

When a normal Ferrari just isn't fast enough

Richard Heseltine puts the sensational 360 Challenge Stradale, 430 Scuderia and 458 Speciale through their paces in their natural environment – a deserted track

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**



Okay, maybe one more lap. It would be rude not to. The landscape unspools in a blur as you cycle through a series of conclusions and emotions, thoughts turning to how, precisely, you're going to fund the purchase of a Ferrari 360 Challenge Stradale. It's just so, well, animated, so eager to please. End of lap. That was quick. One more go? If you absolutely insist. Honestly, moths show greater resistance to flame. And you haven't even tried it in 'Race' mode yet.

Make no mistake, this is a car born with track action in mind, Ferrari having followed the Porsche business model of transforming a production model into a competition tool ahead of launching a one-make series. Wait a little while, throw in a few concessions to construction and use regulations *et voilà*, you have a limited-edition road car. The idea, in principle,

is to strip something to its essence, and charge a thumping premium for the privilege.

Except that it isn't strictly true. The Challenge Stradale, like the other two circuit-orientated machines here, is more than just a pared-back junior supercar. These are a sub-species of Ferrari; ones that in modern-day road-tester parlance are 'focused'. And how. They were tweaked and tailored for track action but they also handily double-up as among the most compelling road cars ever made. And, just as night follows day, they were launched amid a blizzard of hype. The thing is, for the most part they more than lived up to the billing, and still do.

It's easy to forget the rapturous reception that greeted the 360 Modena when it was launched in 1999. With a rigid aluminium body/chassis, efficient aerodynamics and downforce-producing underbody design, to say nothing of its 395bhp, 40-valve, 3.6-litre V8 with a flat-plane crank, it



Who needs a red Ferrari when black looks this good? Left: snazzy yellow and black trim; normal wheel in CS with set-up options on carbonfibre panel; Rosso plenums; Modena profile obvious but with better airflow



was already halfway towards being a racer. It was the jumping-off point for the Challenge Stradale, the most obvious changes over the regular car being the subtly reshaped nose, sills that guide air around the rear wheels, new rear spoiler, further underbody tweaks and rear air extractor. Oh, and 19in alloys with painted-on Pirellis, not forgetting the carbon-ceramic brakes borrowed from the Enzo. The suspension, meanwhile, was stiffened, power was boosted by 30bhp while wanton luxury made way for lashings of carbonfibre. All told, the Challenge Stradale emerged some 109kg (240lb) lighter than the Modena, the result being a vehicle capable of 0-62mph in 4.1 secs and a top speed of 186mph.

The F430, which followed in the 360's wake, was another giant leap forward in marque lore. Despite sharing the same aluminium tub, roof-line, doors and glass as its predecessor, it looked significantly different, not least the redesigned tail section, with its high-sited exhausts and grilles in the rear wings. The new 4.3-litre V8, from the Ferrari-Maserati F136 series of engines, provided a thumping 483bhp, but it was merely the opening salvo. A Challenge version followed, which in turn was usurped by the Scuderia. Unveiled at the 2007 Frankfurt Motor

Show (Michael Schumacher was on hand to lift the sheets), it was about 100kg (220lb) lighter than the regular model and packed a useful 503bhp. If the PR blurb was to be believed, and there was no reason not to, it could sprint from 0-62mph in 3.6 secs on to a top speed of 198mph.

Then there was the 458 Italia, which was launched in 2009. Its 32-valve, 4499cc 90° V8 may have lacked cylinders in comparison with its arch-rival, the Lamborghini Gallardo, but it produced an identical 562bhp at a dizzying 9000rpm. Ferrari claimed a 0-62mph time of 3.4 secs and top speed of 202mph. Stylistically, it represented another leap forward, but that wasn't the clever bit. The Italia's alleged drag coefficient figure of 0.33Cd wasn't that remarkable, but it's what it did with the air that was really impressive. Deformable winglets at the front bent at speed to direct air beneath the car – downforce at maximum velocity was said to be equivalent to 340kg (749lb), almost a third of the car's weight. Oh, and the engine and transmission coolers engaged the airflow to increase efficiency through the matrices before jetting it out the back to improve overall aerodynamics.

The 2013-'15 Speciale, in contrast, was more extreme still, obvious visual deviations being the

360 CHALLENGE STRADALE

Sold/number built 2003-'04/1274

Construction extruded aluminium frame, aluminium body panels

Engine all-alloy, dual-overhead-cam-per-bank, 40-valve 3586cc flat-plane crank V8, Bosch Motronic 7.3 electrostatic fuel injection

Max power 425bhp @ 8500rpm

Max torque 275lb ft @ 4750rpm

Transmission F1 electro-hydraulic six-speed sequential gearbox, controlled by levers on steering column, driving rear wheels

Suspension independent all round, by double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar, gas-filled dampers; pushrod at rear

Brakes ventilated carbon-ceramic discs all round, with ABS

Steering rack and pinion

Length 14ft 8 1/4in (4477mm)

Width 6ft 3 1/2in (1918mm)

Height 3ft 11 1/4in (1200mm)

Wheelbase 8ft 6 1/4in (2600mm)

Weight 2822lb (1280kg)

0-62mph 4.1 secs

Top speed 186mph

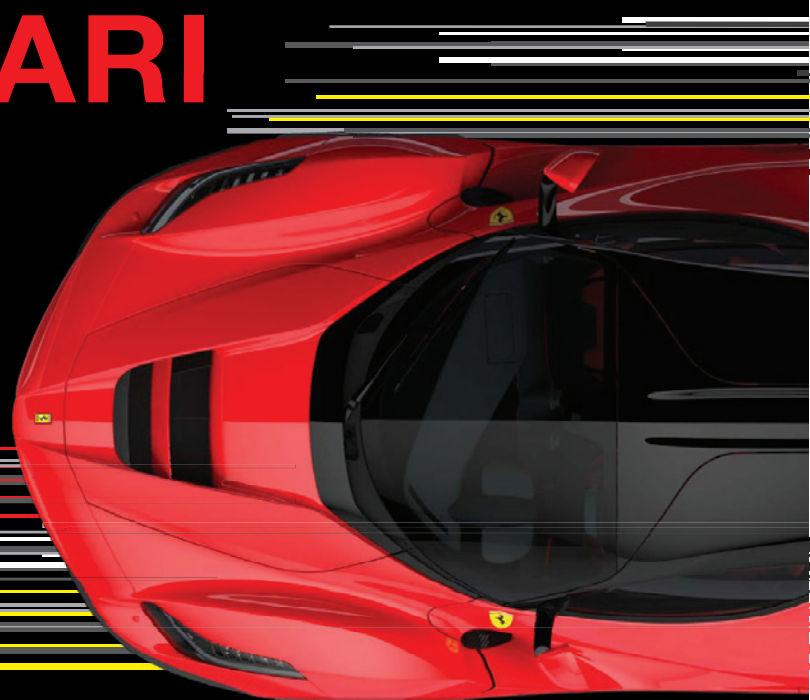
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From main: tail echoes
Enzo; more black, plus
bare tub, in cabin, wheel
has sprouted buttons;
seats deceptively comfy;
vivid yellow rev counter;
redesigned induction set-
up gives it a harder-edged
tone; badge on mesh

'EVEN STAYING ON THE
NURSERY SLOPES, IT'S
BUTTOCK-CLENCHINGLY
QUICK AND VOCAL, TOO'



vented bonnet, strakes in the sills, a loftier tail spoiler, forged wheels and bumpers featuring movable flaps that reduced drag at speed. The engine, meanwhile, received a power hike to 597bhp. This new strain weighed 90kg (198lb) less than the car that bore it, and was reputedly good for 0-125mph in a blistering 9.1 secs.

Which brings us to today, our triumvirate being resplendent in black – or rather *nero* – with the obligatory racing stripes (painted rather than *appliqué*). Up close, the 360 looks squat and pugnacious, those flared 'nostrils' evoking the 1961 156 'Sharknose' Grand Prix challenger. Inside, just about everything is clad in glossy carbonfibre: the door cards, console, seat shells and myriad smaller items. The drilled aluminium pedals look similar to those of the Enzo, as does the steering wheel with its slightly flattened-off top, behind which rest the F1-style shift paddles. The yellow-faced rev counter dominates the instrument cluster. It's nothing if not noticeable.

The starting procedure is theatrical, if time-consuming: with your foot on the brake, turn the key, pull both paddles back for neutral, thumb the starter, move the right paddle for 'I', take your foot off the brake and you're away. There is no 'Drive' button, yet there is Launch Control, but you use that only once if you don't want to fry the clutch. In Sport, acceleration is savage, ballistic even. It will change gear in just 150 milliseconds, even if it isn't the smoothest arrangement. While it may change up or down faster than you could ever manage with a lever, you still need to time shifts accurately. Otherwise there's distinct shunting, although you soon acclimatise.

And the noise! You cannot believe it left the factory like this, because the blare as you approach the top end is beyond loud.



430 SCUDERIA

Sold/number built 2007-'08/na

Construction extruded aluminium frame, aluminium body panels

Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank, 32-valve 4308cc V8, Bosch Motronic ME7 injection

Max power 503bhp @ 8500rpm

Max torque 347lb @ 5250rpm

Transmission electro-hydraulic six-speed sequential 'box, driving rear wheels via E-diff and F1-Trac traction and stability control

Suspension independent all round, by double wishbones, titanium coil springs, active dampers and anti-roll bar

Brakes cross-drilled, ventilated, carbon-ceramic discs all round, with ABS

Steering rack and pinion

Length 14ft 9 1/2 in (4509mm)

Width 6ft 3 3/4 in (1924mm)

Height 3ft 11 1/4 in (1200mm)

Wheelbase 8ft 6 1/4 in (2600mm)

Weight 2976lb (1350kg)

0-62mph 3.6 secs **Top speed** 198mph

Price new £172,625

Price now £180,000

'IN JUST ABOUT EVERY QUANTIFIABLE WAY, THE SPECIALE IS THE MOST ACCOMPLISHED HERE'

The steering is super-direct, too. Almost disarmingly so, but what comes as a surprise is how well the Challenge Stradale rides the bumps. It doesn't exactly absorb imperfections in the asphalt, but nor does it upset the car's equilibrium – unlike some of its period rivals. Or at least it doesn't in the dry. Prior experience of the model in the wet informs you that the rear Pirelli P Zero Corsas will break traction, forcing the tail sideways before the ASR kicks in and order is restored. The brakes are amazing, stopping you from silly speeds – from yourself – without threatening to fade, but modulating pedal pressure takes a little getting used to.

You cannot help but fall for it. Yes, it's hardly the most practical of road cars, but it will happily potter when needs must. By which, we mean if you absolutely must. This car thrives on being caned. It's like a regular 360 Modena that has its genes spliced with an F40; a Frankensteinian mash-up that gets better the faster you drive. In Race, it's a whole new world of sainted lunacy, one which sadly there wasn't time to explore.

Then there's the 430 (the 'F' bit of the nomenclature was dropped for the Scuderia edition). It's arguably more handsome, the rear end in particular being reminiscent of the Enzo, not

least the tail-light treatment. Inside, it's stark and purposeful but there's still space for electric windows and a surprisingly effective climate control set-up. Bare ally, bare welds, a Lexan rear window and exposed carbonfibre lend sufficient racer reference points, the ultra-thin yet supportive seats proving comfortable without pinching.

Then there's the driving position. With the Scuderia, Ferrari got it absolutely right. You're not obliged to contort yourself to a neck-cricking angle to see out of it, and everything is in-line rather than offset. Then comes the really good bit. At idle, it emits a deeper, more metallic timbre than the regular F430 thanks to the more efficient exhaust arrangement. That and the redesigned (and groovy-looking) airbox and induction system. There's 510bhp here – 20bhp up from its sibling – and it sounds a mite angry. Then you notice that the five-stage *manettino* (knob) on the steering wheel *starts* at Sport.

Even staying on the nursery slopes, the Scuderia is buttock-clenchingly quick and vocal with it. Some 80% of the 347lb ft of torque is available from 3000rpm. There's no fluffing, no hesitation, just immediate and inexorable acceleration. Artificially amplified it might be, but the 4.3-litre flat-plane crank V8 is commotion itself. The

change-up lights housed in the top of the steering wheel serve only to goad you on, flashing red from left-to-right with each step in the rev range: you want to nail all of them before shifting up. Only the close proximity of trees stops you.

And the gearchange – there's no juddering or baulkiness. The F1-Superfast 2 sequential set-up works incredibly well at speed. As does the traction control set-up, which feels reactive rather than nannying. Ferrari claimed that the Scuderia could generate a cornering force of 1.6g, which seems feasible. In 'CT' with no traction control, it still has more grip than it knows what to do with. Into 'CST Off', where the stability systems are disabled but the E-diff – where it actively alters the rear wheels' relative speeds – and ABS still functioning, it's positively amazing.

So how could the 458 possibly be any better? It is, though. On stepping aboard, you're struck by how contemporary it still looks. The seats are figure-hugging, while the dash is simply styled yet striking. The minor controls are reasonably intuitive at a glance but then most of them are attached to the steering wheel. The view across the Dino-like sweeping contours is sublime.

As with the other cars here, it sounds more flatulent than choral at low revs but press the

Speciale accentuates 458's savage beauty; gorgeous tan Alcantara livens up cabin; howling flat-plane-crank V8 is good for c600bhp; 'Race' setting prompts brutal acceleration and quicker responses; dash badge



throttle pedal that bit harder and... Oh. Dear. God. The immediacy of accelerative force is, if anything, even more brain-scrambling. The 458 just hurls itself forward, yowling as it does so. With the doohickey in Sport, there is never a lull. The paddle-shift system works incredibly well. You can pretty much leave your right foot buried and it will change up without protest.

What strikes you more than anything is just how planted it feels. The Speciale never deviates from its course and, even at high three-figure speeds, it does nothing unruly; there is no writhing through the wheel. The front doesn't lift, or if it does it isn't discernible from the driver's seat.

The steering is ultra-sharp and in the corners you can fully appreciate the electronics. Arrive at a testy switchback going that bit too quickly, the clever gubbins throttles back the engine and brakes opposite wheels. It just sticks, proffering cartoon-like cornering forces. The ride is even halfway decent, with reasonable bump absorption and no creaks through the structure.

What is patently clear is that the Speciale is a much better car than you are a driver. You sense that when you reach its limits, you will long since have exceeded your own. Driving one quickly becomes a case of mental programming: you know it will go around a corner at *Looney Times* speeds but your right foot wavers as your mind tells you it won't. The Brembo anchors are brutally efficient, too. We didn't try it in 'Race', mind. We didn't dare. A damp track and a paucity of pluck ended play early.

As for the vexed question of which car is best,



it depends on what you're after. In just about every quantifiable way, the 458 is the most accomplished machine here. It's toweringly capable, but the Scuderia isn't far behind. If anything, it's more fun to drive somehow south of ten-tenths. It's the most benign, that's for sure. If push came to shove, however, the 360 Challenge Stradale is the one you'd want to play with for a day – if not until the end of time. It's utterly joyous to drive hard, and you would never tire of that induction howl. It might render you deaf, but that would be a small price to pay.

Thanks to DK Engineering: www.dkeng.co.uk



THE SPECIALIST DK Engineering

Experienced dealer and racer James Cottingham of DK Engineering (on left) has persuasive views on the market for limited-edition 'modern' Ferraris.

"If I had to pick a favourite, it would have to be the 360 Challenge Stradale," he says. "It was the original special lightweight Ferrari of the modern era. The build quality isn't as great as the later cars but the balance of rawness and the sense of occasion is just right. Not only that, I don't think Ferrari will ever build another car that comes with a better soundtrack as standard! If I wanted a car to use regularly, though, it would be the Scuderia."

And values? "It depends," explains Harvey Stanley. "Starting money for a 360CS would be around £160k for a left-hand-drive one, but low-mileage cars would be considerably more. If you want right-hand drive, add £40,000. I think these cars are rare enough that they will continue appreciating."

"People are now trying to complete the set – 360CS, Scuderia and Speciale – and being the rarest of the three means that they will become even more sought after."

458 SPECIALE

Sold/number built 2013-'15/na

Construction extruded aluminium frame, aluminium body panels

Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank, 32-valve 4497cc V8, direct electronic injection

Max power 597bhp @ 9000rpm

Max torque 398lb ft @ 6000rpm

Transmission Getrag seven-speed, dual-clutch sequential 'box, driving rear wheels via E-diff, F1-Trac and Side Slip Control

Suspension independent all round, at front by double wishbones

rear multi-links; coil springs, magneto-rheological adaptive dampers f/r

Brakes ventilated carbon-ceramic discs all round, with ABS

Steering rack and pinion

Length 15ft (4572mm)

Width 6ft 4¼in (1949mm)

Height 3ft 11½in (1207mm)

Wheelbase 8ft 8¼in (2648mm)

Weight 3042lb (1380kg)

0-62mph 3 secs

Top speed 202mph

Price new £208,000

Price now £275,000