**Ferrari 360 GT**

In the early 1990s, Ferrari’s sales were lagging, particularly for its “entry-level” 348 line. To boost interest in the midengine two-seater, Ferrari launched its popular “Challenge” Series, one of which was the Ferrari 360 GT.

Production 348s were given a slight massage, then pitted against one another in a series of races, often on major tracks in support of top-flight pro events. The racing was highly competitive and the series proved so popular with Ferrari’s clientele that the tradition continued with the 348’s successors, the Ferrari F355 and 360 Mondial.

In 2000, the year after the Ferrari 360 was introduced, several 360 Challenge cars found their way into the FIA GT Championship. The Ferrari 360 Challenge was in essence a road car, but with fewer amenities to lighten weight, with grippier tires, and different wheels and brakes. The 3.6-liter V-8 was not significantly altered, but racing shock absorbers replaced the road car’s electronic suspension control, and ride height was lowered with racing springs and aluminum bushings. Several Ferrari 360 Challenges, prepared and raced by outside firms, finished GT Championship races in the top-10 in class.

This led to creation of the Ferrari 360 GT. Done in conjunction with Ferrari tuner Michelotto, the Ferrari 360 GT was some 200 pounds lighter than the 360 Challenge. It got further suspension upgrades, massive Brembo brakes, and a large rear wing. The 3.6-liter V-8 was boosted slightly to 430 horsepower, and used the available six-speed sequential gearbox. It scored multiple class wins in the FIA’s N-GT class in 2002 and 2003. Another highlight was a second overall placing at the 24 Hours of Daytona in 2003.

In 2004, Ferrari introduced the 360 GTC, also done in collaboration with Michelotto. Like the Ferrari 360 GT, the Ferrari GTC weighed 2,425 pounds -- the minimum allowed by class rules -- but was an even more-aggressive machine. The GTC used the basic, mildly race-prepped bodywork of the Ferrari 360 Challenge Stradale, but added a new, large rear-mounted wing, giving the GTC a different appearance from the 360 GT.

Steel disc brakes were fitted, the front with six-piston calipers, the rears with four-piston calipers. The 3.6-liter V-8 made 445 horsepower at 8,750 rpm, thanks in large part to new Magneti Marelli electronics. The car garnered a class victory at the Czech Republic’s Brno raceway in 2004.

The arrival of the Ferrari F430 implied a new GTC, but getting it sorted took most of 2005 for tuner Michelotto and Ferrari’s Corsa Clienti engineers. Meantime, Ferrari 360 GTCs continued to race and win in the FIA GT2 series, but Ferrari had to settle for second place (behind Porsche) in that year’s manufacturer’s standings.

Incidentally, the Prancing Horse was also runner-up in GT1 competition (bowing to Maserati). But this and stiffer competition for the 550/575 racers likely prompted Ferrari to withdraw from the class after 2005 -- at least for the time being.

The Ferrari F430 GTC finally took to the track in early 2006. Aside from a taller rear wing, it looked like simply an updated 360 GTC -- which it basically was. But there was one key difference: a special 4.0-liter V-8 (various postings on the FIA website quoted exact displacement as 3998.6cc).

This engine was apparently derived from the production 4.3-liter unit also used in the F430 Challenge car, but Ferrari was tight-lipped about specifications. Horsepower was also undisclosed, but was likely greater than the production engine’s. Weight was again stated as 2425 pounds, still minimum allowed, but the new GTC did benefit from several features developed for the latest Challenge car.

Chief among these were a quicker-shifting transmission based Formula One experience; new 19-inch Pirelli racing slicks; a new quick-release steering wheel with fingertip controls for telemetry and driver-adjustable onboard systems; new-design center-lock wheels; and built-in pneumatic jacks to speed tire changes.

Ferrari announced that “more than 15” GT2-spec Ferrari 430 GTCs would be built for the 2006 season, with entries slated for the American LeMans Series (ALMS) as well as the several European GT2 series. Results were impressive on both continents. Team Risi Competizione won five of 10 ALMS races to clinch the GT2 team title. AF Corse did likewise in Europe, where Jaime Melo, Jr. won the driver’s championship. Early results in 2007 suggest the 430 GTC will remain a force to reckon with for several seasons to come.

In racing, Ferrari’s focus had for some years clearly been on Formula 1. But thanks to a cooperative effort between factory-affiliated engineers and tuners, and a legion of always-enthusiastic competition-oriented Ferrari owners, Cavallino sports cars were once again an exciting presence on the world’s premier race courses.