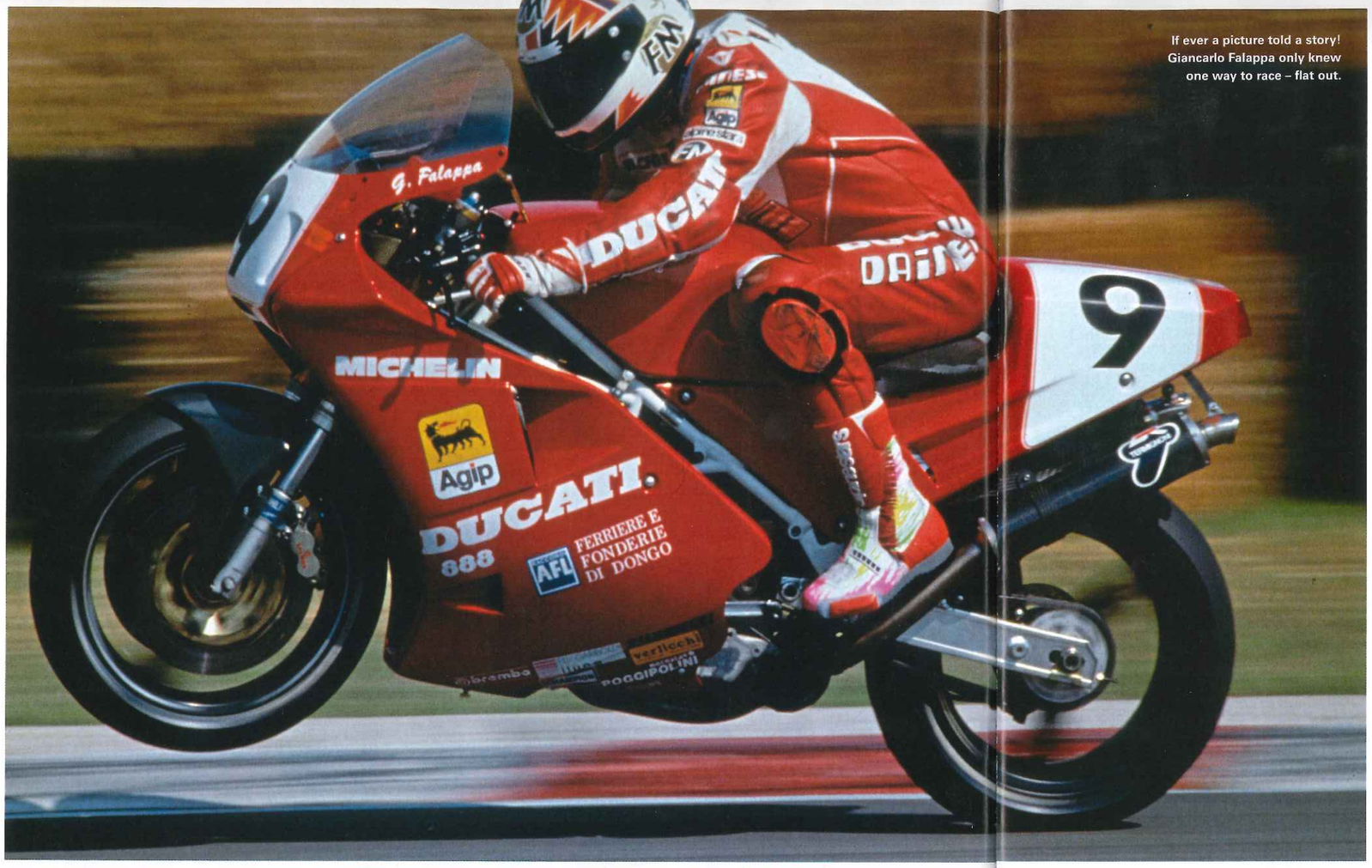
Giancarlo Falappa

IL LEONE OF SUPERBIKE

Giancarlo Falappa was alternatively considered fearless, immensely talented, or barking mad, depending upon who and when you asked. What is consistent is that he had great respect from within his teams, and off the track was one of the most loved personalities in the SBK pitlane. He is "Il Leone" ... the Lion of Superbike.

Words: Norm DeWitt **Photographs:** Ducati, WSB Archives, and Mark Wernham Collection part of Mortons Archive.



If ever a picture told a story! Giancarlo Falappa only knew one way to race – flat out.

FALAPPA SOON MOVED FROM BEING THE TALK OF THE PADDOCK (BOTH GOOD AND BAD) TO AN INTERNATIONAL SENSATION.

Falappa was first to make his impression in motocross, as he explains, "I come from motocross, I win the Italian Championship in 1981, in 125 and 250, riding the Moto Villa. In 1982/83 I raced for them in the 250 world championships but no more because Moto Villa did not have that much money. I stopped racing."

Giancarlo eventually found his way to road racing bikes. "In 1988, I won four races with the Suzuki and races with the Bimota YB4 and won the Italian Championship with Bimota in 1988. It was similar to the bikes of Ferrari and Tardozzi the year before, Virginio won it, world champions in Formula 1."

Davide Tardozzi takes up the story: "First time I'd seen him was a private test at Misano, when he was a younger guy moving from off-road to a street bike. He was running in the Italian Championship for Superbike, back when I was with Bimota in 1988. He had a very old Suzuki road bike he was running, and it showed immediately that he had a huge potential. I know that he raced for Moto-Villa. Francisco Villa gave him some bikes."

In 1988 the Bimota team challenged for the World Superbike Championship, with Tardozzi and Mertens both being contenders right to the final round in New Zealand. Although Oscar Rumi's RC30 with American Fred Merkel was to win that first World Superbike title, on fast circuits the Bimotas were the class of the field. For 1989 there was a rider shakeup at Bimota, with both Tardozzi and Mertens off the team. The new riders were comparative unknowns; the new Italian champion Giancarlo Falappa and Fabio Biliotti.

At round one Falappa was on the factory Bimota for his first international race, in England. Race one at Donington saw Giancarlo battling with the leaders until it came undone when he tangled with a lapped bike. It would not be an exaggeration to say he frightened many of the competitors with his unconventional motocross riding style and aggression.

Falappa soon moved from being the talk of the paddock (both good and bad), to an international sensation when he won the second race later that day. Giancarlo reflects: "In 1989, my first race in the world championship, I won in Donington Park. I was not surprised because I knew it was possible to win. I raced only for winning."

Round three in Canada again saw Giancarlo take a win in race two, in France he was fifth, and he gained another win in one of the more incredible tales in recent years, as Tardozzi explains. "He was so talented that he was doing something over the top; how he was riding was incredible. One of the main was Le Castellet (Paul Ricard) in 1989 while he broke the left handlebar and finished the race while holding the tube of the front fork and riding with just the right handlebar."

The series moved to Sugo, Japan. In race one Giancarlo took fourth, but in race two it was a battle royale with future champion (and Sugo race one winner) Doug Polen. Doug remembers the race well. "The other riders were saying 'Oh man... this guy's gonna beat you no matter what. He's gonna keep on you because he came from motocross and he doesn't care about bashing into people.'

"I'm going racing with this guy, going back 'n' forth for 25 laps at Sugo. I'm thinking 'this might not work out too good for me.' There I was, right in the middle of it. As it turned out, the race was really good and he ended up pulling away enough that we didn't have to battle it out like that. He ended up third and I was fourth. It worked out just fine. He rode hard but didn't slam into the side of me and stuff like that."

Leoni and Bracconi were the Bimota team mechanics, often known collectively as 'Bruno and Bracco'. Bracconi reflects: "There are a lot of stories about him but the most important thing is that he was a rider with a lot of passion and heart, and he always respected the team and the mechanics."

Mid-season Bimota had replaced Biliotti with American Mike Baldwin, but it wasn't enough. Bimota did not stay the course and despite Falappa's second place in Germany, the team chose not to contest the final two rounds in Australia and New Zealand. Giancarlo slipped from fifth to sixth in the final point standings. Falappa explains: "Bimota did not race in Australia or New Zealand because they did not have the money to go to those races in 1989."

Giving some idea of the respect for the heart that Falappa had shown with his racing, he became known as 'Il Leone'.

Giancarlo nata per correre

Giancarlo Falappa
vita nel mondiale

DUCATI BOUND

For 1990, Giancarlo moved over to Ducati, riding as teammate to Raymond Roche, the Ducati factory team being run by Marco Lucchinelli. Falappa's previous two years at Bimota held a special place for all concerned, which Giuseppe Morri (one of the three founders of Bimota) relates: "In the following months it happened that Falappa, travelling along the A1 motorway, close to the headquarters of Bimota, stopped his bike or car on the hard shoulder, then climbed over the networks and was in the company for a quick chat."

Davide Tardozzi was no longer riding his privateer Bimota; he was now riding the factory development Ducati. It could be that Davide's firing by Bimota at the end of 1988 was providential; being cut loose before it went downhill had given him time to explore other opportunities. Davide has spent almost his entire subsequent career at Ducati, where he is currently with the Moto GP programme.

Roche was to win the first two races, and then took second to Merkel at Donington in race one. Race two saw a last lap pass of Roche by teammate Falappa, repeating his stunning upset of the year before, to Roche's chagrin.

Steve McLaughlin, WSB's founding father, looks back. "When we had the Superbike race at Hockenheim, my partner and I were there as promoters. One of the things we did was to have an autograph session. We had this tent and it was so intense, that we actually had to get them out the back of the tent and get the police.

The Germans were pushing in; they were so impressed to see Falappa. Giancarlo was a special guy, he was just an animal... he had so much courage on the bike. It was all Giancarlo. He wasn't a big talker, it's not that he was the best looking guy, but he had that magnetic personality." Roche was very different from Falappa, as Giancarlo recalls: "Raymond Roche – good rider, but not very good people, not a very good man, too much 'wah wah wah wah' to like."

For most of the next few events, Roche held the advantage, and then the series headed to Canada. Davide explains, "Giancarlo had a huge crash in Mosport, Canada breaking his hand and missing the following US round. Soon after he had another in Zeltweg, which was a consequence of the previous crash in Mosport. The concussion was so hard, I never seen another guy like him. He would jump on the bike and do something incredible."

The crash at Austria was grisly, a huge shunt in qualifying as Falappa tried desperately to take pole position over Mertens in his comeback race. He was essentially shattered: femurs, shoulder, wrist (again), and his life may have been saved by Tardozzi stopping and helping to undo Falappa's helmet strap, which looked to be suffocating him. Davide did what little he could do, until the medical staff arrived.

Falappa's season was over, and in the end, teammate Roche had won the 1990 World Superbike title. Giancarlo's comeback race was a non-championship race at season's end in Mexico City, which defied all the odds. Falappa explains his return: "First race back was Mexico City. I wanted to come back to race, but the medical told me it was better to stop for two years. At the hospital in Zeltweg the doctor told me it was better if you stop racing but if you want to come back.... maybe 1993. I went to Spain for new operations, and I raced in 1991 and 1992."

Defying all the odds, and advice, Giancarlo was back on the factory Ducati. He struggled throughout 1991 to find his previous pace. Highlights were a number of sixths, a single podium in race two at Hockenheim, with third and fastest lap in race two at Mugello, near the end of the season. It was a lost season as he watched Eraldo Ferracci's Doug Polen have the most dominant World Superbike season in history, on a similar Ducati.

For 1992, World Superbike champion Doug Polen now had Falappa as a teammate, as Polen and the Fast by Ferracci bike were brought into the factory team effort rather than their previous stand-alone team within the Ducati factory. Polen and Falappa got on great with Doug, saying: "We were best friends, man", and Giancarlo agreeing, "Doug Polen was my best teammate."

Ducati had a new team manager, Franco Uncini. That was never the plan, as it was just going to be Franco and Falappa working together as manager and rider, as Uncini explains: "Falappa was my rider and Polen was with Ferracci. First of all, I met Falappa because he called me; I had never met him before.

"He said 'I call you because I know how to ride a bike, how to prepare myself to ride the bike, but I do not know anything about how to manage a rider. So I need your help to keep going as a professional rider. This was in 1992, then we went to Ducati together and I spoke with the Castiglioni brothers. say, I would like to help Giancarlo and would like to make a proper team for him.

"Can you help him and furnish a works bike for him? They said they would come back to me. I went again to Bologna and they say 'Ok, Franco. We can give you the bike and maybe one or two mechanics from Ducati. But then we started to think... Franco, we have so many teams inside Ducati, can you also take Polen and Ferracci?'

"I was surprised as I start to make a team and you give me a bike for Falappa and I am happy. Then you give me a world champion (Polen)... I was a little bit confused. This was the beginning of March and the first race was the beginning of April in Albacete. So, I did it. Police was my sponsor, as I got Falappa, Ducati, and the big sponsor Police."

Giancarlo approved: "Yes, he is a good manager; Franco Uncini is a very good man, good people. I had big problems with my condition." Falappa had pole in the first race of 1992, at Albacete. He followed that with poles at Spa, Johor, and Manfield. More impressive was his sweep of both races at Zeltweg, Austria, the track that had nearly cost him his career.

Across the decades, some of the greatest racers hadn't much talent for the art of setting up a racing machine; Mike Hailwood was one example. Giancarlo Falappa was another of those, and was indeed fortunate to find himself with such development talent as Davide Tardozzi and Doug Polen for teammates, two of the best in the business.

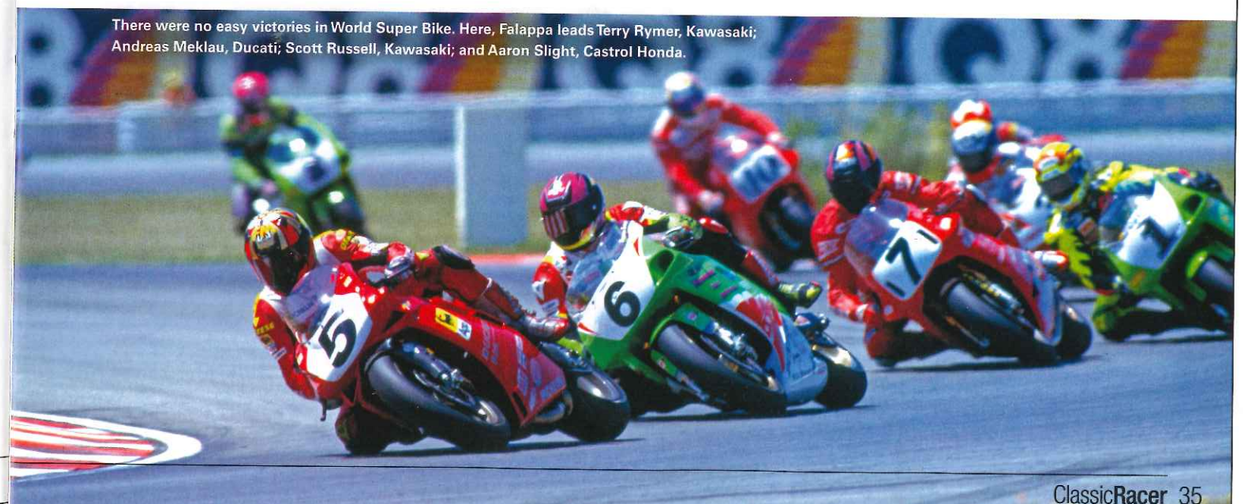
Tardozzi remembers well: "He understood absolutely nothing about bikes. He knew where the seat was, where the handlebar was, and where the throttle was, that's the only thing he knows about the bike. Now, if the rider doesn't know about bikes, there is the telemetry and the engineers can see most everything.

"Then it was difficult for his crew to help him and the easier thing was to take the set-up from somebody else with a bit harder springs on the front and back because he was very hard on the brakes and got onto the gas in a very hard way. He was so, so aggressive. He doesn't care; the bike is a bit longer, shorter, higher, lower, he doesn't know."

Despite all the disadvantages in not understanding the physics and set-up involved, Falappa fought on as Franco Uncini recalls: "He was really fantastic, very fast and at some races he was unbelievable. In the rain, Christian Sarron was unbelievable, but the next best was Falappa.

"We had a very good season, but the only problem was Falappa was a little bit jealous as Doug Polen was winning. As a man and as a rider, you'd go to Polen and ask him what he thinks about the bike. He'd say 'let me think a little bit, finalise everything, and then get back to you'. He'd come back after a half an hour and say 'suspension like this, tyres like this' he'd go out and then go a second faster. Giancarlo was with passion, but not with the experience to develop the bike for a proper set-up. He was always going around to Roche and Tardozzi copying their choices, making a mix and making confusion many times."

Despite all this going on behind the scenes, after winning race two in Holland, Giancarlo was tied for third in points. Winning the final race of the season gave Falappa fourth for the season, and he was well and truly back to full strength. His teammate Polen was again World Superbike champion.



There were no easy victories in World Super Bike. Here, Falappa leads Terry Rymer, Kawasaki; Andreas Meklau, Ducati; Scott Russell, Kawasaki; and Aaron Slight, Castrol Honda.

Giancarlo is still ever present at World Super Bike races and here he hands out the silverware to Davide Giugliano, right, and Tom Sykes.

NEW TEAM STRUCTURE

The following year was to see another shake-up in Ducati team management as Uncini was now gone and Raymond Roche was running the team. Polen was off to race in America and the new teammate was Carl Fogarty.

Giancarlo continued to show his talent with authority in the races at round one at Brands Hatch, ironically the Ireland round, and at Misano, in the San Marino round. All four races were swept by Falappa; it was total dominance as Tardozzi reflects: "Where he was so much faster than the others was in the wet. In the wet he overtook up to fifth and said it was because he was not pushing. 'I can go faster he said'."

Ernesto Marinelli, now Ducati's World Superbike team manager, has fond memories of Falappa: "Arh, Giancarlo, the Lion of Superbike! He lapped up to fifth place at Misano in the race; it's not something you see many times. In the rain he was the strongest rider I've ever seen." Giancarlo had dominated both races and set the fastest lap in each as well, also repeating this feat at Brands Hatch.

The unknown truth was it had to do with injuries previously suffered by Falappa, which were masked by the wet-weather conditions, as Giancarlo explains: "Racing in the rain... too easy. Often after 1990 I had a problem with my left hand. In the rain I had no physical problem and could go very fast. When it was dry I had a big problem with it; I don't have a muscle on my left hand."

IN THE END THE SEASON TURNED INTO A GRUDGE MATCH BETWEEN CARL FOGARTY AND SCOTT RUSSELL.

Combined with his first in race one and third in race two at round two in Germany, heading to Austria, Falappa was leading the World Championship. After winning race two in Austria, including the final race of 1992, Giancarlo had now won seven of the last 11 races and was the man to beat. In the end, the season turned into a grudge match between Carl Fogarty and Scott Russell. Falappa faded to fifth in points, as in the final 16 races he only had three podiums, only one of those a win in race two at Monza.

Ernesto Marinelli tries to explain Il Leone's technique: "I've seen many styles on a motorcycle. If a rider comes from a pure road racing world, 125/250, he will have a very clean way. A rider from the motocross side is more likely to use the rear brake a lot and have a sliding entry with the bike. Giancarlo was one of the wild ones; you never knew what he was going to do.

"When you have a rider with this kind of talent, it is something you want to take care of quite carefully. Then of course there are days that will make you upset, and days that will make you really proud... the good and the bad. I was in university when there was also Fogarty and so on. The races were unbelievable. It was the beginning for the Golden Age of Superbike."

1994 brought yet another team manager to Ducati, this time Virginio Ferrari, and Falappa was again teamed with Carl Fogarty. Their latest weapon was the Ducati 916, ridden a few times in 1993; it was a timeless machine and the best Superbike in the world upon its introduction.

The year started with some promise, with two fourths in race two at both Donington and Hockenheim, followed by Misano, where Falappa took second and a win. Giancarlo was second in the World Super Bike Championship as the series headed to Albacete, Spain. In practice it all went wrong as he had the second huge crash of his racing career. It was to be his last.

Giancarlo recalls the reasons: "It was because I tested the new electric gear. After my accident in 1990, it was impossible for me to change gear with my leg. Virginio Ferrari gave me the new electric gear (shift) but it broke and I crashed. It was no problem with the Ducati engine; it was the electronics, the gear change." This resulted in a highside crash.

Giancarlo was rushed to hospital with a head injury, and it was immediately clear that he was fighting for his life. Jonathan Green was attending his first World Superbike race for the STAR network and remembers it well. "Il Leone is down. It was the first race I was covering. We had the rights for Formula One, Motorcycle Grand Prix, and World Super Bike, so I found myself doing all three.

"The first one I tipped up to was in 1994, at Albacete. Carl Fogarty was beginning to shine and we were there primarily to cover this new English sensation. At the time Falappa was still Ducati's blue eyed boy, he was the man. An impressive guy he was, he was short and stocky and aggressive as hell. He was racing almost for pride as he knew this kid (Fogarty) was coming up fast.

"He was pushing it on the first practice day and he went down. I was asked by the boss in Hong Kong to get the camera and do an update. So, my first day doing motorsport at a world championship event was sadly outside a hospital in Albacete talking about Giancarlo Falappa. He was in a coma for a long time, probably partly induced as well."

Falappa was in a coma for 38 days. Jonathan Green again. "The most impressive thing of all for me out of that entire ordeal was that he was such a great champion and was so respected. Italians do one thing, when they have a love and passion for motorsport or for a guy – they never give up on him. The way they revere the racers, it is insatiable.

NEW TEAM STRUCTURE

"Falappa still drives to most World Super Bike weekends; he's at every World Ducati weekend, still about the paddock, in the back of the garage, a part of every celebration. I find him an extraordinary figure and it is quite remarkable that Ducati and the Italians are making sure that Il Leone is still in the family."

Tardozzi confirms the Italian way of doing things. "In the end, he made too many mistakes because he was so aggressive, which is why he crashed so much and didn't win as much as his talent would have allowed him to. Giancarlo was mainly incredible in changing direction and brakes. Coming from motocross he was the strongest guy; he was the first guy who rode the bike with his physical potential. He looked like he came from motocross, how he was riding. Ducati still hires him because he IS Ducati.... he had an accident on the Ducati and in some way they give him a kind of pension."

So how is The Lion's health now? "Not so bad, I have a big problem with my ankle; maybe I need a new operation and a new ankle. For 18 years I've been driving my motorhome all over Europe. I follow the World Championship of Superbike and MotoGP too." Tardozzi confirms this: "Wherever you are with a Ducati on the track, he's on his way."

Ernesto Marinelli again: "He is still one of our historical riders that we care about, and of course he is within the family of Ducati constantly. Superbike is the racing that he loves and the races he is attached to. The only races he doesn't come to are the ones overseas. He's done I don't know how many miles each year around Europe on his camper. It's incredible, anywhere there is an event, a dealership, or anything, he's there. So many times I'm riding in a car and there is the Falappa camper going by. It is an institution."

At the end of his short, meteoric career, Giancarlo had 16 wins and eight poles. "My first race in Donington Park, I win. My last race, I win it. An incredible situation," Giancarlo says with pride.

In this world where the primary focus seems to be 'what have you done for me lately', Ducati provides a welcome exception. Ernesto Marinelli has the final word: "Giancarlo is with us no matter what we do. If we are doing a three-day test, he will be there at least one of the days. He is in the paddock with us, in the garage with us; he is in the factory at least two or three times a week. He is part of the family, the person we see every day."

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