



A letter from Italy

Wolfgang Kurth writes to the editor to reluctantly sum up the appeal of the Vernasca Silver Flag hillclimb

About 70 miles south of Milan, the small city of Castell'Arquato, which is more than 1000 years old, invites you to dream of racing in the 1950s and '60s. There is no charge for visitors and only a small entry fee – plus an eligible car! – for participants. Vernasca Silver Flag is no posh event; it's a down-to-earth race weekend. Its mission is to be 'a dynamic concours for the restoration and conservation of historic race cars'. But, in fact, this event – which is a reincarnation of the famous hillclimbs held there between 1952 and 1972 – attracts the most exciting race cars of this period...

Dear James,

You know that I never decline an invitation to write for the *XK Gazette*, but this time I am reluctant to report about Vernasca Silver Flag. Why? Because it is a great historic motorsport event infused with the Italian way of life. It is a hidden gem – and it should stay this way!

I will try to explain: in the past years, once in a while I met competitors at events whispering in a cult-like manner about Vernasca Silver Flag – a



- Top: D-type replica in action on the hillclimb. Vernasca Silver Flag evokes the prestigious Castell d'Arquato events of the 1950s and '60s Photo by Alex Snijderwind
- Above: the colourful *parc fermé* at the top of the hill in Vernasca – this is a scene typical of European hillclimbing



- Above: Le Mans winner Jürgen Barth leaves the start line in an XK 120 Photo by Paolo Maggi
- Left: all smiles in the sunshine as the HWM-Jaguar leaves the line Photo by Marcello

gathering of race cars from the 1950s and '60s somewhere in Italy. Participants in past editions just rolled their eyes and didn't talk an awful lot about the reincarnation of this famous hillclimb. 'Please, no widespread publicity!' That was the message, and they were right.

This event is absolutely unique: there is no mega-sponsor to dominate (and spoil) this meeting of totally relaxed motorsport enthusiasts. Vernasca Silver Flag is a down-to-earth

festival organised by a motorsport club for motorsport fans. Passion and dreams power the members of Club Piacentino Automotoveicoli d'Epoca – the ambitious organiser of the event. Each year, like-minded sympathisers trailer their race cars towards Castell'Arquato for a weekend among friends.

If you go to Castell'Arquato for the first time, you will understand immediately why there is an entry limit of 200 cars: Abarth 2000 Sport, Alfa Romeo Tipo 33, Lola T70, Maserati 8CM,



Maserati A6GCS (not only one – three, including the rarest of the rare, the A6GCS Berlinetta Pinin Farina), Lancia Stratos HF, and on and on. The Italian collectors have opened the gates!

The cars are squeezed into doorways or park on sidewalks between bistro tables and under the parasols of bars and restaurants. The limitation of 200 cars is a no-brainer, but more than 200 additional applications are refused each year – unfortunately. Nevertheless, this year several Jaguar cars found their way to these charming paddocks: a 1954 HWM-Jaguar, a Lister-Jaguar ‘Knobbly’, two D-type replicas (Proteus and Lynx), two XK 120 OTSs and two E-types. Not bad for an event in the backyard of the Italian ‘Motor Valley’.

As in any year, some ‘Old Heroes’ of motorsport joined the event: two-time World Rally Champion Miki Biasion with a Ferrari 308; Jürgen Barth, Porsche works driver and winner of 24 Hours Le Mans in 1977, was piloting one of the XK120 OTSs; and Clemens Schickentanz was in one of the numerous replicas of the ‘Rote Sau’, or ‘Red Pig’ – the Mercedes in which he finished second in the 1971 Spa 24 Hours. The arrangement of rare sports cars and saloon cars was enriched by single-seaters from Alfa Romeo, Abarth, Maserati, Cisitalia...

The paddock in Castell’Arquato reflects the atmosphere of the ‘good old days’ of motorsport: it’s located on a small parking lot opposite Bar Stazione – I’ll come back to this location later – under trees that would have shaded Ludovico Scarfiotti, Jonathan Williams and other heroes in period. This parking lot and the adjacent roads truly evoke the paddocks of 50 or 60 years ago.

On Friday afternoon, little Castell’Arquato is ruled by the race circus and its fans. Hundreds of aficionados stroll between the race cars, ask questions and remember the historic hillclimbs when looking at a Porsche 910 or Abarth 1000 SP. It seems so self-evident that kids are seated in cockpits for photos with Miki Biasion or Jürgen Barth, as kids did years ago when Sir Stirling Moss or David Piper graced Vernasca Silver Flag.

The Polizia Municipale takes all necessary precautions to assure a hassle-free run of the event: red and white security tape blindfolds the speed cameras along the track – simplification at its best! How the hell do the Italians do that?

This relaxed atmosphere is all around, wafting through alleys and places of this picturesque medieval village. Each and every guest of Bar Stazione is in pole position – the bar is located next to the start line. Participants and visitors chill at small bistro tables, inhaling this sweet drug of high-octane fuel, burned rubber and engine oil, screaming speaker announcements and high-revving engines. At the same time, you enjoy a glass of *Vino Frizzante*, an *aperitivo* or simply an *espresso* while discussing the loudness of the starting cars – *un giorno perfetto*!

The pilots barrel their cars down a long straight through the Val d’Arda – the few chicanes slow down the speed only marginally – before they take a sharp left in Lugagnano. For the next 4.5km, an ever-winding road lined by hundreds of visitors takes them up to the finish in Vernasca. Each driver travels the speed of his choice. There is no time-keeping, no winner!

Nevertheless, the almost 9km route provides ample opportunities to shift gears. When the D-types dashed off the starting line and brake for the first chicane, it is at about 140-150kph. In period and without the chicanes, the fastest race cars easily touched 200kph.

At the end of the day, each and every minute is filled with race atmosphere. But the dream is not over yet: an open-air dinner is served in the centre of the marketplace surrounded by the scenery of the medieval fortifications, churches and alleys of Castell’Arquato. The dessert is illuminated by fireworks we only know from the New Year’s Eve parties in Sydney!

That has been a highlight of the event for years but, unfortunately, uncertain weather conditions forced the organiser to host this year’s dinner in the nearby exhibition halls in Piacenza – with no fireworks!

- Left: D-type replica leaves the wet start line. The weather was a bit changeable this year *Photo by Paolo Maggi*
- Right: 'Look – no hands!' XK 120 joins the queue of cars coming back down the hill *Photo by Alex Snijderwind*



Next day, after the last run up the hill, a typical pasta lunch is served at the Antica Pieve. Between courses, it is time to have look downhill, where the race cars are flocking the little marketplace. And at the latest, by then you start dreaming of the 28th Vernasca Silver Flag in 2024.

Dear James, if you consider going south next year, I need to warn you: Vernasca Silver Flag is no lifestyle event organised by smart marketing agencies. It is a relaxed gathering of motorsport enthusiasts organised by friends who still spell 'Passion' with a bold capital 'P'. I hope for your understanding.

Warm regards, Wolfgang 🏎️



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