



Pocket Rockets of Yesteryear

Published: September 18, 2012 By: Glen Smale

Online version: <https://www.virtualmotorpixblog.com/pocket-rockets-of-yesteryear/>



Renault 8 Gordini brochure from 1970 (© Renault/VMP)

After World War II smaller passenger cars of unitary construction became increasingly popular, and in the 1950s it was common place to find highly tuned but conventional family cars racing in competition. This had an extraordinarily positive effect on sales as the car-buying public could identify with the cars seen on the track and it was possible to go out and buy street versions of those cars. It was during this time that the expression 'win on Sunday sell on Monday' was born, as manufacturers sought to promote their products through success in racing.



The 1960s witnessed an explosion in the aftermarket sector of the auto industry and 'go fast' accessory shops sprung up on every corner. The manufacturers saw that they were missing out on a growing opportunity and wasted no time in producing street legal models that were based on their racing siblings. Evocative model names such as Cooper, Abarth, Gordini, Sebring, Daytona, Mexico, Carrera and many others became associated with victories achieved by manufacturers around the world and much marketing mileage was gained in this manner.

Below is a small selection of some of these iconic motor cars taken from our archives. It is by no means a complete or even a substantial sample, but it is representative of that great era...enjoy!



© Virtual Motorpix/GHS
Fiat Abarth 1000 at the Stonely Park



Historics Motorshow

Probably the original pocket rocket, the Fiat 500 Abarth is fondly remembered for its unconventional engine open format, as it swept to numerous class victories around Europe. The Scorpion-badged Abarth really did carry its sting in the tail as power in the tiny 13bhp 500cc engine was boosted to 26bhp, which in 1958, offered quite some spirited performance. Carlo Abarth proved to his critics that small runabouts could be used as the basis for fast and reliable racing cars, which gave rise to a new phrase, 'small but wicked'. This was followed by the Abarth 850 TC in 1961 that boasted a 55bhp output helping the diminutive Fiat to a first-in-class in its inaugural 24 Hour race at Le Mans that year. Other notable victories included the 500 km Nürburgring race in 1963, as well as the European Touring Car Challenge title in 1965, 1966 and 1967 and included six successive Manufacturers' Championship titles.



Mini Cooper S



The Austin Mini Cooper and Morris Mini Cooper debuted in 1961. The original Mini Seven 848cc engine was given a longer stroke increasing capacity to 997cc boosting output to 55bhp. The race-tuned engine was fitted with twin SU carburetors and featured a closer-ratio gearbox, and management approved one thousand cars which were intended for and designed to meet the homologation rules of Group 2 rallying. The more powerful Mini Cooper S, featuring a 1071cc engine, was released in 1963.



Renault 8 Gordini, model 1970 (© Renault/VMP)

Based on the Renault Dauphine, the Renault R8 was released in June 1962. The R8's styling was fashionably boxy and was initially powered by an all new 956cc engine developing 43bhp but in 1964 a larger 1108cc engine was introduced developing 49bhp. The Gordini, which was also released that year, featured a more highly tuned engine of the same capacity



but developing 89bhp and with a five-speed close ratio manual transmission. The Gordini was originally available only in blue, with two stick-on white stripes.



Ford Escort Mexico, model 1973-74 (© Ford/VMP)

Ford is one company that made the most of its motorsport successes during the 1960s, as the Escort, Cortina (GT & Lotus) and Capri were to demonstrate. The works Escort in particular would rack up victories on both the track and in rallies, and arguably, the Escort's greatest victory was in the 1970 London to Mexico World Cup Rally. Driven by Finnish rally legend Hannu Mikkola, this victory gave rise to the road-going Escort Mexico, a 1.6-litre Kent-engined special edition created in recognition of this achievement.



BMW 2002 Turbo (rear). A car specially designed for competitions (© BMW/VMP)

Max Hoffman is credited with inspiring several exotic versions of top 'imports' into America, among these were the Porsche 356 Speedster, Mercedes-Benz 300SL Gullwing and the BMW 2002 Turbo. Whether this account is true or not, the result in 1973 was the potent 2002 Turbo fitted with a KKK turbo blowing through the tii's Kugelfischer injection which developed 170bhp and had a top speed of around 120mph, but the model's greatest achievements would be seen in Europe where in 1969 Dieter Quester took another European Touring Car Championship in the 2002 Turbo.



Volkswagen 1978-79 Golf GTI in Action (© VW/VMP)

Introduced in March 1975 at the IAA Frankfurt Motor Show, the Golf GTi became the benchmark for the emerging 'hot hatch' market, certainly insofar as the mass produced models were concerned. The principle was quite simple - take a standard production car and give it a high-performance make-over, turning it into a sporty yet practical model. The GTi was one of the first small hot hatches to be fitted with fuel injection (Bosch K-Jetronic fuel injection), and its 1.6-litre developed 110bhp giving it a top speed of 110mph.



Peugeot 205 GTI 1.6i, 1984 Model (© Peugeot/VMP)

One of the most sought after and iconic pocket rockets of the '80s came in the shape of the Peugeot 205 GTi (1984-1994) featuring a 1.6-litre engine and producing 105bhp. The popular model received a larger 1.9-litre engine in 1986, but the age old saying, 'first is best', also rings true for this little French favourite.



Renault Clio Williams (front), model 1993 with Nigel Mansells F1 car (© Renault/VMP)

The long standing collaboration between Williams Formula 1 and Renault resulted in the Clio Williams in 1993. Launched as a limited edition of just 3800 cars (1,300 more than was needed for homologation purposes), each car bearing a numbered plaque on the dash. The cars sold out so quickly that Renault were persuaded to build another 1,600 cars.

Share this: