



The Lamborghini tamer. From Bob Wallace to Giorgio Sanna via Valentino Balboni: how the work of the test driver has changed over the last 50 years at the House of the Bull.

There is no shadow of a doubt that, in the collective imagination, being a “Lamborghini tamer” is one of the world’s most appealing jobs. It isn’t just a question of passing the time driving great cars, but also of helping create them alongside their designers, working with them to develop the immediately identifiable features that have kept the flag of the “House of the Bull” flying high for the last 50 years.

Giorgio Sanna arrived in Sant’Agata Bolognese in 2001 as one of the leading members, with Mario Fasanetto, of the House of the Bull’s test team. That same year the new position of test driver was created. Directly involved in the car development process, the test drivers of the new millennium have the task of documenting their driving experience to provide prompt feedback for the engineers involved in the development of prototypes. This requires experience, great skill and the ability to follow test programmes and report on their outcome with precision.

The great test drivers of the past weren’t involved in R&D and today it really does seem like such a long time ago when Bob Wallace and Valentino Balboni, in addition to their technical duties, often acted as “driving instructors” for customers anxious to learn about the handling secrets of the magnificent supercars they were in the process of buying.

It is a job that has evolved enormously over the last 50 years, but one which is still characterised by the untamed passion aroused by the unmistakable roar of a Lambo.

In 1962 engine mechanic Bob Wallace was so attracted by the possibility of working for the company that he set out on the interminable journey by ship from New Zealand, drawn to the homeland of racing cars and engines. He



arrived in Emilia Romagna before his twentieth birthday and a year later became the youngest test driver in the Sant'Agata team.

He was given the task of test driving the first supercars produced by the company and encountered a multitude of difficulties as he drove them at high speed on the nearby motorway or along a straight section of via Modena, with a temporary licence plate attached to the back of these cars with their amazing throaty roar.

They say that if the car didn't melt down, explode or take off, the test drive could be considered a success and the model was ready to enter production.

This young enthusiast, who stood more than six feet tall, was given the task of taming the 350 GT, the first mass produced Lambo, and then the 400 GT. But most importantly Wallace contributed to the Miura's entire development process, from start to finish.

And in 1970 it was with the Miura that Wallace embarked on an interesting personal project known as the Jota: a version of the car specially prepared for racing. The only example ever manufactured was destroyed in an accident in 1972.

Wallace was also responsible for testing the other fabulous GTs, including the Countach, which enthusiastic customers hurried to order when it was presented at the Geneva Motor Show in 1971, without realising that they would have to wait a full three years for delivery.

This was because the Countach was subjected to two years of testing by "big foot" Bob and a young new recruit called Valentino Balboni.



Bob Wallace left the Sant'Agata Bolognese company at the same time as Ferruccio Lamborghini, after which he set off for the USA and bought a ranch in Phoenix (Arizona) called, believe it or not, COUNTACH RANCH, where he still lives today.

Valentino Balboni began working for Lamborghini almost by chance. When he was 19, he was walking past the Sant'Agata Bolognese factory while a car carrier was unloading some Miura chassis that had just arrived from coach-builder Bertone. He saw everyone rushing about and offered to lend a hand. After finishing, he asked the other workers about the possibility of a job and sent a letter to the management office. A week later he was an apprentice mechanic at the House of the Bull. Not long afterwards he was noticed by Ferruccio and Bob Wallace who, after eight months of training, gave him his big break. During the legendary years when the Countach was under development, the roads around Sant'Agata Bolognese were nicknamed "Balboni Highway" in honour of the test driver's prowess.

From 1973 to 2008 Balboni was the "Lambo whisperer" who tested every Lamborghini prototype and numerous production vehicles. It is rumoured that some customers sent their Lamborghini to the factory exclusively for it to be tested by Balboni. "They were cars that had to be tamed by people who loved driving, and the test driver played a key role in establishing the right compromise between sportiness and comfort", Valentino says, remembering the period. With the passing years, the job of sports car test driver has gradually changed. As a result of the increasing complexity of cars and a more instinctive approach to driving, a background in theory has become essential.

The Diablo was the first car for which Balboni acted as development test driver, working in close contact with the company's engineers, and was followed by the LM002 off-road and the Murciélago.

If today's test drivers were to report that during a test drive the car was about to take off at high speed, their heads of design certainly wouldn't shrug their



shoulders as apparently was the case with the first Miuras in the 1970s. With one of today's Lambos you can't go far wrong. At most you might misjudge the braking distance, because despite the huge Brembo steel brakes, it's easy to underestimate the unbelievable acceleration of a Gallardo on the straight.

The huge improvements in terms of reliability are ensured by the cars' development engineers, who in Lamborghini today are a perfect combination of young managers and test drivers, and who work a few years "ahead of the curve" on the new models and prototypes being considered by the manufacturer.