

WORDS ANDREW FRANKEL | PHOTOGRAPHY TIM ANDREW

Dialling up a storm

Imagine a humble Mondial with an uprated chassis and the powertrain from a 430 Challenge race car. That's what we have here – and it all works astonishingly well

I've always had a soft spot for the Mondial. A strange thing to say perhaps, but true nonetheless. Regulars may recall the first Ferrari I ever drove was my dad's Mondial QV, which my brother thoughtfully rolled into a field, but there was not space to say it was the first of three owned by my father, being followed in quick succession by a 3.2 and a 'T'. So maybe I'm biased.

Or maybe not. Because I'm also old enough for the Mondial still to have been in production when I started driving cars for a living, and I recall very well a group test with a Jaguar XJR-S, Porsche 928 and BMW 850i in which the Ferrari performed quite exceptionally well on the road even if, thanks to some idiot in Egham fitting it with the wrong tyres, it tried to mug me on the track.

But the essential truth is that the Mondial is a rather underrated car. Underrated because it was not a great-looking car, underrated because the mid-engined 2+2 presents irreconcilable packaging issues so remains a vanishingly rare configuration, and underrated most of all because, even in ultimate form with a 300bhp, 3.4-litre motor in the back, it was never that quick.

At the time, some of us tried to point out that there was more to this car than the ungainly proportions conferred upon it by the need to fit an engine and four people within the wheelbase, but few were listening. Don't forget either that its die was cast by the original Mondial 8 of 1981, whose 3-litre engine had spent half the previous decade in various 308s breathing heartily through four twin-choke

Below
At a glance it's just a Mondial, albeit one moving rather more swiftly than usual. The soundtrack might give it away, though...



Specification

ENGINE V8, 4308cc
MAX POWER 483bhp @ 8500rpm
MAX TORQUE 343lb ft @ 5250rpm
TRANSMISSION Six-speed automated manual gearbox, rear-wheel drive, limited-slip differential, traction control
SUSPENSION Front and rear: double wishbones, coil springs, electronic dampers, anti-roll bar
STEERING Rack and pinion, power-assisted
BRAKES Vented discs, 300mm front, 310mm rear, ABS
WHEELS 8.5 x 18in front, 10.5 x 18in rear
TYRES 235/40 ZR18 front, 255/40 ZR18 rear
0-60MPH c4.0sec (est)
TOP SPEED 170mph+ (est)

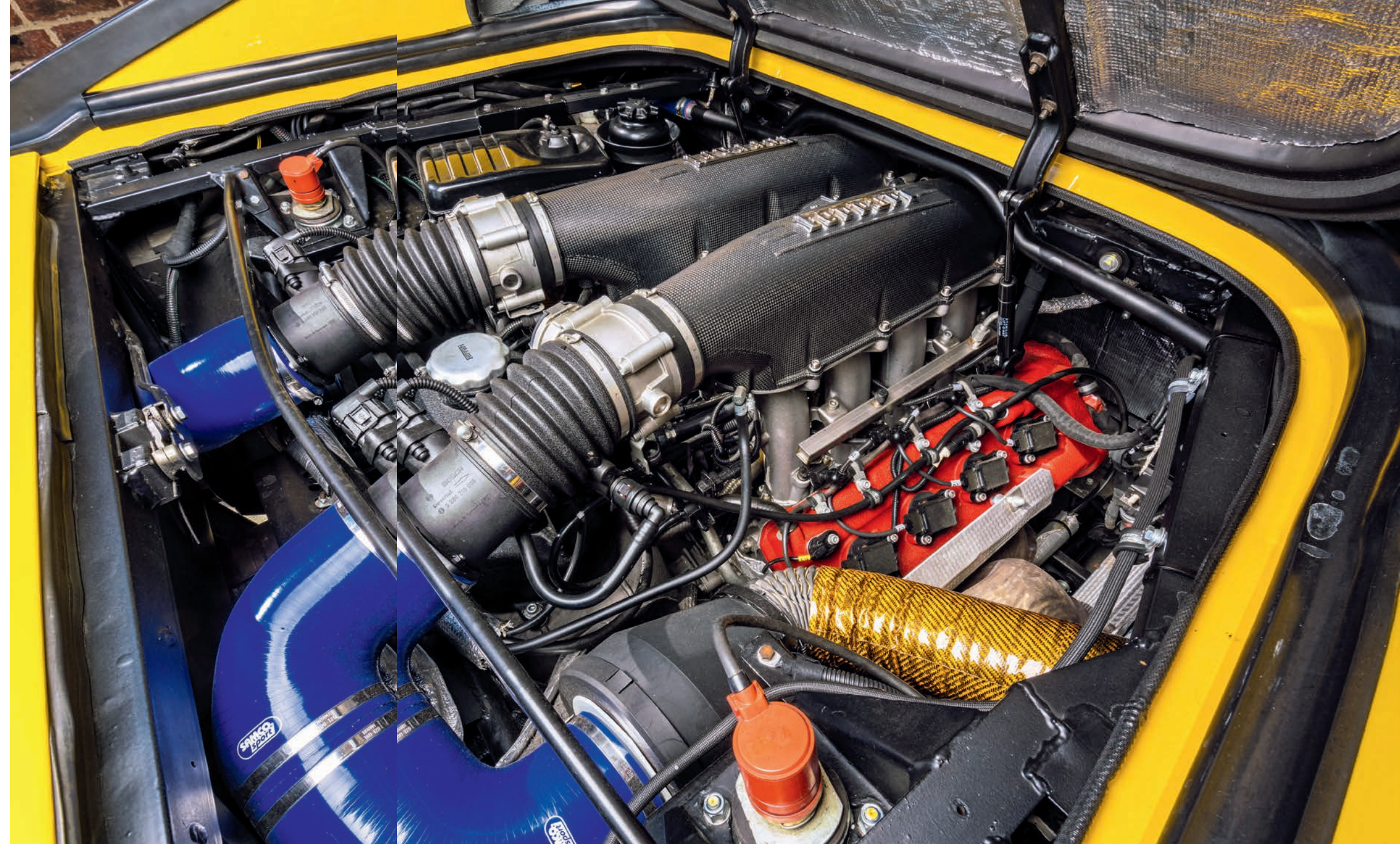
downdraught Webers, and took not at all kindly to the indignities of Bosch K-Jetronic mechanical fuel injection. It produced just 214bhp and that's if you were lucky enough to buy one in Europe. In the US, stricter emissions legislation knocked that back to 205bhp. The immensely influential and respected *Road & Track* magazine tested one such car in 1981 and could not coax it to 60mph in less than 9.4sec, making it by a comfortable margin the slowest car to wear a Ferrari badge for which I have ever seen independent, authoritative figures. And that's the kind of ignominy from which any alleged performance car is going to struggle to recover.

And yet by the time I started driving Mondials for professional purposes and drove not only rival cars but also other Ferraris from the same era, something else became clear to me: Mondials handle beautifully. History has been as kind to the 308 and 328 as it has been horrid to the Mondial, but the truth is the ugly 2+2 was far, far nicer to drive on the limit, and compared with a 348... well there's really no comparison to make. Likewise you really wouldn't want to go prodding about beyond the adhesion limits of a Testarossa, but a properly set up Mondial could be slung out of line pretty much with impunity. Something in the way they were configured, almost certainly rooted in the unfashionably long wheelbase required to house all that metal and flesh, just worked. The strange but, to me, incontrovertible truth is that if you wanted to buy a better-handling new Ferrari in the late 1980s, you needed to get yourself an F40.

But that power problem remained. Now as then, if you buy a Mondial it will be either under-engined or over-chassisised, depending upon your perspective. Unless... unless you buy this one.

This is a Mondial like no other. It started life as an everyday, common-or-garden Mondial t, a fact born out by not only its badging but the upright side-strakes that fed air to its engine. The strakes of earlier cars were mounted at a rather more louche and attractive angle, not that I'm any kind of Mondial-geek, you understand. It was owned by a chap who was not only a very good customer of DK Engineering but a rather tall one too, hence his choice of Ferrari's most practical chariot.

In the early part of this century he asked them to prepare it for some gentle trackwork, so the rear seats



'An F40 motor was considered... but an even more powerful solution was found'



Above and left 4.3-litre V8 from 430 Challenge car is a snug fit, and boot space had to be reduced to accommodate the exhaust system, but the conversion (by DK Engineering) is beautifully done and brilliantly effective. Twin, wider-bore tailpipes (where a Mondial would have four smaller pipes) is one of the visual clues to what lies inside

From the top Sparco race seats – and a half-cage where the rear seats used to be; digital instruments from the race car, and paddles for the semi-auto transmission; wheels from a 575M, ignition cut-out switch and plumbed-in fire extinguisher controls. Opposite: Frankel savours a Mondial like no other



were replaced by a half-rollcage, a fire extinguisher plumbed in, and both the brakes and suspension from an F355 fitted. The car also had a very rare Valeo clutch that retained the usual five-speed gearbox and exposed H-pattern shift, but only required two pedals in the footwell. It would have been interesting to try because I never managed to in period. Naturally these modifications would have played very well to the car's extant strengths though not, I imagine, without exposing still more ruthlessly its inherent weakness, namely an inability to get out of its own way in a straight line.

Even so the customer was clearly happy, at least for a while, for it took more than a decade for him to return it to DK with a request that it be given a bit more power. Okay, a *lot* more power.

Briefly an F40 motor was considered and I'd have driven a long way to see what that was like to drive. But in the end a more modern and, as it turned out, even more powerful solution was found. Which was to buy an F430 Challenge race car. Not just the engine, the whole car. From this, the entire powertrain was removed and, with some pushing and pulling, installed in the back of the Mondial. As you'd expect of DK, it's a deftly done job, the only compromise to practicality being a reduction in boot volume to accommodate the race car's exhaust system. What happened to the rest of the F430 I cannot say, though I nurse this rather fond hope that somewhere out there lurks a Ferrari Challenge car wheezing its way around racetracks powered by a Mondial t engine.

The resulting Frankenrrari looks remarkably normal from a distance. You'll have noticed the 18in wheels from a 575 (clad in fresh-looking 235/40 and 255/40 section Yokohamas) but have you clocked also those two fat pipes at the back, replacing the four smaller items with which the car would have been fitted from new?

Inside is rather more different and not just because of the cage, Sparco race seats and small suede-covered Sparco steering wheel. All the instruments have gone, too, replaced by the digital dashboard of the race car. I'd have preferred to keep the old clocks because to me they are so redolent of the era, but they'd have been a nightmare to integrate into the new operating system. But most of the centre console survives, albeit joined by a cut-out key, a starter button and various other switches, the only important one being that which turns off the traction control. The transmission is now that of the race car, which means a six-speed robotised manual operated in the usual way via steering column-mounted paddles.

Rarely have I got into a car and known less what to expect. This is not a car you can research and the fact that I have in my time driven both a Mondial t and F430 Challenge appears to help not at all, because I simply cannot conceive what one fitted with the 483bhp engine from the other will be like.

Amazingly civilised is the answer. It fires with a cultured bark and settles down to an even idle. It should be remembered that the Challenge engine and the street car motor were identical units and, sitting further away from you, cradled by a rear subframe redesigned by DK to take it, you could quite easily kid yourself that this was the engine with which the Mondial was fitted from the start.

The dancing LEDs on the dash tell a somewhat different story, not least because the red line comes at 8500rpm, a speed at which any normal Mondial engine would probably have unstitched itself. So I tug the right-hand paddle, release the fly-off handbrake and nudge the throttle. The Mondial, or what's left of it, eases away smoothly.



'Rarely have I got into a car and known less what to expect'

‘The car now has a near-perfect balance of power and grip’

Above
Not quite a Q-car with its upsized alloys and retina-scorching paint job, but still capable of surprising many a modern supercar driver

Traffic is quite heavy at first and there's time to reacquaint myself with Ferrari's semi-automatic gearbox and remind myself why I didn't much like it when new. Compared with a modern double-clutch transmission, it is rather slow-witted and in need of a little management in the form of lifting off the power between upshifts if you want them to be smooth, blipping the throttle yourself when changing down and just being a little patient. You soon get used to it.

And then the road clears and it's time to put all that theory into practice. Second gear, foot down and go. Suddenly this Mondial is doing things no other Mondial has done before, such as lungeing at the horizon. I'm not sure why I should be surprised: F430s were timed at under 4sec to 60mph and this Mondial won't be much heavier, but briefly it seems bizarrely and then rather wonderfully incongruous. The temptation to bounce it off its limiter and throw gear after gear at it is strong. I wonder also what it would do flat-out: F430s were good for over 190mph but what Mondial aerodynamics would have to say about that is another matter. But it would certainly go past 170mph, beyond which, my guess is, few would want to stray.

But what I really wanted to know is how the Mondial's always excellent chassis, sensitively uprated, would cope with more than double the power of my dad's old QV. And

the answer is quite beautifully: it could so easily have been a well-meaning mess, initially fun but ultimately frustrating. It is anything but: with the uprated suspension, bigger brakes, wheels and tyres, the Mondial copes with 483bhp as if it were born that way. The car is beautifully damped, rides firmly but never harshly, and preserves the original's lovely behaviour as the limit approaches. Understeer is vestigial and eliminated with the smallest lift of the throttle, whereafter any kind of reapplication of the power will let it flow into that languid neutrality I remember. I expect it would drift until you'd incinerated the Yokos, but not on these roads and not in someone else's car. It is, in short, an unexpected and startlingly capable delight.

Of course the car remains a curio, as any two-seat Mondial must, but its charm is real and considerable. I'd thought 483bhp would be too much for it, but with the chassis development work it's received the car now has a near-perfect balance of power and grip, something I've never felt inclined to say about any Mondial until now. All I'd change in the gearbox: the F430 was the last Ferrari V8 to be fitted with manual gears and though such cars are rare, they are out there. Even as it is, the F430-powered Mondial is a treat. It may have taken 30 years, but finally the Mondial chassis has a powertrain worthy of its ability. To someone, somewhere, that has to mean something. **E**