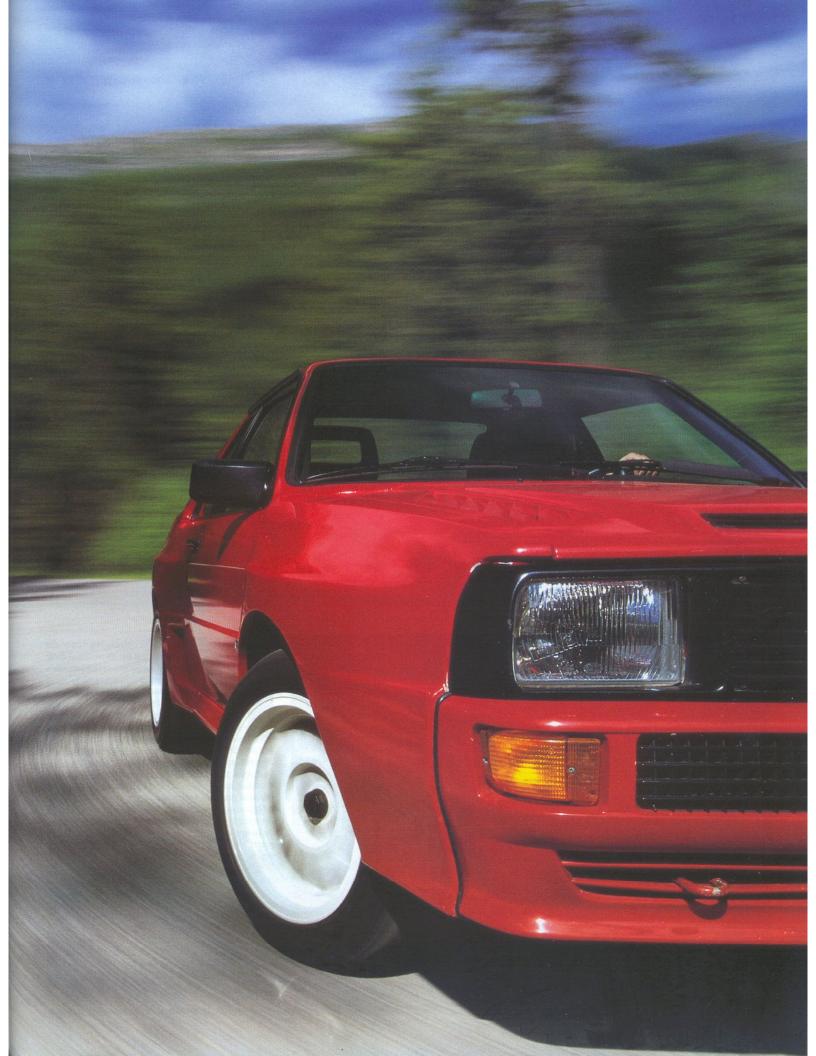


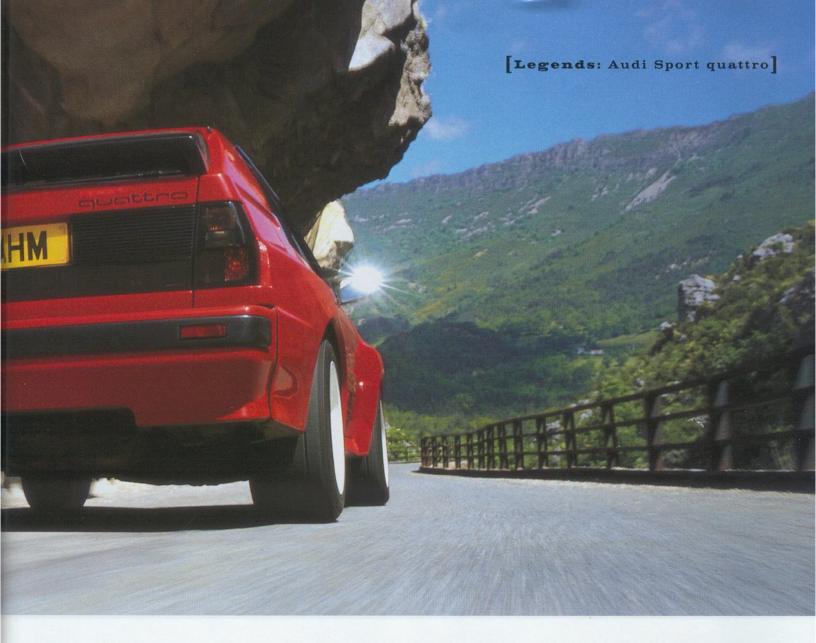
GET SHORTY

It's fifteen years since the flame-spitting, shortwheelbase Group B Audi Sport quattro finished its final World Championship rally. Richard Meaden relives its last blast in the mountains above Monte Carlo

Photography: Gus Gregory **Archive photography:** McKlein/LAT







could kill the grotesquely proportioned S1 quattro had the opposition slayed before the start.

As a wide-eyed teenager, months away from his 15th birthday, the closest I got to experiencing the Monte Carlo and Röhrl's fire-breathing quattro was through the pages of *Autosport* and *Motoring News*. Now, as an older but still wide-eyed 30-year-old, it's quite a feeling to be storming up the very same roads in the showroom equivalent of Walter's old warhorse. It gives me a buzz just looking at the thing – a decade and a half has done little to blunt the Sport quattro's shock value. It's still cartoonishly ugly from most angles, plain stupid in profile, but the bluff nose, box arches and cotton-reel alloys combine with compelling effect, even to eyes rendered blasé by prolonged exposure to be-winged

Imprezas and Evos. You simply can't resist a lingering glance back at Audi's outlandish homologation special, no matter how much time you spend with it.

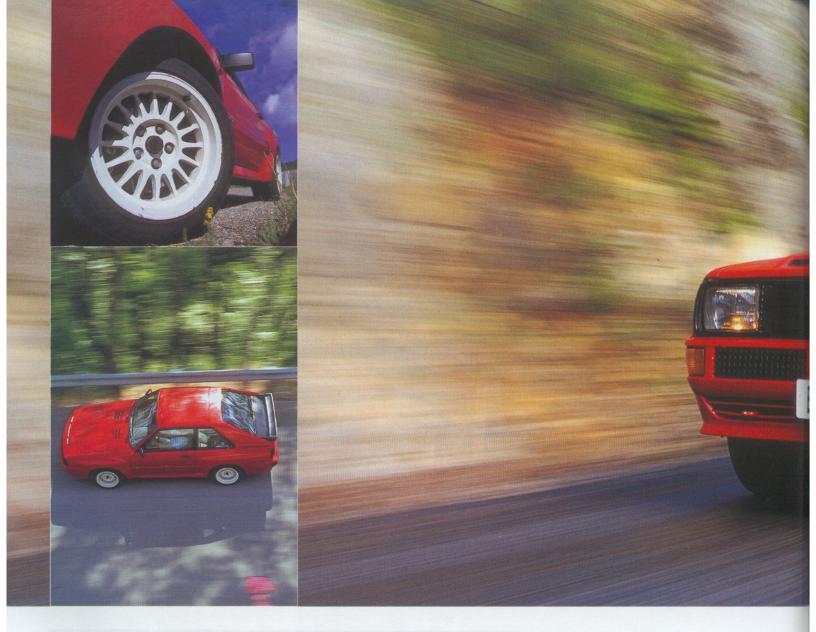
We're here to retrace Walter's wheel-tracks, for the '86 Monte Carlo rally was to be the Group B quattro's final fling before spectator and driver deaths prompted Audi to withdraw from Group B competition before the end of the season. We're here in June and not January simply because given the choice between minus 15 and factor 15, sunshine and dry tarmac wins every time in my book. In fact, you don't need wintery conditions to appreciate what Röhrl had to cope with. Winter or summer, these roads are incredible, threading their tortuous way through some of the most spectacular scenery in Europe. So twisty and narrow that a ten-mile

journey can take you the best part of half an hour. Even with caution thrown to the wind, the prospect of attacking them at similar speeds in the snow and ice makes my mouth go as dry as parchment.

To the uninitiated the Sport quattro is just a cooking quattro with 12 inches cut out of the wheelbase. Take a close look and it's shocking to discover just how different the shorter car is from the original. Pretty much all the bodywork is Kevlar-reinforced plastic, from the roof and wings to the bonnet and boot. In fact only the doors remain in metal. With weight saving a high priority the Sport quattro's engine was all-alloy, the new block weighing some 23 kilos less than the old, cast-iron version. A 20-valve cylinder head, much larger KKK turbocharger and a more efficient induction



Above: Walter Rörhl was the master of the Monte in the '80s, but his brutishly powerful Audi (left) was still an almighty handful on snow and ice. Road version was built to satisfy Group B regulations





and cooling system, enabled Audi engineers to extract 300bhp from the 2.2-litre, five-cylinder motor in road trim, with another 200bhp on tap in Röhrl's flame-spitting S1 version. In a formula famed for its excess, the S1 was the mightiest of a warrior breed, so it's fitting that of all the Group B homologation road cars, the Audi Sport quattro was similarly superior.

We've already grown to appreciate the quattro's under-bonnet muscle, having nailed the 1100-mile journey from Peterborough to Nice in one hit, yesterday. For a 15-year-old car, the Audi makes a remarkable long-distance machine. There's plenty of wind noise, not to mention a bit of propshaft vibration, but with a brimmed 90-litre fuel tank and settled at a comfortable, Gendarme-happy 95-100mph cruise, the Audi will run for three and half hours between fuel stops. The ease with which it surges to 125mph with the gentlest stroke of the throttle suggests Audi's claimed top speed of 155mph is well within reach. It's genuinely comfortable, too, thanks to the brilliantly supportive Recaro seats, so Gregory and I clamber out at our hotel on the Rue des Anglais ache-free but hungry for beer and pizza. Nothing new there then.

Back in 1986, the Monte Carlo Rally was a six-day monster that took crews on a gruelling 2474-mile route, 547 of those miles split into 36 diverse special stages. Our considerably abbreviated re-run still includes some of the great Monte stages, from the Col de Turini just north of Monaco, to the superfast Sisteron stage a couple of hours to the north west. We'll also head for stages where Röhrl and the quattro shone brightest, including the rally's 36th and last stage between the



Right: Sport quattro's extraordinary profile was the result of removing 12 inches from the wheelbase of the regular quattro

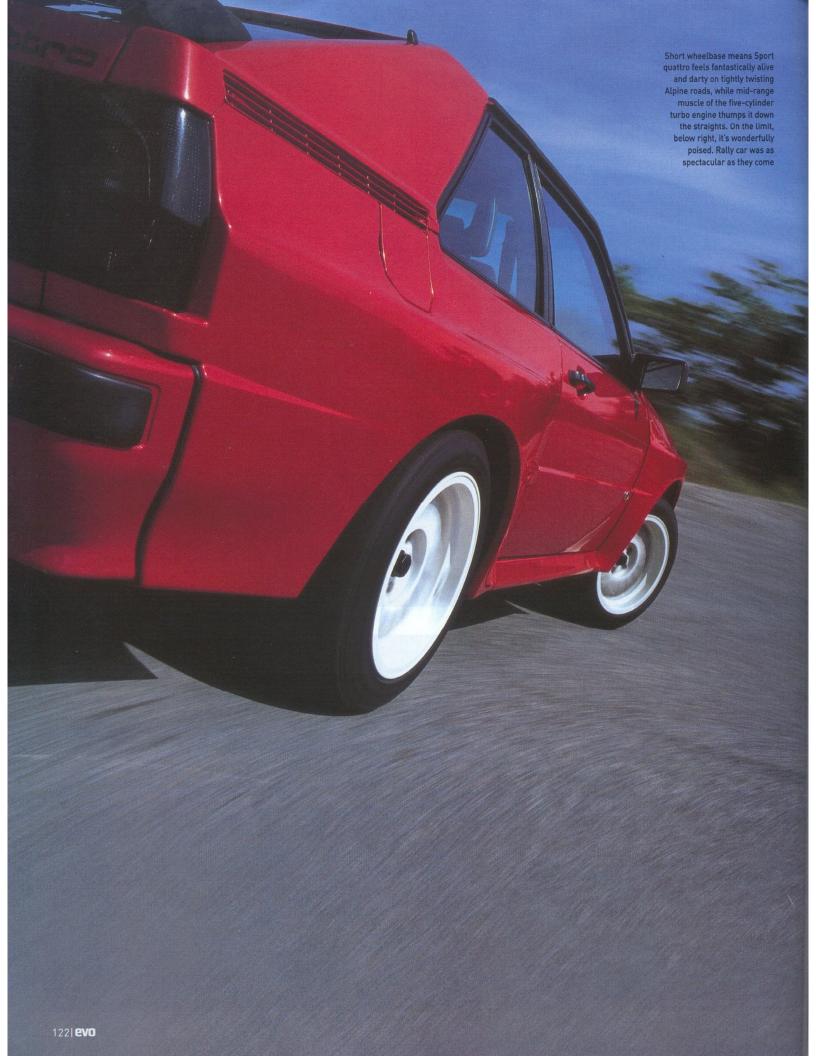
isolated mountain villages of Loda and Luceram. It's going to be an awesome, eye-opening drive.

After a great dinner and a good night's sleep we meet up with photo-shoot assistant Antony Fraser, 'fresh' off the easyjet redeye from Luton. After collecting a rental Merc A-class that bears more battle-scars than a Gaza Strip minicab, we strike out for Sisteron, one of the toughest stages of the entire rally.

With a huge change in elevation from start to finish, choosing tyres to suit the whole stage was nigh impossible as conditions could range from dry tarmac at the start to black ice and slush on the ascent and deep powder snow at the highest points. Getting the better of surface conditions as fickle as this relied on luck as much as tyre choice, and way before he got to our first port of call, Röhrl had fallen foul of both.

A poor 12th after the first stage, Röhrl snuck into the top six places just twice in the first eight stages. His team-mate, the Swede, Hannu Mikkola, was faring better but not much. Clearly the Audi's power advantage counted for nothing if it could't be transmitted to the road, a problem the agile 450bhp, Pirelli-shod Lancia of Henri Toivonen just didn't seem to have. The fight looked lost almost before it had begun – to everyone except Röhrl, who proceeded to take over a minute out of Toivonen's lead on the 10th and 11th stages, elevating the shovel-nosed Audi to a threatening 2nd position. Tyres, as ever, had been the key, and now the Monte Meister gathered ominous







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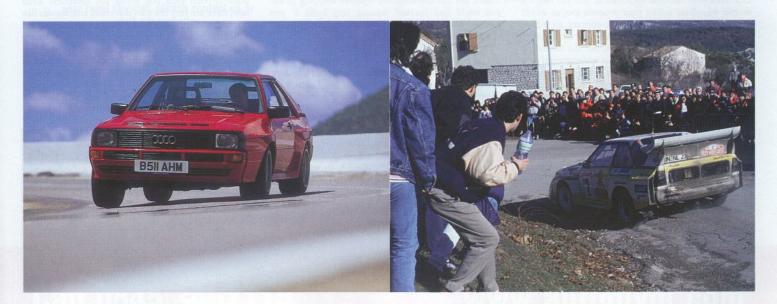
momentum, his hands circling the rally's throat in readiness for the stranglehold that he would surely apply in the next few stages. Lady Luck had other ideas though, and on Burzet, the longest stage of the rally, Röhrl suffered a puncture. Conditions were good for once, and Röhrl was on unstudded dry tyres, but inexplicably his spare was a studded snow tyre, an error that cost six minutes and any realistic hope of victory.

Fortunately, tyres aren't an issue in our assault of Sisteron. With the sun beating down and crickets chirruping in the meadows, the Sport quattro feels sensational, lunging between bends on a rip-tide of forced-induction thrust. Age hasn't diminished its accelerative punch, and although there's plenty of fluffy, low-compression lag below 3000rpm, when the outsize KKK spools into life, the quattro lifts its ventpeppered nose and punches forward with supercar force. It doesn't thrive on low gears or high revs, the real sweet spot sitting between 4500 and 6500rpm in third and fourth gears. It's here you flex the soulful fivecylinder's muscle most effectively, all 243lb ft of midrange torque hefting you out of the hairpins, the turbo's final fiery flourish providing the top end to make the most of the straights. Whenever the stage uncoils enough to really uncork the quattro's performance, it devours it effortlessly.

At just over 23 miles long, Sisteron is one of the longest stages on the Monte. For the first ten miles or so it's a riot of clearly sighted second and third gear corners. The tarmac is smooth, and wide, by Monte standards at any rate, though still only two cars wide at best. You climb gently, but as the lush greenery subsides the topography gets more ragged and worrying drops start to fall away to your right. Gnarled armco barriers are now the only thing between you and a seemingly bottomless abyss of fresh air as you blast across frostcracked asphalt, eye-level with the peaks of 1300-metre high mountains. From here the only way is down, the road plunging into dense forest where without warning it constricts savagely. Barely a car wide and far twistier than before, every corner is blind. It's here that Geisdörfer became Röhrl's eyes, seeing him through the maze of bends and hazards, Röhrl powering on in a literal act of blind faith. At this point, less than twothirds through the stage, Gus and Î stop for photos. Out of curiosity we check the time. We've been driving fast for 20 minutes or so. Coping with snow and ice, Röhrl and Geisdörfer would need only eight more minutes to complete the entire stage. Mind-blowing stuff.

From Sisteron we point the Sport quattro towards St Auban. It's another classic Monte stage, the most memorable section carving its way through a claustrophobic canyon. How anyone built a road through here is beyond me. With a sheer face on one side, a sheer drop on the other, pitch-black tunnels and overhanging rocks it's one of the most hair-raising roads I've ever seen. There's no way we can go quickly through here; it's just too narrow and dangerous, especially as there's traffic coming the other way. Some sections are so scary I have to hoot for comfort before timidly poking the quattro's nose blindly round the corner. For this reason alone it's a memorable drive, despite our lack of pace. Needless to say, our man Röhrl, now driving only to prove what could have been, powered the S1 through here faster than anyone else, no doubt filling the canyon with the five-cylinder engine's spine-tingling war-cry.

After the confines of St Auban, even the sinuous Col de Turini feels spacious. Fast and furious, the road climbs through thick mountain woodland before popping out at the 1600-metre high summit, then jinks diagonally between two restaurants before plunging down the other side. A stone's throw from the Italian border, it's a favourite stage for the most partisan spectators. In 1986 roaring flanks of Lancia and Peugeot supporters lined opposite sides of the stage at the Turini's summit, pelting each other with snowballs and shovelling snow onto the path of the enemy. What





they did to Röhrl is anyone's guess, but the big Audi would have been a handful as it crested the Col, wastegate shrieking and wheels spinning with the force of 500bhp on sheet ice and snow. Broadside through a seething mass of humanity.

All we have to contend with are gaggles of super-fit cyclists, calf-muscles rippling as they pull impossibly high gears up the eye-watering gradient. The Audi also enjoys the ascent, gravity pushing its nose firmly into the uphill hairpins; moist, dense air filling the fivecylinder's hungry lungs. The steering is perfectly judged for this kind of nip-and-tuck work. There's so much feel you know exactly how hard the chunky 225/50 Dunlops are working, each fraction of a turn of lock filled with essential information. You can feel the shorter wheelbase aiding your progress too; an added dartiness when turning into tight corners, an edgier throttle adjustability through the faster curves. It's more aggressive than a standard quattro, but the reassuring feel and balance is still there. Sure it understeers if you carry too much speed or get on the power too soon, but not so much that you can't contain it. It's an Impreza with real feel, an Evo without the synthetic chassis balance. For the vast majority of the time it manages to

generate so much traction from such modest tyres it simply grips and goes, firing out of corners like a champagne cork. More importantly when it does slide you know precisely why, and there's enough information through the steering wheel and controllability in the chassis for you to exploit or remedy the situation without too much drama.

It's on the descent that the quattro feels less convincing. Brakes have come a long way in 15 years, and though vented and clamped by four-piston callipers the disc size is badly compromised by the 15in wheels. To put things in perspective an Impreza P1 WR's discs are bigger than the quattro's wheels. Not surprisingly although the Audi's middle pedal has good initial feel, there's just not the ultimate, repeated stopping power you could find yourself wanting very badly if you charged down the mountain as hard as the engine and chassis encourage you to do.

From the Col de Turini we drive to our last stage of the journey, and the last stage of the '86 Monte Carlo. It's a relatively compact ten miles, and Röhrl, by now back in a safe 4th position thanks to five fastest stage times since his fateful puncture, is still driving like a man possessed. Just 13 minutes and 46 seconds later his point is proved beyond all doubt, having posted a time nearly 50secs faster than team-mate Mikkola, still the second fastest man through the stage. I have a real crack at this one too, really pushing hard when conditions allow. It's odd, but the quattro feels most at home in moments like this, soaking up the punishment like a sponge. The damping is nothing short of brilliant soft enough to absorb bumps that would have stiffer cars skittering, but controlled enough to keep the engine's sump from grinding itself into swarf on the unforgivingly undulating tarmac. Gone is the transmission shunt that blights low-speed driving, so too the turbo lag that punishes lack of commitment.

Give it its head and the quattro unleashes a ferocious point-to-point pace that leaves you breathless. Even now, there are very few cars that could attack roads like this with such conviction and emerge with honour (and structure) intact. Fifteen years — half my lifetime — stand between this car and the so-called cutting edge, and yet, right at this moment I'm struggling to think of anything to touch it for its incredible combination of feel and cornering force. The S1 failed to win the Monte, but its road-going progeny remains a uniquely impressive experience. The quattro legend lives on.

