

# CLUB ITALIA

PREVIEWS AND REPORTS ON INTERNATIONAL EVENTS AND ITALIAN CAR CLUBS



## FUN AT FRANCIACORTA

Historic Abarth Trackday at the Autodromo di Franciacorta

Report by Roberto Giordanelli

**N**ow in its second year and flourishing, this event is open to historic Abarths and anyone with something special. Although titled as a trackday, it is run as what in the UK would be called a racing test day: ie, no rules on overtaking and no problems with timing. But, unlike the UK, it includes a proper Italian lunch in the circuit's classy air-conditioned, white-table-clothed, waiter-served restaurant. In Italy, lunch and dinner times are cast in stone; everything else works around these givens.

Star guests included Anneliese Abarth, Carlo Abarth's wife and a worthy contributor to Auto Italia, and Dottore Renzo Avidano, the Abarth works team manager in the 1950s, '60s and '70s and 'number two' only to Carlo Abarth.

As it took place a few days after the Vernasca Silver

Flag Hillclimb, many of the teams that had travelled great distances to be at the hillclimb used the Franciacorta opportunity to capitalise on long-distance transport costs. Widening the event in the future to include all historics is a distinct probability.

There was an international flavour to Tony Berni's Abarth day at the Autodromo di Franciacorta, located just south of Brescia. If you own a historic Abarth, Berni Motori needs no introduction. The most famous Welshman in Italy, he is your man for Abarth cars, parts, restoration or simply for some decals – his customer database is worldwide. See Tony's website [www.bernimotori.com](http://www.bernimotori.com).

The event was run in group sessions until mid-afternoon, when it became open pit lane. With 51 cars entered, an open-pit-lane format could have been run from the beginning, as Franciacorta's track length is

*ABOVE: Abarths old and new on track at Franciacorta.*

*FACING PAGE BOTTOM: Special guests Anneliese Abarth and Renzo Avidano*

2.5km and easily capable of handling the traffic. Unlike a UK trackday, with modern cars constantly circulating, the Abarths at Franciacorta paced themselves and rested appropriately, so everyone had plenty of track space.

A large percentage of the Abarths were Fiat 600 derivatives. Originally powered by 20bhp 600cc motors, the Abarth versions topped 100bhp with 1000cc engines. Needless to say, these flyweights er... fly. I have driven a few and know that they can also roll over if cornered too hard. Not that I have ever had the pleasure of such an inversion, but I know those who have.

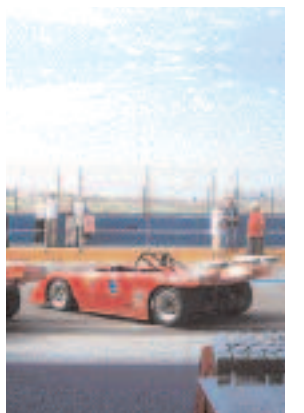
So, upon arrival at the circuit, the sight of a crumpled OT1000 was no surprise. However, to be fair, this roll-over was due to a mechanical failure. A rear hub had failed, detaching the wheel and brake assembly and pitching Marco Gnutti's 1000TC into a roll. In good old-fashioned style, the vehicle had no seat belts and the driver was thrown out of the car. Now that is what I call historic racing. Luckily, he was unhurt – but don't try this at home. No other incidents took place.

Of course, many car models – old or new – are easily rolled over. You don't need to be Adrian Newey to understand that tall, narrow cars can fall over. The modern one-make Abarth Trofeo 500 racing series is no exception. Just about every tall, modern 4x4 or SUV can also end up with its wheels skywards. It is simply a consequence of the position of a car's centre of gravity, its grip and its overall track. The Swedish 'Elk Test' (a triple swerve on a flat surface) humbles and tumbles countless tall cars. Indeed, a UK star system to identify 'propensity to roll over' is due to be added to the buyers' information sheet.

I am not advising against these cars – indeed, I have two tall vehicles in my own fleet. On the positive side, height has been proved to be safer than 'low-slung' in non-roll-over collisions. As roll-overs only represent a minority of road traffic accidents, you could conclude that 'tall' is safer. It all depends on what kind of crash you have.

Drummond Bone offered me a ride in his 1992 Maserati Barchetta, and it was good to re-acquaint myself with the superb capabilities of this masterly Maserati. As a reminder to our readers, here are a few words on the Barchetta. Totally ignoring the early 1990s World recession, Maserati, bless 'em, made special designs, special tools, special moulds and special castings, as if they were going to make a million Barchettas. However, only 16 or maybe 17 were built.

There was talk of road cars and much racing but, in the end, only two Barchettas were road-converted and the racing was mostly confined to the 1992/3 one-make series. The Barchetta has a carbon-fibre tub, aluminium backbone chassis – which doubles as a fuel tank – and proper racing suspension. Weighing a tad under 800kg, its 320bhp gives the little boat a hefty shove. Turbo boost is always there, provided you do the





age-old trick of feathering the throttle mid-turn to eliminate any turbo lag.

I was also re-acquainted with the driver's seat of Mike Kason's mad Fiat X1/g – all 320bhp and 700kg of it. Bristling with superb engineering, I am really surprised it has not been snapped up by an American, as such is the destination of many a hybrid. It may look like a historic Dallara X1/g, but not one original X1/g component exists on this jewel of a silhouette. Historically pointless, maybe, but what an awesome racing car if you can find an appropriate series.

A special mention also to Robert Wadsworth, who drove his 1982 Lancia 037 Stradale all the way from Wimbledon to lap the Franciacorta Circuit. The French Police stopped him simply because they loved the car and wanted to have a look.

Another classic Abarth was Fabio Gementi's Fiat 131 Rallye, an ex-works car fitted with a later supercharged Volumex engine. With his pre-teen daughter ensconced in the passenger seat, Fabio covered countless laps before Italian Health and Safety stepped in with a wagging finger.

Fabio is working with others to organise a revival of the fabulous Val Savio Hillclimb that used to piggy-back on the Silver Flag. Renamed the Adamello Historic, hopefully for 2012, this spectacular 4000ft/six-mile Alpine climb will once again follow on from the Silver Flag. Together with Berni's trackday, this would make a wonderful 'triple' in a seven-day period. The Editor recently returned from driving in the 2011 Adamello Historic and was suitably excited about it. Full report coming – see [www.adamellohistoric.it](http://www.adamellohistoric.it)

Back to Berni's trackday and, quite rightly, the star cars were the 40-odd Abarths. From the diminutive

touring cars to the sleek sports prototypes, Abarths ruled the roost. Add plenty of Formula Abarth single-seaters and we had an event special enough to make it into the Brescia newspapers.

I had a chat with Anneliese Abarth and Renzo Avidano. I asked Avidano what he thought of the renaissance of Abarth by Fiat. After a long pause for thought, and a short sigh, he called it "A purely commercial venture. Not in the spirit of true Abarth." He is right. 'Old Abarth' existed for the sake of the cars – it was a racing team. Yes, it had to make money, but only so that it could develop the road and racing cars. Avidano commented on how race wins sold more cars. The 1960s phrase, coined in the US, "Win on Sunday; sell on Monday" got it right, and research shows that it still works today.

I asked him which were Abarth's golden years. "The 1960s. We ran in the World Championship in the 1000cc, 2000cc and 3000cc classes, and spent much memorable time racing in the USA." Despite Fiat's commercialism, one has to concede that the Abarth renaissance has kept the legendary brand remembered. It is the same with Lotus, Bugatti and others – better evolving than dissolving.

This very successful day ended with some short speeches, before we devoured a work of art – a one-metre-square liqueur-laced Abarth gourmet cake – washed down with Italian pink champagne. Of course, being Italy, the fun did not stop. With the beautiful Italian Lakes on Franciacorta's doorstep and countless historic towns and cities to visit, plus the wonderful diversity of Italian culture and cuisine, one is not exactly stuck for something to do. See you there next year. 🇮🇹

*TOP LEFT: Drummond Bone's much campaigned Maserati Barchetta*  
*ABOVE: Car transporter being carefully loaded with valuable Abarths*

*BELOW: Formula Fiat Abarth 033 is a practical track day car powered by a transverse Lancia 2-litre twin-cam power unit*

