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FIAT ABARTH
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# Fiat 124 Abarth

# RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

## The car that launched Fiat into the world rallying arena – and one man in Belgium owns three of them

Story by Bart Lenaerts
Photography by Lies de Mol and Jeroen Peeters

*LEFT: Of the trio, the ex-Jaruzelski Team Poland car is the one with the most provenance. It is said to have a 2.1-litre engine, although it clearly retains its early narrow-angle 16v Abarth cylinder head and carburettors*

Carlo Abarth started tinkering with the ideal recipe for a sporty car in 1949. Now that Fiat has taken the cookbook down from the shelf, *Auto Italia* is sampling a traditional menu – variations on the theme of the 124 – in order to recreate the true house flavour.

Fiat built a little under 200,000 124 Spiders between 1966 and 1985, just 1013 of which were given a vitamin treatment in Abarth's workshops because Fiat wanted to go rallying. Rare creatures, therefore, yet Guy Moerenhout from Lier in Belgium has a few of them at home. From an original 'stradale', via the accessible Group 3 to the raucous Group 4, they are an ideal trio that sums up the Abarth philosophy.

Fiat could have used the 124 Coupe as a basis for its rally car but the Spider was 80kg lighter and could also be lightened further. The soft-top was replaced with a glassfibre hard-top, which had a Perspex rear window. The wooden dashboard made way for an aluminium one, and the glovebox and rear seats were discarded. The 124 Abarth stradales also had Recaro seats, lightweight trim, an Abarth steering wheel with a thicker rim, and a rear roll-over bar to stiffen the body.

You can recognise an Abarth immediately by the additional air intakes under the front indicators. Furthermore, the front and rear bumpers were removed, the doors were made from aluminium and the bonnet and bootlid were matt-black glassfibre. Choice of body colour was limited to red, white or pale blue.

Abarth replaced the original 1.6-litre unit with a 1756cc eight-valve four-cylinder engine attached to a five-speed gearbox, with two Weber 44 carburettors and twin overhead camshafts, enabling it to push out some 128bhp. A lot of work was also carried out under the skin to make the 124 a winner. The stradale was fitted with an independent rear axle with modified front wishbones, whereas a normal 124 Spider still had a rigid rear axle. The stradale is probably the smartest of the family because it sits so attractively on its Cromodora CD30 magnesium alloy 13in wheels. The revised offset increased the car's track, so modest wheelarch extensions were fitted.

Sitting in the stradale is very comfortable, despite the interior being so rudimentary and the finish being so stark. You sink deeply into the low Recaros, otherwise you wouldn't fit under the low roof while wearing a helmet. The steering wheel and the pedals are exactly where you'd expect them to be, which was often not the case in many Italian sportscars from that era. It's just a shame that the gearlever isn't precisely under your hand.

The Group 3 car – recognisable by the bonnet with built-in driving lamps – extends the theme of the stradale, but looks much fiercer. The same basic eight-valve four-cylinder engine is housed at the front, bored out in this instance to 1839cc. Different camshafts and

*LEFT: The Group 3 car is interesting because it has a 1839cc engine. This capacity was an Abarth option for customers and was achieved by increasing the bore size from the original 84mm to 86mm*

open air filters boost power up to a significant 135bhp. The Group 3 car also sounds a lot more purposeful: purring nicely at low revs, finishing with a sturdy growl in the higher rev range and a cheerful snarl when you change gear. Furthermore, it stands more firmly on its wheels thanks to shorter springs and gas-filled dampers.

The hero of the family is, of course, the undiluted Group 4, one of the 25 examples built in the Corso Marche to go rallying. It was initially a blue and yellow Olio-Fiat works car, after which it moved to Poland, from where Jaruzelski drove it to third place in the 1975 European Rally Championship. It has a rare 2.1-litre 16-valve engine that puts out 210bhp, but lacks the fuel injection system that characterised the last 124s in Group 4. To keep it giving its best, you have to give it a good thrashing, otherwise the plugs oil up and it drowns in its own fuel. If you want to keep its blood hot, you have to whip it along at high revs, over 6000rpm, because only then does it become really fast. It then thunders so hard through its open exhausts that I could still feel the pistons hammering against my pituitary gland three days later.

The modified close-ratio gearbox feels good and firm so you can change gear with a short, sharp movement to get the car accelerating like a rat up a drainpipe.

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Even though the top speed suffers as a result, at 50mph the engine whines at over 3000rpm in fifth. The car effectively has no clutch, the left pedal acting more as an on-off switch. This makes driving away from rest a precision job and slow traffic is a nightmare. You need very strong legs, so heavy is the clutch operation. Not ideal, then, but if you want to get the most out of the narrow power band you have to change gear a lot. The steering is also hard work but, despite the lack of a modern rack and pinion, the car can be steered

*BELOW: Originally in works Fiat Olio blue and yellow, the Group 4 car was repainted in Team Poland's colours of red and white*

## ABOUT 124 ABARTHS

Fiat 124 Spiders were first used in rallying by privateer drivers with unofficial factory support. They were production-based cars with 1438cc and, later, 1608cc engines. In 1972, Fiat homologated the 124 Abarth Rally for an official team. The car was an immediate success, with Rafaele Pinto winning the European Rally Championship for Drivers later that year.

There were basically three versions of the official 124 Abarth rally car. The first appeared in the first World Rally Championship for Constructors in 1973 and had the 171-176bhp 1756cc engine. The 190bhp 1839cc 8-valve version was used from the (delayed) start of the 1974 season. And, at the start of the 1975 season, 16-valve engines were used, while late in the season the team had a 210bhp fuel-injection version still with 1839cc.

The original livery for the works 8-valve 124 Spiders was crimson and black with a white stripe, but when the Group 3 and 4 124 Abarths came along they were painted a much brighter matt red, with a yellow roof and wheel arches. In 1976, however, the official team was required to carry the colours of its sponsor, Olio Fiat, in dark blue with yellow trim. After 1976, the 124 gradually gave way to the car that replaced it, the 131.

At the height of the Fiat rally competition programme, during 1975, no fewer than 30 cars were being run at any one time, in addition to the stillborn X1/9s. In Sanremo, in 1974, the team entered seven cars – although only one finished. Though undoubtedly a competent car, the 124 Abarth only ever won three world rallies outright: Poland in 1973, Portugal (with Lele Pinto) in 1974, and then Markku Alen, again in Portugal, in 1975. Five times their drivers finished second overall. But, in each of the three seasons that the 124 Abarth was fully active, Fiat was runner-up in the Championship, firstly behind the Renault Alpine, then twice, but ignominiously, behind Lancia.

**Phil Ward**

precisely, without the slight delay or dead zones that are so typical with an antique worm-and-roller steering system.

This Group 4 car is a gravel stage version, one that sits higher on its wheels and has open front suspension. It's ideal for throwing about vigorously, but at a considerable penalty when it comes to running on Tarmac. Combined with rose joints and rock-hard suspension mountings, it is more nervous than a student sitting final exams, and responds more violently to changes in load. Compared with this Group 4 car, an old Porsche 911 is a paragon of straight-line stability and aged calm. As soon as you lift the throttle – even when changing gear – the Abarth tries to follow the path of least resistance. It is even a little wobbly on its dampers, so it soon loses its equilibrium on an uneven surface.

Such an ultra-violent Group 4 vehicle is not an ideal

*ABOVE: The specification of the Group 3 Abarth is the one that most Fiat 124 Spider enthusiasts are attracted to when considering uprating their road cars*

way of introducing yourself to Abarthology. A coquettish stradale is more suitable as a sampler. Its pure speed is disappointing, of course, if you've just felt 170bhp screaming through your nervous system; 128bhp for 930kg and a sprint from 0 to 62mph in about 8 seconds is respectable, but no more than that. Yet the stradale is a tasty car. It feels solid, and as the miles mount up you admire it more and more. It sits firmly on its wheels, always remains stable and at the same time smoothes out many irregularities in the road surface; it's good-natured and beautifully balanced. The power unit is also more flexible than the Group 4 version. It gets going from 1500rpm and keeps on going until it hits the red zone at 6500rpm. Linked to a five-speed gearbox with a good spread of ratios and a very direct changing action – not to be compared to the vague gearboxes of other Italian cars of the period – and a good set of brakes, it is ideal for relaxed

participation in regularity rallies. This is mainly because the stradale is so pleasant to steer, direct yet comfortable, offering lots of feedback without becoming tiring. You can position it to the millimetre in a bend – with no trace of understeer – so you can get back on the throttle right away. The only thing missing to make the package complete is a limited-slip differential. If you hit the power too soon in the bend, all that results is a madly spinning inside rear wheel. Guy Moerenhout has a different opinion: "If you drive cleanly, you don't need a limited-slip differential. Don't forget that such a diff eats up some 18% of the power."

The Group 3 car shows that it can be done more pleasantly. Where the stradale is a little short on power, you no longer get that feeling in the Group 3. Ours has the optional close-ratio gearbox and a 35% limited-slip differential. Together with the extra power, this results in a car that is a bit more tail-heavy, and a car with which you can lay precise lines of rubber on asphalt. It is so easy to control, and to apply opposite lock, that you could win a drifting contest with the greatest of ease. If you wanted to, you could drive it on power alone by just steering a little less deliberately and applying the power more gradually.

Now that new life has been breathed into Abarth, with modern-day equivalents to the 124s in the form of the family of Grande Puntos, we can only hope that Abarth CEO Luca De Meo and his team will be in regular contact with Guy Moerenhout. I know for certain that the Belgian will welcome him with open arms – and with the keys on the table – as he does for everyone with passion in their soul. If the Italians step back into the past occasionally (without forgetting that we live in 2008), all will be well with the new Abarth.

With thanks to Guy Moerenhout. www.abarth-gmr.be

*ABOVE: Unusually, this stradale retains its original air filter, a bulky item that is often discarded*

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