

WORDS JIM MOORE PHOTOGRAPHY DAVE COLLISTER



Collezione Italiana

He spent his formative years razzing the wheels off of Italian-made 125s, and now **Jacopo Barone** can't get enough of them

Main Jacopo Barone at the centre of his ever-expanding collection
Right If it wasn't an island, Jim and this AFI would still be going

MOST OF US would be delighted to own a Honda CBX1000, made up to have an NS400R, and absolutely ecstatic to find our name on the V5 of a Kawasaki Z750 Turbo. Taking charge of all three would be dream garage territory indeed.

For PS reader Jacopo Barone, however, that wasn't the case. While he enjoyed owning these highly sought-after Japanese legends, none of them lit his fire. In Jacopo's eyes less really is more, and what rings his bell and gets his wallet twitching is Italian-built supersport 125s. So much so, he's amassed a collection of the things – 20-strong and counting – and he's on the hunt for more.

To get your head around why Jacopo would choose a single-cylinder two-stroke over a six-cylinder superbike you need to understand his past. And as with so many of us, it was his early experiences on bikes that left the greatest impression and inform his passion today.

“We'd ride to school on our 125s, and at the end of the school day it was like the start of the Italian GP”

“I grew up in Milan in the late 1980s and early '90s, and at that time bikes were everywhere in Italy. You could ride a moped at 14 then a full-power 125 at 16, so the market for small bikes was huge. All the magazines were full of tests of the latest 125s. Many were way more technologically advanced than bigger bikes of the time, so from the age of 12 when I began buying those mags I was hooked.”

After starting out on a Malaguti 50 Top aged 14, Jacopo moved up to a 125 two years later. “I wanted an Aprilia AF1 but after seeing an NSR125R parked next to an NR750 in a local dealer, I ended up with the Honda because it looked like a mini NR.”

The Italian 125 craze was like our very own FS1-E-fuelled sports-moped mania of the 1970s. Every kid seemed to have one, and they'd ride around in packs from street to street until they ran out of fuel or the chip shop shut – only in Italy, it was bars and bistros rather than chippies that doubled-up as meeting spots. Owning a bike meant freedom, excitement and entry to the tribe.

“We'd ride to school on our 125s, and come the end of the school day it was like the start of the Italian GP as we all raced to get away first. Then we'd spend the rest of the

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Left Aprilia ST and STX engines up on blocks

Right Rare special Denim edition Cagiva Mito gets to it

Below Aprilia head-to-head as 1990 Futura heads a '92 Futura SP



GSX-R1000 after that. That was fantastic, but it was just too fast."

The experience of the GSX-R prompted a change of motorcycling direction for Jacopo. "I started buying '70s and '80s bikes, the real legends, like the CBX, the NS and the 750 Turbo. They were interesting to own and ride but because I had no emotional attachment to them they never grew on me so I eventually had to let them go."

Then in 2007 the inevitable happened. Nostalgia came knocking. "My love for 125s never stopped, so I started looking for a '93 NSR just like the one I'd had. I found one in Milan that had been stored in a garage for 15 years. It made me feel 16 all over again."

An Aprilia AF1 quickly followed because that was the bike Jacopo lusted after the most when he was 13 and 14 years of age. "Then I went nuts and started buying bikes from all over Italy whenever I could find them."

Jacopo's job in finance had led him to the Isle of Man, which at that time was still enjoying the banking boom. He couldn't be without his bikes – he was on Mona's Isle, after all – so once settled Jacopo sought someone on the island who could keep his machines fettled and ready to go for

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day racing each other and pulling wheelies. My NSR would wheelie forever with a pillion."

Italy's huge appetite for small two-strokes was fuelled in part by a closed-shop policy to imports. The Japanese RDs, MBXs, ARs and RGs that were abused by the thousand here in the UK didn't make it to Italian shores. Instead manufacturers like Gilera, Aprilia and Cagiva filled the void with exciting, exotic and sometimes bizarre race replicas that made Yamaha's LC look prehistoric. We got excited about bellypans and seat cowls; Italian youths got

"I found an NSR125 that had been stored in a garage for 15 years. It made me feel 16 all over again"

underseat pipes, single-sided swingarms, and hub-centre steering. No wonder they lapped them up.

The other influence stoking the development of these super-trick 125s was the hugely popular Italian Sports Production Championship, a breeding ground for future Grand Prix champions (see opposite). Winning on track only increased the appeal to impressionable 16-year-olds.

After three years with his Honda, Jacopo felt the desire for something bigger and better. In '96 he bought a Suzuki GSF400. "It was a fantastic looking bike with a great engine – a real screamer – but the chassis was terrible. I bought a



Be still awhile and take in the glory of this 1992 Honda NSR125R SP

when he was over from Italy. Dave Hagen from Evomoto in Ramsey was the man entrusted with the task.

"I still had the CBX and NS at the time, and David did a great job setting-up the carburation on the six. Then I started taking 125s to him, first the NSR and two Aprilias. Initially I thought 'that's enough bikes' but I couldn't help myself and they kept arriving for David to work on."

The first few were simple recommission jobs – fresh fluids and tyres, rings if needed – but that soon turned to complete restorations as the bikes Jacopo sourced became harder and harder to find in mint condition, or "mine-t" as he describes it in his Italian brogue.

"The Futura Sport Pro caused the biggest headache," says Dave. "A lot of its parts are subtly different to those on the standard bike, so getting replacements wasn't easy. The nylon tank had split and it couldn't be plastic welded. We tried a liner, but that only lasted six months before it dissolved into sludge. In the end he found another good used tank, but it wasn't a quick process."

Workshop manuals don't exist for these bikes either, but luckily Dave's been twiddling spanners since he was a kid, so through a process of common sense and taking pictures of everything as it came apart he's been able to fettle or restore every bike Jacopo's brought to his door.

Several restos are ongoing, as Dave shows me when I visit the workshop. An extremely rare Honda NSR125R SP sits atop a workbench, minus its plastics. Only 600 of these homologation specials were hand-built by Honda Italy's race shop, so when Jacopo found this complete but tatty example up for sale in the UK he had to have it. It is nearing completion of a full restoration, Dave's just waiting on new ignition pick-ups to finish the job off.

A brace of ST and STX Aprilias are almost ready to go back together too. These early '80s strokers pre-date the more familiar AF1 models and look antiquated in

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Italian Sports Production Championship



A certain Valentino Rossi in 1994

THE ITALIAN SP Championship was massive in the late '80s and early-to-mid '90s. Not only did it provide close racing, it was a breeding ground for some of the greatest racers in GP history. Loris Capirossi campaigned a Gilera KZ125 to fourth overall in 1988, Max Biaggi won the series in 1990 on an Aprilia AF1, and nine-times world champ Valentino Rossi was victorious in '94 on a Cagiva Mito.

The manufacturers took it deadly seriously, eventually building special limited-production 'SP' versions of their already super-trick 125s in an attempt to grab the advantage on track. Carburettor sizes grew on the SP models, reaching 37mm on the Cagiva Freccia C12R SP, until rules restricted them to 28mm from 1991.

SP spec usually includes higher-quality adjustable suspension, more

radical cylinder porting, a racier expansion chamber, different carb and CDI, uprated brakes and the removal of the electric starter in order to save weight. Honda Italy, which hand-built the NSR125R SPs it produced for the series, even specially machined the bikes' crankcases in an attempt to tease out every last bhp.

Being race homologation models, the SP variants were built in limited numbers. Most made it straight on to the track, so finding unmolested examples is difficult. Few were bought as road bikes because they were often much more expensive than the cooking models from which they were derived and are often, due to their race porting and carburettor set-up, not as suited to road riding either.



Max Biaggi, 1990, Aprilia AF1



Thank you

Evomoto Ramsey, Isle of Man:
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moto125.org



comparison, but they demonstrate Jacopo's devotion to his chosen cause. "Aprilias are my real passion, so my aim is to own an example of every model they made."

Like Jacopo I've got a real thing for Italian 125s because the styling, engineering and performance was so far ahead of the Japanese at the time. Scanning my eyes over Jacopo's amazing collection I genuinely don't know where to look first. The words, "which ones would you like to ride?" send me into an even bigger spin. There are bikes here that I've wanted to ride for years.

For me, the 125s can wait. What's top of my list, perhaps surprisingly, is the AF1 50. I yearned for one of these as a kid, but financially they were out of reach. So I grab the keys, thumb the starter and head out through Ramsey's midday traffic in pursuit of open roads. Jacopo follows on the Cagiva Freccia C12R SP.

This is no ordinary 50. It's powered by the export-market 75cc Minerelli motor that's good enough to scream the AF1

"A lot of its parts are subtly different to those on the standard bike, so getting replacements wasn't easy" Dave Hagen

Above Getting fresh with a Freccia between the Isle of Man's dry-stone walls

Below Dave Hagen has a long pedigree in race engines and now in Italian 125s



up to 60mph, even with a 15-stone lump like me on board. Four-speed gearbox aside, it's as I'd always hoped it'd be, and so much better than my old Kawasaki AR.

What comes next, however, leaves me gibbering like a fool. Cagiva's Freccia was an object of youthful desire for me too. Big time. And the C12R SP is the pinnacle of Freccia performance and development. Being an SP it runs a specially ported barrel, uprated pipe and a massive 37mm Dell'Orto carb. Jacopo's bike makes a genuine 30bhp at the wheel.

It is, without doubt, the fastest 125 I have ever ridden. Strong power kicks in from 7000rpm, but it's at 9000rpm that the C12R SP really makes its mark. From there to 10,500rpm it pulls like a 250, and it's easy to keep there too with a seven-speed gearbox. This would embarrass a 250 Gamma, it's that quick.

The day gets better as Jacopo encourages me to ride more and more of his collection. I tick numerous 'must try' boxes with rides on the AF1 125 Project 108s, both Futuras, his brace of Cagiva Mitos – the Lawson-replica SP proved to be so track-focused it's impossible to use successfully on the road, and the naked NSR125F.

The surprise for the day for me, however, was the AF1 Europa. An unfaired 125 single doesn't sound much fun on paper. In reality though, it's barmy. Forget the engine size and lack of aerodynamics, this thing flies and, with its relaxed 'bar position compared to the race-rep Futura on which it's based, is perfectly suited to the ever twisting and turning B roads on the island.

As with most collections, Jacopo's is still growing. There's a very scruffy 1988 AF1 Sintesi awaiting complete restoration, and an Extrema SP waiting to be shipped over from Italy for recommissioning among others, and Jacopo's nose for a potential project or another SP model is as keen as ever. It's an extraordinary collection of bikes, and possibly unique in its focus, size and quality, but the best thing about it is exactly what I've experienced today – they're there to be ridden, and ridden hard.

Jacopo was right. Less really is more. 

THE COLLECTION

Highlights of a spectacular and growing 125 garage



1985 Aprilia AS-R125

"This was a zero-mile bike I bought over the 'net while on holiday in Antigua. It had been stood in a dealer's in Sicily for 27 years but fired up first kick. It's had a complete strip and rebuild since."



1986 Honda NS125F

"I thought it was in a desperate condition when I bought it in 2008. It was covered in dust and dirt and the engine was seized. But once we'd degreased and cleaned it, it turned out to be perfect underneath."



1986 Aprilia AF1 50

"This needed a complete rebuild. It was all there but the frame was rusty and the paint was poor. It's got an export-spec 75cc Minarelli engine."



1987 Aprilia AF1 125 P108

"My best-ever find, it was perfect when I found it in 2010. Other than being recommissioned with a new piston, rings and fluids it's needed nothing."



1987 Honda NS125RII

"A really good find. I haven't seen another Rothmans NS-R in such good condition. Just needed new rings and it ran perfectly."



1988 Aprilia AF1 125 P108 Replica

"It had done 3000 miles from new when I found it in 2010. The engine and paint were good, but the frame had rusted because the bike had been stored in a damp place."



1989 Honda NSR125FJ

"The previous owner was a mechanic so it was in perfect condition when I found it in 2011. All it needed was fresh fluids and tyres and away it went."



1990 Cagiva Freccia C12R SP

"Very rare, and the hardest of my bikes to find. Cagiva only made a small production run and most of them were raced. So to find an original road bike is very hard."



1990 Aprilia AF1 125 Sintesi Sport

"When I found this one in 2009 it looked like it had spent its life on the bottom of the sea. With hindsight I wish I had bought a better example. It took a year to restore."



1990 Aprilia AF1 125 Futura

"This was a good find. I bought it from a guy who had owned it since he was 16 years old, and it was completely original. I've had it since 2007."



1992 Aprilia AF1 125 Futura SP

"Bought in 2007, it was in need of restoration. The plastic tank was split, then the replacement split, so it took a year-and-a-half to find a good used tank."



1992 Aprilia AF1 125 Europa

"Found in 2009, it was in very good condition with 7000 miles on the clock. All it needed was basic recommissioning, and a fresh piston and rings."



1992 Cagiva Mito 1 Denim

"The Denim is a limited edition – 306 of 600, but not an SP. I found it in 2009. It was perfect apart from where fuel had leaked and stripped paint off the swingarm."



1993 Aprilia RS125 Extrema

"I like this bike very much, and it's very fast. I've had it since 2009 and it was in perfect condition when I found it."



1993 Honda NSR125R

"This was the first one I bought. I had a Foxeye when I was 16. This one was in perfect shape but it hadn't been run in 15 years so it needed recommissioning."

Bikes currently undergoing restoration

1983 Aprilia ST125

"Bought complete but rough. Being completely restored at the moment. Should be finished later in the year."

1988 Cagiva Freccia C10R

"The bodywork's a complete mess but the rest is good with no rust. We'll clean it, get it running and decide whether to keep it."

1984 Aprilia STX125

"Like the ST, was complete but hadn't been used in years. Being restored alongside the ST. Should be finished at the same time."

1992 Honda NSR125R SP

"Very rare. Only 600 made. Bought in the UK as an import. It was rough so everything's been refurbished."

1988 Aprilia AF1 125 Sintesi

"A real mess. Needs a full restoration."

1993 Aprilia RS125R SP Extrema, Reggiani replica

"Extremely rare. Got it off the same guy that I got the Cagiva C12R SP from. Still in Italy at the moment."