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- [Fashion](#)
- [Community](#)
- [Classifieds](#)

Racing with an Italian Accent

By Christine Davis, Marketing Writer

Thursday, February 24, 2005

Photos by Martin Gauthier

Special to Automotive • Yacht Showcase

Italiafest brought dozens of local car lovers to the races Feb. 5-6, especially those with a soft spot in their hearts for Italian-made automobiles.

The 18th annual event for Italian Car Club members and enthusiasts included a track event at Moroso Motorsports Park and a concours car display in Delray Beach.

At Moroso, John Johansen of Plantation showed off his brand new, right-off-the-showroom-floor 2005 Lotus Elise.

"The Lotus Elise has just been imported into the United States for the first time this year," said Johansen, who races just for fun. In real life, he co-owns a car-care product company, Shining Monkey.

Accompanying Johansen was his friend and three-time Brazilian kart champion, Cristiano Piquet.

Chuck Barnum, co-owner of Mac Fabrics on Clematis Street in West Palm Beach, brought his 1977 Lancia Scorpion to Moroso. He has owned the car for about eight years and likes racing because speed thrills him.

"I like the feeling of going around corners as fast as I can," Barnum said.

David Rabber of Tampa displayed and raced his Lamborghini Diablo roadster. He said he was at Moroso "just having fun" and promoting his company, "Festival of Speed."

Speed is just part of his nature, he explained. He was a navel aviator and raced super bikes, including a championship Mussie-prepared Kawasaki ZX7. "I like anything that goes fast," he said, which is why he founded the Festival of Speed, an event featuring automobiles, motorcycles, boats and aircraft.

Some have fun just showing their cars, but not Rabber: "Like everything in my life, I've always wanted to go to the limit and back. Having a car like my Lamborghini and not driving it to the limit is unfortunate."

His Lamborghini appeared a little worse for the wear after its race. A Ferrari 360 trying to take the line on a turn pulled in front of him and ended up hitting the wall.

"He went deeper into the turn and then cut over in front of me. I was already at maximum braking, and I tapped him. I still feel badly. My bumper will be relatively easy to fix compared to his car. I will never forget his face. He's spinning, and I'm watching."

Walter Hotchkiss of Homestead brought two cars, a 1974 Maserati Bora and a 1962 Ferrari 250 GTO/GTE.

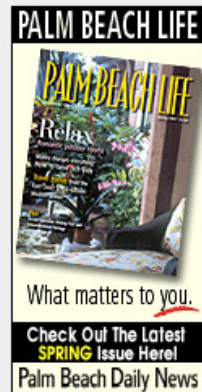
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"It's a converted GTO," Hotchkiss explained. "It's the same year of Ferrari's most desirable four-seaters. And although the GTO/GTEs are highly desirable, only 33 of the GTOs were made, and they are worth \$9 to \$10 million each."

Greg Jones in Jupiter did the conversion, Hotchkiss added. The car has all Ferrari parts except for the body, which has been handcrafted out of aluminum. It is virtually the same as the GTO but without the racing history, he said.

Hotchkiss, 72, retired from racing a year-and-a-half ago, explaining he's no longer comfortable on the track. "I raced for 10 years in the 1960s and took it back up again in 1993 for another 10 years," he said.

Hotchkiss not only likes the look and the feel of racecars, but he also enjoys the mechanics of them. He restored a Griffith by himself.

"They made about 300 cars – it's a hybrid. Like the Shelby Cobra, the Griffith has an English body with an American motor. It's very high performance," he said. "I got it back together – it was a pile of junk – and got it back on the track."

He managed to turn it over six years ago at an event like Italiafest. He enjoys performing at the limits, as well as just showing his cars.

The entire Funny Italians Automobile Racing Team and its owner, Howard Banaszak, all of Fort Lauderdale, came up for Italiafest. Team members Sherman Holland, Bill Tribble, Rob Hall, Jason Wenig and Bill Kirby were all present and accounted for. They brought with them a collection of cars, including a 1959 Stanguellini, a Ram Formula Junior, an Arnolt and a Motto Climax.

Banaszak got the team together in 1991. He summed up the group's feelings about racing: "We like Italian cars and we have a good time."

Everyone on the Funny Italians team is involved in Banaszak's ready-mix concrete business in real life, except for Jason Wenig, owner of The Creative Workshop Fine Motorcar Restoration.

"We all drive equally well," Banaszak said. "Billy is the fastest with Kirby right behind him. Rob is the slowest."

Rob Hall added: "That's because I'm the tallest and can only fit into the slowest car," which also happens to be the largest.

"It's not about who's the fastest, though," Banaszak said. "It's about having fun. Coming back (home), the car is always 30 miles (per hour) faster."

Jonathan Eismann, chef and owner of Pacific Time restaurant in Miami Beach, showed his 360 Challenge Ferrari. He takes his cars to the races every six weeks or so, he said, and has seven vehicles in all. He started with an Alpha Romeo and has built his way up to the Ferrari.

Eismann is a hands-on owner and admits that keeping the cars in top shape is a lot of work. "I'm totally not competitive," he said. "For me, Italiafest is a chance to exercise the car."

Mitchell Josephs and his son Jonathan of Palm Beach stopped by to watch the racing event. Josephs was driving his new car, a Ferrari 355 F1 Berlinetta. He won the Gold Award, representing second place in his class, at the Palm Beach Cavallino Classic at The Breakers Hotel in January. He exchanged his Lamborghini Diablo for his present car, saying the Lamborghini was too impractical.

Jonathan, 11, an artist by nature, said he likes the fluidity of the new car.

And his dad reported another reason: "He also told me he liked it because this is the first of my Italian cars not to be in the shop," Josephs said.

John Schumann of Vero Beach brought his 1960 Maserati Birdcage tipo 60/61 to the track. Retired after publishing the Press Journal in Vero Beach, Schumann and his wife, Kathi, have found time to enjoy and race their cars since 1991. He took his Porsche to a driving school at Moroso at that time, and one thing led to another, he explained.

He's charmed by vintage cars of the 1950s and '60s, finding them to be "sleek, attractive-looking and relatively uncomplicated."

It's the challenge to do better and achieve better lap times that drive him to compete, he said.

His Maserati is one of 24 in the world.

"It was one of the faster sports cars in 1960 and '61. This particular car was driving by Sterling Moss in vintage races. It was originally brought in by Briggs Cunningham," the legendary racer of the 1950s and '60s.