

Contact: General Media Inquiries
Ariel Gavilan

60 Years of Racing Heritage: The History of Abarth

October 30, 2011, Auburn Hills, Mich. - Over 10,000 individual race victories, 10 world records and 133 international titles are part of the rich racing heritage behind the acclaimed Abarth marque. In fact, success in competition has always been one of the cornerstones of the Abarth story, and it is no less important now than when Karl Abarth founded 'Abarth & C' over 60 years ago in 1949.

Abarth and the Fiat brand have a history of collaboration going back 45 years, resulting in six international records and nearly 900 individual race victories. It is with this racing pedigree in mind that fans of Abarth are eagerly anticipating the official launch of the new Fiat 500 Abarth.

A Fighting Start

Karl Abarth, born on November 15, 1908, in Vienna, had racing in his blood and was a five-time European motorcycle champion by his mid-20s. This was a feat made even more astonishing when considering that he achieved this success using his own hand-built motorcycles and with no official factory support. Success came at a price, however. In 1939, Abarth suffered a near-fatal accident during a race in Yugoslavia.

The crash left Abarth hospitalized for almost a year and effectively ended his motorcycle racing career. Undeterred, he remained in Yugoslavia during the war, opting to further hone his mechanical skills and step away from driving temporarily. Working as a technical manager in a workshop in Ljubljana, Abarth indulged his entrepreneurial flair by taking on small engineering projects as well as researching how to run internal combustion engines on kerosene.

Shortly after the end of the war, Abarth returned to Italy, prompting him to re-establish old ties with the Porsche family. Stints working in Porsche's design department and Italian sports-car manufacturer Cisitalia quickly followed, until March 31, 1949, when he founded the 'Abarth & C' company with Armando Scagliarini, producing aftermarket products for production cars.

Abarth Performance Exhaust Systems

To supplement the cost of producing tuning kits, Abarth branched out into developing performance exhaust systems. Using his extensive experience with motorcycle exhausts, Abarth developed a new range of car exhaust systems. Soon, Abarth had developed an array of exhausts tuned to specific vehicles and launched an eye-catching campaign to sell them. The exhausts were presented in a matte black finish with chrome-plated tips. Despite their high price (starting at 5,950 lire as opposed to 2,000 lire for a standard silencer), motorists chose to fit them in the thousands, and Abarth's company grew from the strength of these sales.

By the end of 1950, Abarth employed more than 40 people and had sold over 4,500 exhaust systems. By 1962, global sales would reach nearly 260,000 units. At the same time, Abarth had once again forged ahead in racing – this time on four wheels. The iconic Fiat Abarth 750 helped Abarth win its place in the record books by smashing time and distance records.

The combined success of the exhaust systems and motorsport achievements attracted attention from major manufacturers, and in 1958, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., son of the American president, travelled to Italy to sign an agreement to distribute Abarth products and vehicles in America.

Abarth and the Original Fiat 500

1958 proved to be a landmark year for Abarth for another reason. Fiat released a new car: the 500. Measuring just 10 feet (3 m) long and weighing a mere 1,100 pounds (499 kg), the Fiat 500 was one of the very first, true city cars and was the perfect answer to post-war market demand for inexpensive and practical motoring.

Karl Abarth saw other uses for the Fiat 500. Initially releasing the vehicle under the designation 595 (later switching to 695), Abarth took a standard Fiat 500 and gave it the full Abarth treatment. This included raising the compression ratios on the small 479 cc engine, fitting a Weber 26 IMB carburetor, optimizing the fuel and intake systems and adding a full Abarth sports exhaust system.

The combined result dramatically improved the handling and doubled the horsepower from 13 to 26. The car's exterior remained largely unchanged, apart from having wider wheels and tires, some discrete Abarth branding and a machined ABARTH plaque between the trunk lid and bumper for extra cooling for the rear-mounted engine.

Breaking six international records in its first year of production, the Abarth 595 went on to claim nearly 900 individual race victories by 1965. In fact, the 1960s as a whole proved to be a golden age for Abarth. The famous Scorpion badge (used because Abarth's astrological sign is Scorpio) quickly became a symbol of power and performance – so much so that Abarth entered everyday language in its native Italy. Customers in cafés and restaurants would not ask for a strong coffee, or a coffee with a shot of alcohol, but instead ask for an “Abarth coffee.”

Abarth Unleashed Again

Since being re-launched in 2007, Abarth has enjoyed improved sales, which have resulted in expansion to international markets. In addition to its success on the dealership forecourt, Abarth has achieved important results in motorsport as well – both in off-road and on-road disciplines, proving its worth as a true all-round contender.

On track, 2011 sees the Abarth 500 compete in the „Trofeo Abarth 500 Italia” and the „Trofeo Abarth 500 Europa” championships, which include rounds at famous circuits such as Monza, Spa Francorchamps and Imola. In rallying, the new Abarth 500 will prove its spirit in the 2011 'Trofeo Abarth 500 Selenia.'

In the U.S., the Fiat 500 Abarth will have its world premiere at the 2011 Los Angeles International Auto Show, joining the Fiat 500 and 500 Cabrio.

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