



Mick Walsh

FROM THE COCKPIT

I often play the same game with friends at auctions or art galleries – if money was no object, what would you take home? It's a fun challenge that's guaranteed to focus interest in the subject. I've always had a soft spot for early De Tomaso Panteras – particularly before huge wheelarches and wings spoilt Tom Tjaarda's styling in its purest form, while their tough 5.7-litre Cleveland V8 offered supercar performance without the worry of big bills.

Ex-Lamborghini designer Gian Paolo Dallara was responsible for engineering the new monocoque and even hero Mike Parkes had a hand in the Gp4 racers before he moved on to the Lancia Stratos. If you can't have a GT40, this is the next-best option. Critics dismiss it as an Italian kit car, but for me it's a must-have in that dream V8 set with a Cobra 289 and a GT350 Mustang.

When *Historics* at Brooklands' latest auction catalogue arrived in the office, lot 282 had me transfixed. Few colours suit the Pantera better than metallic blaze orange, and I looked carefully for any assets that I could quickly sell to fund this low-mileage Californian import.

At the earliest opportunity, I was over at Mercedes-Benz World for the preview day – and even dragged buddy and expert mechanic Colin Mullan along to check it over. Few people have more experience with V8s than the former drag racer and Monteverdi 375L owner. "I worked on a friend's Pantera once, and the test drive nearly killed me," he recalled. "At the first corner it just ploughed on. It felt as if I was on ice." So he clearly wasn't keen to look at another.

The Pantera was positioned on the first floor in the immaculate confines of the showcase dealership, where *Historics*' specialist Stewart Banks reported strong interest in the dazzling left-hooker. But there was no chance of even starting it, let alone a short drive. Other than its 2013 import to the UK as a project, there were few specific details about the rebuild by a Surrey-based serial Pantera restorer who I later discovered had five in his garage, although

specification possibly verifying the mileage of just 19,343. The recent repaint was reacting in places, while upgrades included a new aluminium rad and a full retrim. Yet without a test, there was no chance of checking the expensive ZF transmission. Even with a torch, I couldn't really assess much of the underside or suspension.

"It looks a straight car," observed Mullan, but specialists maintain that it's key to inspect any Pantera on a ramp for the critical rust areas.

"I took one to 125mph and that was enough," recalled designer Tom Tjaarda. "My heart was in my mouth!"

The crisp lines of the early cars have always seduced me, and Tjaarda once related at a concours that American football players were an influence. "Mid-engined cars disturbed me because you couldn't really tell where the engine was," he said. "I wanted a simple clean nose with all the intakes at the back to give it a big muscular look. One car was windtunnel-tested, but the front gets light at 150mph. I took one to 125mph and that was enough. My heart was in my mouth!"

I've yet to drive a Pantera, but the experience appears to be mixed – right back to the original magazine articles. One of the first was by Belgian Grand Prix ace and 1960 Le Mans victor Paul Frère, who collected a prototype with wild two-tone hammock-style seats from the Ghia factory in early 1971. Minor irritations included lifting wiper blades at 125mph and the need for extra spotlights to flash at slower cars, but Frère found the De Tomaso to be utterly stable, including through the fast S-curve on the Torino-Ivrea *autostrada*. "It took it flat with lots to spare even though this was faster than I'd ever taken it before," he reported. Several stops from high speeds thankfully proved that the brakes were superb, too.

Frère was less happy on winding mountain roads because the car understeered excessively, which he put down to a heavily pre-loaded limited-slip diff. Gear ratios that were too closely stacked with a short

155mph with the later transmission) were other criticisms, but overall the De Tomaso impressed.

Ford instantly fell for the Pantera and sold it via its Lincoln-Mercury dealers, but soon realised that it had myriad faults – leaking fuel tanks, failed sensors and weak suspension mounts. The man tasked with sorting it was legendary race-team boss Bill Stroppe, who even tracked down the dozen people who'd bought Panteras before the problems had come to light. He turned up in person and did the work on the owners' drives!

That just adds to the mystique of the Pantera for me and I still can't get that orange beauty out of my mind. I feel really quite envious of the lucky French buyer who snapped it up unseen for £57,120. Just imagine it burbling through Paris on a Saturday night... CLASSIC



Stunning low-mileage '74 GT5 wowed Walsh at *Historics*

