

CLASSIC DRIVER

Trofeo Abarth 500 GB



If you want fast and furious racing, try the Trofeo Abarth 500 series. They're much quicker than most of us expected them to be, these little Abarth 500 racers, and there's quite an art to getting the best out of them. With 190bhp in a small, light car, plus big slicks which give plenty of grip, they're lively and exciting to drive.

One chap I met at **Oulton Park**, where I drove the guest car in the first two rounds of the championship, was quite shocked to learn that they were turning in the same lap times on the long circuit as his **Porsche 911** track-day car.

Any driver hoping to succeed in this series will need lots of testing, perfect precision driving and a dead cool attitude, as displayed by **Gareth Howell** who won both these opening rounds at **Oulton Park**. The young but experienced **Howell** achieved that double victory even though he was not on pole for either race and despite the fact that a well-prepared beginner, **Benny Simonsen**, notched up the fastest lap in both races.



With proper, seasoned racers like **Howell** and **Charlie Butler-Henderson** to race against, novices will find it a tough challenge to be anywhere near the pace. It's the real thing: serious, fast racing with no quarter given. Personally, it was a sobering thought to realise that not one of the other drivers in the series had been born when I won my first saloon car race at **Oulton Park**, way back in 1973. I felt like the token old fool and probably looked it.

Driving the brand-new guest car in its first outing, with no previous testing, was fun but I must admit I was a long way off the pace to start with. These cars have a lot of grip and they are extremely sensitive to small changes to front and rear ride height, damper settings and other variables. The centre of gravity feels quite high, there's some turbo lag and traction is an issue to think about. Only through extensive trial and error will the correct settings be found and only once you have done all that can you hope to be near the front of the field and start really racing.



Out on track for the first time, in qualifying, the first thing was to get some heat into the tyres and brakes. It's essential to get the lightly laden rear tyres warm, as well as the hard-working fronts which heat up relatively quickly. With that done, I realised that my car was slightly unstable on turning into the faster corners, preventing me from attacking the track properly.

I had just concluded that the main problem was probably that the rear ride height was too high when a keen 17-year-old, with a less inhibited attitude, belted past going down into the fast **Cascades** corner. Right in front of me, he promptly lost it one way, then the other way, wobbling violently all over the shop until he finally came to rest in his own cloud of smoke. It occurred to me that his rear ride height was probably a bit on the high side, too. My car would have done exactly the same thing, had I been brave enough to try it, which I wasn't. In qualifying I was over seven seconds off the pace.

My greatest problem, however, was that the rear brakes were locking up before the fronts, giving me several unwanted moments of excitement. This was still unresolved when I went into the first race. The rear ride height had been lowered, however, so I felt more optimistic.



My first ambition was to get through the accident I expected to see ahead of me as the pack left the first corner after the start. It happened exactly like that and I did jink through without a scratch. Progress had been made as the car was now lapping 'only' four seconds off the pace. I kept on pushing hard, surviving a massive 'tank slapper' moment on one occasion, coming close to losing it when I let a rear brake lock up under heavy braking. Then the engine cut for several seconds near the end of the last lap because there wasn't quite enough fuel left. That lost me one place and we finished tenth, 81 seconds behind the winner.

Before the second race, a fault in the brake balance bar was discovered, so that problem was cured. We tried a few more tweaks and, having survived another even more alarming first corner accident unscathed, I found the car was running 1.5 seconds a lap faster. We were heading the right way, at least, and this time finished eighth.



That's how you have to work at proper racing like this. The technical challenge of getting the car right is nearly all the battle, far more important than being brave behind the wheel. Mind you, recovering after going off on lap one, my young friend passed me again at **Cascades** in this race, with a very courageous dive down the inside. It looked extremely leery but this time he didn't lose it. Good for him. Once he calms down and hones that raw talent, he looks like a future winner to me. Meanwhile, I think I'll go and have a nice little lie-down to recover from all that excitement.

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