

ABARTH BENEFIT

We test drive three exotic Abarths at Autodromo di Franciacorta

Story by Roberto Giordanelli
Photography by Michael Ward

Italy's Goodwood – the Vernasca Silver Flag Hillclimb – has grown into a significant international affair whilst maintaining an informal nature, and with no charge for spectators.

It is not ideal for entrants to transport their cars enormous distances for just one event so, because Silver Flag's featured marque last year was Abarth, top Abarth specialist Tony Berni and Perry Passini from Franzoni Auto Brescia decided to organise an Abarth trackday. The action took place four days after Silver Flag at the Autodromo di Franciacorta, with Anneliese Abarth (Carlo's widow) as the guest of honour.

Berni's trackday set a world record for the greatest number of historic Abarths lapping a race circuit in anger – ie, not posing on the startline and not in a parade. 60 turned up, with 50 lapping at speed. Interestingly, and boding well for the future, non-Abarths also entered the trackday (which has no noise limit).

The roving *Auto Italia* team was there to track test three Abarths, loaned by three generous owners: Tony Berni's 1300 OT, Tony Castle-Miller's 1000 TCR and David Robey's X1/g Prototipo.





LEFT: Tony Berni's Abarth 1300 OT's fabulous Colucci bodywork hides its humble Fiat 850 underpinnings

ABARTH 1300 OT

Between 1965 and 1967, Abarth made 50 1300 OTs for homologation purposes – and yes, it looked like a racing car. Its Marco Colucci styling was superb, and it promised to be light and powerful. But I knew that underneath its fibreglass curves lurked a Fiat 850 floorpan and components raided from a Simca parts bin, complete with an engine hanging off the tail-end. In the world of international motorsport, how could this car possibly work? How could it have been FIA GT World Champion in the 1300cc class in 1966 and 1967?

Tony Berni briefed me: "Keep it below 7000rpm, and enjoy it." A glance at the Tech Spec will reveal that 8800rpm is the race maximum of this five-bearing Simca-based motor. Clunk it into first gear (left and back on the dog-leg 'box) and away we went. The track was still soaking wet and Berni had swapped the historic Dunlop M-section tyres for modern Dunlop radials. This 60-year leap forward in tyre technology has to be taken into consideration. Dunlop Historics are cross ply tyres rightly engineered to have the grip of an ice-hockey puck and are therefore great for historic racing, while modern Dunlops are world-beaters – horses for courses...

At 150bhp and weighing just 655kg, acceleration was impressive. The 5500rpm lower limit of the narrow power band had to be observed or the motor would stutter if full throttle were to be applied too soon – typical of big carburetors on a

small-capacity short-stroke screamer. Its two plugs per cylinder certainly add sparkle to the performance! Once on song, the noise – oh, the noise – was as hard as nails with the urge of a hammer whacking them.

Wet grip was a joy; roll and dive were absent, with traction being the star of the handling department. Carlo Abarth, like his friend Ferry Porsche, believed in rear-mounted engines, the philosophy being that superior corner-exit traction delivered higher speeds down the following straights, and that this benefit outweighed the disadvantages.

While this 1300 OT can vouch for the above, it should also be borne in mind that the weight of these early Abarth (and early Porsche) engines was modest, which gave the driver a good chance of recovering from the notorious and legendary tail-wagging-the-dog syndrome of the heavy 'clockwork' Porsche 911s.

The object of a track test is to convey the experience to the reader. It is not the test driver's place to enjoy himself with unnecessary laps. However, the sure sign of a good car is just that – I stayed out longer than I should have, proof that the 1300 OT is a tremendous car. It feels and handles very much as a racing car should, and I forgot all about its road-car underpinnings and its tail-hanging motor. Amazing.

The 2011 event has already been agreed for June 30th so, at long last, it looks like Italy is going to have a regular international trackday for historic racing cars.



LEFT: In Abarth terms the 1300 OT was relatively common with 50 examples being constructed



ABARTH AT FRANCIACORTA

ABARTH X1/9 PROTOTIPO

Production Fiat X1/9s were built between 1972 and 1989, and about 200,000 were made. Originally 73bhp (1300cc) and weighing 900kg, the second series rose to 85bhp (1500cc) and 960kg. Abarth entered the scene in 1973, when it built some powerful lightweight X1/9 prototypes to match its 1.24 Abarth Spider and 1.31 Abarth rally cars. Out went the X1/9's diminutive SOHC Fiat engines, together with 200kg of surplus fat, and in went main-size, twin-cam 1.840cc, 180bhp, 16-valve Abarth motors. Body-kits, air-intakes and colour schemes were as per our test car.

Research indicates that four X1/9 Prototipos were built, making this one the fifth! A prototype Stradale was also constructed – and Bertone was tipped to build 500 of them for homologation purposes, but this never happened. According to Robey, his car is a re-shell of an X1/9 Prototipo that

crashed in Poland, killing its driver. He suggests that 70% of the mechanical components have been carried over. While I have no proof regarding this car's provenance, one has to concede that, with all other X1/9 prototypes squirreled away in private collections, this is the nearest anyone is going to get to a track test of such a machine.

Aesthetically, Robey's car is very untidy. However, as I drove off down the pitlane, the X1/9 did demonstrate that it could lap a race circuit, something that many a priceless museum-piece has failed to do. The second thing that struck me about the X1/9 was the torque-to-weight ratio. Robey's car is missing the Abarth 16-valve head and, as we all know, an eight-valve engine produces torque earlier. One could argue that this eight-valve engine should have been standard issue for the production X1/9 – it would then have had enough power to get the driver into trouble: the *raison d'être* of a sportscar.

ABOVE: David Robey's Abarth X1/9 'Prototipo' serves to demonstrate what might have been if the proposed Stradale version had been made

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

ABARTH 1300 OT CHASSIS 137/046

ENGINE: 1289cc, inline four, longitudinal rear-mounted
 BORE & STROKE: 86mm x 55mm
 FUEL SYSTEM: Two Weber 45DCOE twin-choke sidedraughts
 POWER: 150bhp @ 8800rpm
 TRANSMISSION: Five-speed manual race-box with LSD
 SUSPENSION: Double wishbones, coil-overs, anti-roll bars front & rear
 BRAKES: Solid discs all round, alloy calipers
 WHEELS: Campagnolo 7x13 & 8x13
 TYRES: Dunlop 500M x 13 & 550M x 13 (but tested with Dunlop Formula R195/60R13 & 215/50/R13)
 KERB WEIGHT: 655kg
 TOP SPEED: 153mph
 0-60MPH: 4.9sec

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

ABARTH X1/9 PROTOTIPO '23005'

ENGINE: 1840cc, inline four-cylinder, transverse
 Currently 8-valve
 BORE & STROKE: 86mm x 79.2mm
 FUEL SYSTEM: Two Weber 44DF twin-choke downdraughts
 POWER: 175bhp @ 7500rpm (originally 210bhp @ 8000rpm)
 TRANSMISSION: Five-speed manual Beta with LSD
 SUSPENSION: MacPherson struts, coil-overs, anti-roll bars front & rear
 BRAKES: Solid discs all-round, alloy calipers
 WHEELS: Cromodora 7x13
 TYRES: Michelin MXV 205/60R13
 TOP SPEED: 750kph
 110-160mph (depending on gearing & engine spec)
 4.2 to 5.6sec (depending on gearing & engine spec)
 0-60MPH:



ABOVE: Tony Castle-Miller's 1000 TCR proved that these Fiat 600-based cars are not easy to drive near the limit

The track was very wet and the controls on the X1/g Prototipo would best be described as loose. The gear-lever flopped about, the steering was vague, the brakes pulled this way and that, and there was a slight misfire. I later discovered that the tyres had been over-inflated (35psi cold) – a recipe for that zero-g chaos that comes with video games. Consequently, the car lacked feel and it understeered going into corners and oversteered

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

ABARTH 1000 TCR CHASSIS 100D 2096549

ENGINE:	982cc, inline four, longitudinal rear-mounted
BORE & STROKE:	65mm x 74mm
FUEL SYSTEM:	Two Weber 40DCOE twin-choke sidedraughts
POWER:	105bhp @ 8000rpm
TRANSMISSION:	Five-speed manual
SUSPENSION:	Double wishbones, coil-overs, anti-roll bars front & rear
BRAKES:	Solid discs all-round, alloy calipers
WHEELS:	Campagnolo 7x13 & 8x13
TYRES:	Yokohama 032R 185/60/R13 & 205/60/R13
KERB WEIGHT:	585kg
TOP SPEED:	130mph
0-60MPH:	6.2sec

coming out. But do you know what? I quite liked it. I could see through its various faults and wanted to take it home, re-engineer it, and drive it as it was meant to be.

The big-engine concept was spot-on. Road testers of the period banded on about the standard X1/g's amazing handling. But, truth be told, the stock SOHC motor was not suited to a one tonne car – it was too slow to handle badly. Robey's car demonstrated how the X1/g needed a 'big four', just as the Lancia Montecarlo needed a turbo or a small V6. Once fettled – and one day it will doubtless happen – this X1/g will be a truly fine machine, as well as a useful window on Abarth history.

ABARTH 1000 TCR

By the time I got into the 1000 TCR the track had dried out. If any cars epitomise the term Fiat Abarth, it is those based on the Fiat 600. Period race pictures show swarms of them battling for their class wins. Tony Castle-Miller is the UK's Abarth guru – Middle Barton Garage in Oxfordshire is his HQ. This is his personal car, and it has eminent and continuous race history. Still in its original

RIGHT: The colourful selection of Abarths at Franciacorta included a 2000SP, another car from the Berni Motori fleet



Group 2 spec, it produces 105bhp at 8000rpm and tips the scales at 585kg.

Pulling away from the pitlane illustrated its first idiosyncrasy: Full throttle could not be applied until at least 5500rpm – difficult, as in this case the tachometer had recently died. The narrow power band required much working of the five-speed dog 'box and, unless very lightweight modern (FIA illegal) internals are employed, its maximum rpm is an issue.

If I tried to be gentle, the car bogged down and got swallowed up by swarms of other 1000 TCRs on track. The suspension was relatively soft and the

car was running slightly higher than the 'opposition' – this enabled much kerb-hopping, essential for a quick lap. The motor, fuel tank and seat are mounted rather high. A high perch is great for visibility and control, but added to the 'sitting on the car' rather than 'sitting in the car' feeling.

One or two similar cars on track were a little quicker. Slick-shod, they ran lower to the ground; their drivers sat on the floor, hardly able to see over their steering wheels. Their engines screamed to what sounded like 9000-plus rpm – evidence of the ever-soaring pace of modern historic racing.

Meanwhile, the Castle-Miller TCR was being

BERNI MOTORI

Carlo Abarth based his company on selling performance parts to Italians who wanted to make their Fiats go faster. Eventually, Abarth's fame spread throughout the world and he began to produce his own competition cars. Fiat bought the company in 1971, and today builds fast, small cars that maintain the original concept. The cars built by Carlo Abarth, and the later Fiat rally cars, became highly prized by collectors, and a network of specialists was established to

maintain these exotic cars and manage the scarce spares resource. Welsh-born Tony Berni recognised that the original parts stock was practically non-existent, and the use of Abarth competition cars running in historic racing and hillclimbing was increasing. Re-manufacturing was the way forward, and the 'Welsh Wizard' set about developing a network of engineering contacts that could produce quality parts. Avoiding badly-made products from the Far East, Berni has gained an

international reputation for sourcing replacement parts that fit well and work perfectly.

Tony Berni arrived in Italy in 1979, having landed a job at Maranello where he worked in parts procurement for F1 cars and, because he spoke fluent Italian, undertook translation work for Il Commendatore. However, not comfortable with Ferrari politics, Berni left and, after a brief spell at Riva boats, set himself up in the Abarth parts business. However, his work at Ferrari did provide him with the necessary experience

in running an efficient parts empire, and Berni's immaculate premises at Maleo near Piacenza bear testimony to his meticulous cataloguing and research.

It is not surprising that Berni's search for original parts led him to the discovery of several complete cars, some of which he acquired and restored for his own use. Each car he owns is perfectly presented and fully functional. They appear regularly at events like Silver Flag and occasionally at UK Abarth events.

RIGHT: Tony Berni's Abarth parts emporium also houses his own collection of competition cars that he has acquired over the years





FAR LEFT: Event organisers Perry Passini and Tony Berni pose with Tony's son Brian
NEAR LEFT: Roberto Giordanelli at 'work' in the Abarth 1000 TCR

chucked about, slid and caught with great satisfaction, despite its short wheelbase. Braking was good; rather than nose dive, the tail rose. The double-wishbone front suspension really transformed this Abarth – possibly its greatest weapon in attacking lap times, the original Fiat 600 transverse leaf arrangement being laughable.

At race speeds, the 1000 TCR would spend much of each lap running on two wheels – and I just knew that, if I pushed any harder, the car would be on its roof. The TCR was running on modern trackday tyres – a bit like cut slicks. While this raised cornering speeds and lateral-g levels, it increased

the chance of a roll.

A typical track driver thinks about many things: handling, braking, cornering lines, spinning, etc. He or she does not think about rolling the car, sideways excursions into gravel traps and post-collision chaos excepted. When racing a 1000 TCR, a roll-over is an occupational hazard, a consequence of its track, c-of-g and grip level. In its original form, the 1000 TCR is not an easy car to drive at 10/10ths, but a great little car at 9/10ths. I came away from this car understanding it, and appreciating why the model has such a following. They are so charismatic. 🇮🇹

FRANCIACORTA TOURISM

Franciacorta's purpose-built racing circuit is clever in both its concept and execution. To keep the environmentalists at bay, the track was laid out in a disused quarry to avoid both visual and sound impact. In fact, it is so unobtrusive that it is quite hard to find!

Located to the south of the A4 autostrada between Bergamo and Brescia, we found that taking the Rovato exit is the most direct and better signposted route. The circuit

has superb viewing facilities, state-of-the-art paddock services and pitlane garages. There is also a café in the pitlane and restaurant facilities.

The Franciacorta area is renowned for its vineyards and distinctive quality wines. We can also recommend a weekend stop-over at one of the hotels at nearby Lago d'Iseo. This beautiful location is the least publicised of the Italian lakes – it's one of those

places that the Italians would prefer to keep to themselves. It's not as commercial as busy Garda and Como and ideal for a quiet break.

We stayed at Hotel Rivalago, in Sulzano, which has a lakeside swimming pool and superb views across the lake from its balconies. The five-minute ferry ride out to Monteisola for a walk on the island or a visit to one of the restaurants is a must; or perhaps try one of the regular

boat trips that will take you to Lovere in the north or Sarnico in the south of the lake.

Recommended websites
www.bernimotori.it
www.autodromodifranciacorta.it
www.rivalago.it
www.navigazione lagoiseo.it

Event dates for 2011
June 24-26 Silver Flag Hillclimb
June 30 Historic Abarth Trackday



LEFT: The Franciacorta region is an excellent area to take a holiday break. Nearby Lago d'Iseo has some great places to stay – like Hotel Rivalago