

CLASSIC DRIVER

Vernasca Silver Flag Hillclimb



Ah, those were the days... those photos of the Targa Florio with fabulous cars blasting by so close that spectators could reach out and touch them. This is a story about an annual Italian event where you can still revel in that atmosphere, or - if you can find a suitable car - take part.

The **Vernasca Silver Flag** is an 8.5km hillclimb in the hills near Parma. From 1953-1972, it was part of the Italian Hillclimb Championship where **Ferrari, Porsche, Alfa** and the rest attacked the demanding course that starts with a kinky straight of Mulsanne-esque proportion, before wriggling up the 1000ft climb. Since its 1995 renaissance, the **Vernasca Silver Flag** hillclimb has grown in stature to become one of historic motorsport's great events. Each year has a theme; for 2007 it was Porsche, with 14 of Stuttgart's best facing the hill. **David Piper** with his **Porsche 917K** was a multiple prize-winner as was **David McLaughlin** in his **ex-Jim Clark Lotus 49**. Other F1 cars included the **James Hunt McLaren**, **Denny Hulme Yardley McLaren** and a **Niki Lauda Ferrari T312**. There were 31 pre-War cars, 32 post-War single seaters, 30 sports prototypes, and countless sportscars, touring cars and GTs.

From diminutive **Fiat Abarth 595SS** to locomotive-sized **Blower Bentleys**; from the purr of the 1920s to the howl of a **Group C Porsche 956** (**ex-Henri Pescarolo, Stefan Johansson, Ayrton Senna**), this event is a gem. This writer's mount is made for the job: the 1965 ex-team **Ian Walker/Team Lotus 26R** rally/race car - 180bhp and 580kg of fun.



The cut-off date for entries is early/mid-1970s; around the date of the last championship climbs. Being Italy, exceptions are made if you have something very special, such as **Alexander Seibold's 1983 Porsche 956** or **Professor Drummond Bone** with his **1992 Maserati Barchetta**.

The **Silver Flag** is no longer a timed event. Without time-sheets to worry about, the pressure is off, giving the three-day extravaganza a party atmosphere. Whether cars charge up the hill at ten-tenths or seven-tenths makes no difference. It allows drivers an opportunity to relax, have fun and entertain passengers.

The startline is at the bottom of a long valley in the enchanting historic town of Castell' Arquato. Spectating is free and unrestricted, so if you want to be part of those great old Italian road-racing pictures where

spectators are millimetres away from the action, this is your chance. The road is closed to normal traffic as the cars line up for the start in the picturesque paddock. From the start, cars have a long flat-out blast along the valley bottom. This three-mile stretch of nearly-straight road accounts for about half the hillclimb's length. In the old days, cars would have attained frightening speeds, something impossible on a race track where straights are rarely more than half a mile. Today, the 'straight' is interrupted by five lightly-coned chicanes. Cars start at 30 second intervals, with the order arranged to reduce overtaking. That is the theory but overtaking is common, with our Lotus passing six cars on each run.



The Italian tricolore drops and cars wheelspin away. After the three-mile 'straight', the next challenge is in the town centre of **Luganiano**, where there's a tight 90° left-hander and a downhill blast. The whole town comes out to watch, toddlers in arms included. So far, this is a hillclimb without a hill, but all that is about to change. The 1000ft climb is a series of blind turns: some sweepers, some hairpins. This is where the experience of the local bus driver would come in handy. A useful trick is to periodically take your eyes off the road ahead and look upwards to gauge the topography and maybe a hint as to which way the road goes. From the finish line to the **Vernasca** hilltop piazza the cars cover another half-mile on open public road... where else can you see racing cars mixing-it with the normal traffic?

Dates for the **2008 Vernasca Silver Flag** are 27/28/29 June 2008 – see www.cpae.it. Entries for this 'Italian Goodwood' are way over-subscribed so, if you have a very special historic car, please do not enter the 2008 event as yours truly may not get an entry...

*Story and photos by Roberto Giordanelli - all **strictly copyright***









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