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ECURIE FRANCORCHAMPS

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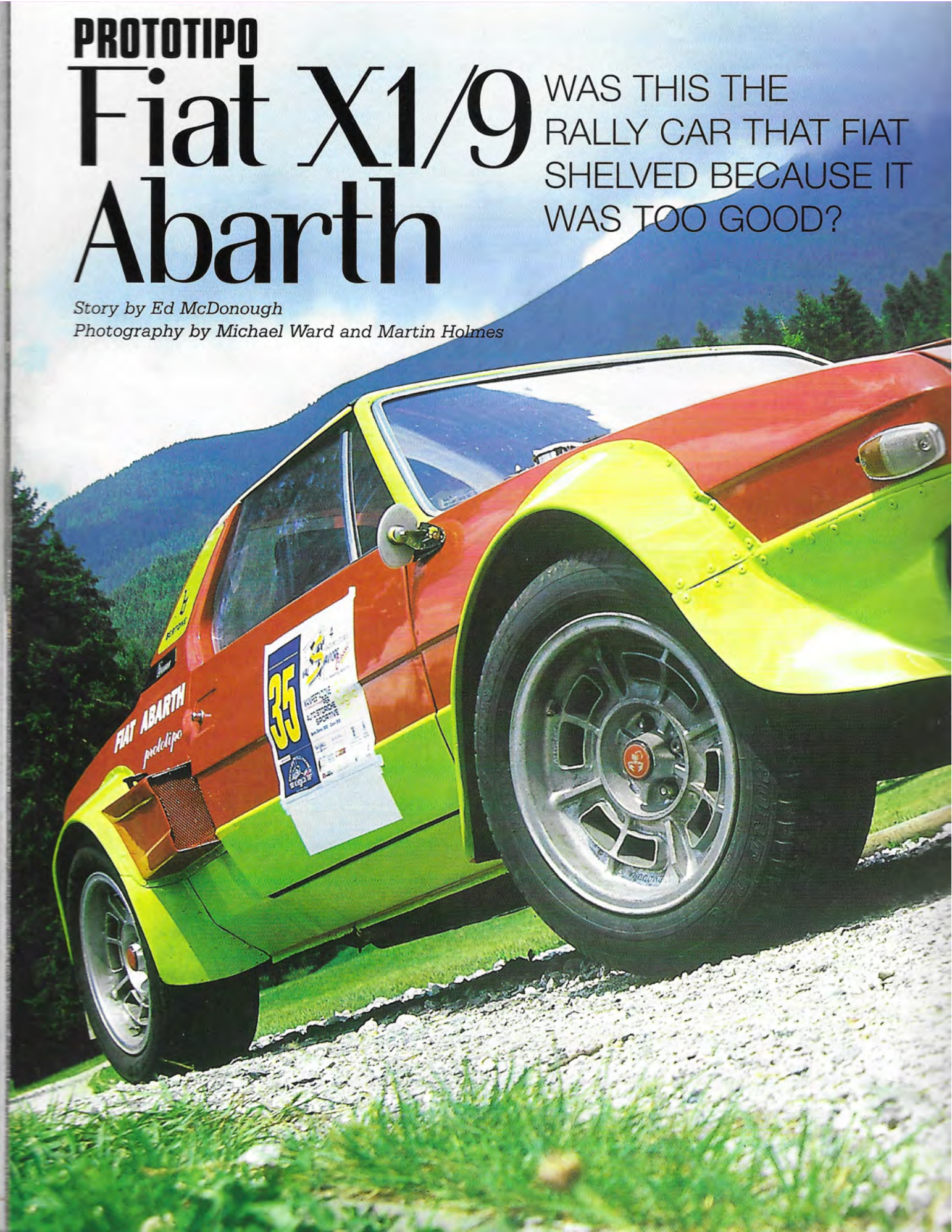
PROTOTIPO

Fiat X1/9 Abarth

WAS THIS THE RALLY CAR THAT FIAT SHELVED BECAUSE IT WAS TOO GOOD?

Story by Ed McDonough
Photography by Michael Ward and Martin Holmes



Fiat X1/9 Prototipo

The Fiat X1/9 was conceived and grew up in a period of Fiat history when the concept of a plan seemed to have relatively little meaning. From the start of an idea for a small mid-engined sportscar in the late 1960s to the final days of production in 1989, the X1/9 could be said to have suffered considerably from a sense of ambivalence in Italy, where Fiat was not sure whether it wanted a mid-engined car or not.

Throughout the years of its existence, when some 160,000 examples of the model were produced, Fiat was often indifferent to its creation and production was eventually 'farmed-out' altogether – the X1/9 becoming a Bertone-branded product. Starting life with a 1300cc engine, a 1500cc version was developed, partly encouraged by interest from the American market. While there were plans for competition, the X1/9 suffered from uncertainty as to which model from the Fiat Group portfolio was going to go racing. To investigate its options, Fiat's Abarth competition department was tasked with turning the fundamentally sound X1/9 design into a rally car.

Baby becomes a beast

The Abarth involvement, according to Phil Ward's helpful Fiat X1/9 Collector's Guide, came about as a result of the changes and diversification in the Fiat rally programme. The 124 Spider had been the heart of the Fiat effort from 1970 to 1975. Before the Fiat takeover of Lancia, the Fulvia had been a direct competitor to the 124 and the Fulvia was eventually replaced with a 'Fiat-Lancia' Beta Coupe using the a Fiat 124 Spider-based engine. At the same time, the Stratos was launched and the Beta was subsequently dropped. Hence, in order to keep the Fiat brand alive in rallying, an Abarth-developed X1/9 came into being. Among the people involved was Fiat works rally driver Gino Macaluso, who still has one of the five X1/9 Prototipos. Aurelio Lampredi developed the engine and testing was carried out by *Auto Italia*'s long-time friend Georgio Pianta.

Though the original intention was to use a 1.6-litre twin-cam engine, it became apparent that a bigger unit was needed and thus the 1.8-litre (actually 1840cc) engine appeared, though it was badged as a '2000'. This was fundamentally a bored-out 124 Spider block fitted with a bespoke 16-valve cylinder head and mated to a five-speed Lancia Beta gearbox. It produced between 190 and 210bhp. Much effort was given over to weight reduction and the car got down to 750kg. It was reckoned to be a potent combination and hindsight indicates that if development had continued, it might have been as successful as the legendary Stratos.

Entering the rally arena

The works X1/9 made its rally debut in the 1973 Rally of Sicily, where it failed to finish. The project came in for strong criticism because it failed to win immediately. It did eventually pick up a victory in 1974 in the relatively minor Alpi Orientali Rally, following this with a win in the Coppa Trabucchi, and a third 1974 victory in the Liburna event came at the end of the year. The improving performance of the car prompted Fiat to put the then Ferrari F1 star Clay Regazzoni in an X1/9 with Gino Macaluso for the Giro d'Italia. This car failed to finish but the promotion was useful for the X1/9's worldwide appeal. Nevertheless, Fiat called a halt to the programme at the end of 1974 to the regret of many people involved with it. For commercial and marketing reasons Fiat switched its rally effort to the much less dramatic 131 saloon. ⇨

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Engine:	1840cc Fiat 132-based 16v twin cam
Bore and stroke:	86mm x 79.2mm
Compression ratio:	11.4:1
Fuel system:	2 x 48IDF Webers
Power:	210bhp @ 7800rpm
Torque:	152lb ft @ 6200rpm
Gearbox:	5-Speed
Suspension:	McPherson struts
Brakes:	4 ventilated discs
Wheels:	8Jx13 front; 10x13 rear
Tyres:	235/45/13 front; 270/40/13 rear
Weight:	750kg

Prototipo survivor

The car you see here, David Robey's recent acquisition from Guy Moerenhout in Belgium, came from Poland. Very possibly one of the cars sold to Polski Fiat, it had remained used for many years following a fatal crash during the '70s. Moerenhout obtained the remains – bearing the chassis number 23005 – and fitted replica body panels and an eight-valve engine, though a 16-valve for the car does exist in Robey's hands.

I've been fortunate to test drive David Robey's car on two occasions. The first chance came at the May 2004 Abarth International gathering at Michel Pont's wonderful chateau in Sauvigny les Beaune, where Abarth owners and enthusiasts from all over Europe met to show and run their cars in and around the grounds of Pont's vineyard... he produces wonderful Burgundy.

I found the car to be perfectly tractable for road use, making it an excellent period historic rally car. Roadholding on bumpy lanes was satisfactory on the Goodyear Eagle NCT 50 tyres on original Abarth wheels (205/55ZR 15 on the front and 225/50 VR50 on the rear), though the original wheels on these cars were 13in. The cockpit is fairly sparse as you would expect, the clutch a bit erratic and the 8000rpm rev-counter not working; all these items being attended to in due course by David and Guy as the car is brought back into active use.

From the tarmac road, we were now able to move back into the grounds of the chateau where the access road around the aeroplane display made a perfect simulated special stage with loose surface and lots of dust, a fine test of the rally origins of the car. The very torquey Fiat engine comes into its own under full power and matched with the lovely five-speed box, the car starts to demonstrate just why so many people in the 1970s saw this as a Stratos challenger, and even something as good as the Lancia 037. Having driven both of those cars, I think the case may be slightly overstated, though the X1/9 is an easier car to dri on both tarmac and gravel, the Stratos requiring total concentration all the time. Of course the X1/9 is slightly

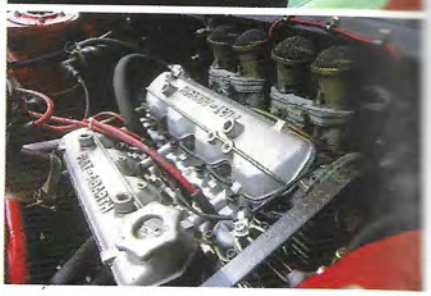
TOP: Although not entirely original, the fact that this car exists at all is something of a miracle ABOVE: 15in 131 Abarth wheels are currently fitted

less refined and is not brimming with Lancia rally technology either, but it is a rewarding driver's machine. It has such an evocative period feel with 1970s-style Corbeau seats, minimal rollcage and incredible in-car banging and creaking. The fly-off handbrake allowed easy spin turns, and coupled with a very small turning circle it was easy on the driver's shoulders and arms, something that isn't quite the case in the Lancia 037.

X1/9 as hillclimber

Auto Italia regulars will be familiar with the Silver Flag historic hillclimb near Piacenza which covers an incredible 10 kilometres between the village of Castell'Arquato and the mountain-top village of Vernasca. This is one of several immensely enjoyable historic climbs in Italy. It is a superb, challenging section of road: 4km of flat-out swerves with four or five first- and second-gear chicanes for safety, a thundering brake-squealing approach into a 90° left at the crowded village of Lugagnano, then flat downhill for nearly a kilometre out of Lugagnano, across a bridge in top – about 120mph here – and then nearly five more kilometres of second- and third-gear steep uphill corners until you flash out into the square at Vernasca.

Having enjoyed some exotica at this venue before, the X1/9 was nevertheless the first car that truly felt it belonged here, as a short-wheelbase, rally-geared car should. There's always a very enthusiastic send-off at the start of the Silver Flag runs down in Castell'Arquato, fuelled by the local bar being on the start-line. Organiser Claudio Casale and his team provide a brief history of each car as it waits for the Italian flag from the starter. The crowd responded to our



TOP LEFT: Ex-Cosentino X1/9 awaits restoration
TOP RIGHT: Perfect and original Macaluso car
ABOVE RIGHT: 8-valve unit currently in 23005

X1/9 being described as the Clay Regazzoni Giro D'Italia car, a comment which provoked excitement (though it may not in fact be accurate).

With the rev-counter now working, it was possible to get a clearer idea of how hard the engine was working, though like a true rally car, gearchanging could be done by ear. The little car rocketed off the line at 6500 to 7000rpm and was quickly up through the gears. Fourth was pretty high and could be held well out onto the fast straight before reaching for top, getting to something like 120mph before the first man-made chicane. The car tended to lock up momentarily ⇨

under hard braking, and it was evident that a slower approach to the chicanes meant a smoother and much quicker exit in second gear. First was an option but didn't gain much and there was no point in punishing the drive train in this venerable machine, though indeed it must have been seriously abused in its lifetime, such was the treatment of rally cars. It's amazing any of these cars survived at all. I was surprised that the relatively short wheelbase didn't make the handling at all edgy at top speed, though there seemed to be a touch of understeer under braking into the medium-speed corners.

Crowds line the road at Lugagnano, with locals watching from the windows of the bar on the corner, as the car lines up again under heavy braking for a 90° left taken under full power in third, drifting out right to skim the bus stop – filled with cheering schoolchildren! It's quickly into fourth as you speed downhill and then into top briefly across the bridge. The surface changes as the climb proper starts, and it's all narrow and tight, with changing camber and dips on the inside of each corner. A rally car is really at home on this sort of road, and now it's several more kilometres of third to second to third gear and a steep uphill run to the finish. The exhaust announces it's coming well in advance of the next corner, and as the back steps out the fans on the hillside respond accordingly. Good traction keeps the X1/9 moving all the time and it never bogs down, no matter how tight the bend. I have just seen why the few men who drove this car loved it so much and were so sad when it left the rally scene.

Detective work

It is thought that five X1/9 Prototipos were built in the chassis sequence 23001 to 23005. 23001 is said to be the car registered as TOH 02940 and does not have cooling vents on the bonnet as seen on the other cars. It is known to have been owned by Al Cosentino of Faza and may still be in the USA. Number 23002 (reputedly TOL 65335) is said to have been destroyed by fire. We know that 23003 was retained by Gino Macaluso. It is a 16-valve car in restored, running condition and still carries its original Turin registration number TOL 65336. David Robey's car is thought to be 23005. This leaves 23004 unaccounted for. Since we know that a car was registered as TOL 65337, it might well be 23004.

Currently, Abarth restorer Giuseppe Volta has one of the X1/9 Prototipos that was previously owned by Faza. Though *Auto Italia* has seen this car in Turin we don't know the chassis number yet – hopefully it's 23004. Our odd-man-out is the elusive X1/9 Abarth Rally stradale, reputed to be the first road version of the 400 road cars required to homologate the X1/9 for competition. So far we have no evidence to confirm that this car still exists if, indeed, it ever did! ai

ABOVE: The UK-based X1/9 Abarth survived both the Silver Flag and Val Saviore Classic hillclimbs last year – and a run up the Brooklands Test Hill