



ABT Sportsline 2016

A special company turns 120 – a journey through time

120 years, four generations. That's how long ABT Sportsline, the globally largest tuner of cars produced by the Volkswagen Group, has already felt its passion for technology and powerful cars. Take a trip through the fascinating world of ABT.

The winter coach invented

The winter of 1895/96 was very harsh, especially in south-western Bavaria, covered by snow for months. Coaches couldn't really get through and sledges couldn't really be used where the snow had been removed. So it was hard to carry goods through this impassable region. This was when the 27-year-old blacksmith Johann Abt had a jolly good idea: he developed a device to turn a coach into a sledge and vice versa in a jiffy. This winter coach was both a helpful invention and a real innovation, the starting point for what is now a still family-owned fourth-generation company.

An "Auto Union" for all eternity

Johann Abt first doubted automobiles would be successful but welcomed the very first cars to his garage. After all, these first models were motorised coaches, more or less, so a blacksmith could also repair them. He soon found, however, that cars would indeed be a success. So he expanded this segment and by 1920 he had to choose a brand to open a branch for. In other words, which manufacturer had enough potential? He opted for Horch and Audi (Lat. for "listen"; in German "horch"), companies founded by August Horch, and thus for a partnership still existing today. For in 1932 Horch and Audi merged with Wanderer and DKW to form "Auto Union", which in turn would evolve into the Audi company, whose four-ring logo stands for these four former brands. Johann Abt surely didn't know how sustainable this relationship with Horch and Audi would turn out to be but AUTO-ABT, as it was now called, expanded rather early on. Which is why it moved in to larger premises in Burgstraße in Kempten at the end of the 1920s.

A new beginning with a strong woman

It is also due to a strong and determined woman that ABT Sportsline became an international brand: without Rosina Abt, the company's history may well have ended sadly with its 50th anniversary. For Johann Abt's son Josef Abt had not come back from the war and his brother Hans only returned home very late. So Josef's wife, Rosina, in those years of post-war austerity first ran the company on her own, then with Hans, her brother-in-law. And there was plenty to do: coaches had to be serviced and the few remaining automobiles were in very bad repair. This strong woman brought the company back on track in the most skilful and smart manner.



From race tracks onto the road – the younger generation favours tuning

And then another man named Johann was to continue to push ABT. Johann jun. had been a successful racer even when still being a teenager, as a DKW driver in particular. He had acquired all the technical know-how early on and wanted to share it with ABT's customers too. The starting gun was then fired when he met Carlo Abarth. Born in Vienna, Abarth had very successfully turned rather conventional compact Fiats into "hot sports cars". In 1966, Johann Abt desperately wanted to be a driver for the brand with the famous scorpion logo and went to Turin to meet Abarth. The whole meeting between Johann Abt and the maverick Austrian only lasted 30 seconds. But Abt not only soon became the "scorpions" driver, he also thought that ABT could do the same as Abarth had done. He then turned the now established slogan "from the race track onto the road" into reality when in 1964 he "officially" became director of the company and founded its tuning department. He and his team relied on upgrades through larger engine displacement and different pistons, special suspensions and exhaust systems and it was all "state of the art". Even back then, just like today, all components had to fit together and be roadworthy.

When tuning became popular

In the mid-1970s, cars were launched that were not only for the masses – like the Beetle before them – but also "tuneable". Modern engines or injection units made cars like the VW Golf or Audi 80/A4 powerful. So ABT developed assertive body kits and dealt with brakes, suspensions and exhaust systems. From the 1970s onwards, tuning was becoming really, really popular. In Kempten, the Golf and A4 were evergreens, each generation a real ABT.

The colourful 1980s

The 1980s were really colourful. For a time, it was trendy to place brightly coloured stickers on almost anything. Thanks to ABT even on cars. Soon you found them everywhere, on bonnets and wings, and not only a Polo's or Golf's. ABT stickers even made it to the popular TV show "Wetten, dass...?". "Thomas Gottschalk really once asked us what it was with the then fashionable 'bird droppings'. So we told him," says a smiling Hans-Jürgen Abt. "Originally, it had only been a marketing gag, but soon it was even sold at Aldi's," the ABT Sportslines CEO continues. "Wetten, dass...?" is no more, but at Kempten innovative ideas are still being realised, e.g. the colourful outfits for the Audi A1. For the design variations' market launch, ABT shot an Augmented-Reality-Video in which virtual visitors were able to co-write the plot with mouse-clicks. "That went down very well on Facebook," Hans-Jürgen Abt remembers. But the company's core business are other cars, particularly the components ABT has come up with for the VW Golf, the Audi A4/A5 or SUVs like the Q5, Q7 or Touareg.

1990 – when tuning finally became ennoblement

A new, representative building, providing space for a growing staff, to link up with the national and international partners and for plenty of innovative ideas – and a new name. ABT became ABT Sportslines, a brand that is now the global market leader when it comes to the tuning of cars produced by the Volkswagen Group. But why "tuning"? In Kempten's Daimlerstraße, since 2015 called Johann-Abt-Straße, one has long since used the term ennoblement. After all, ABT Sportslines deals with premium cars and applies the highest standards. If you drive an Audi or Volkswagen, you expect ABT to improve it not damage it. ABT Sportslines stands for higher quality and high-performance motorsport experience.



There is only one team ABT Sportsline

Johann Abt had already set standards, first as a driver then as the boss of the team. His son Hans-Jürgen has walked in his footsteps: Since ABT started to take part in the Deutsche Tourenwagen Masters (DTM), its drivers have won five championships: in 2002, the Frenchman Laurent Aiello, in 2004 and 2007 Mattias Ekström, and in 2008 and 2009 Timo Scheider as double champion. And ABT also won the team championship three times in the touring cars' top league. But the first touring-car win came in the STW (Super-Tourenwagen-Cup), when in 1999 Christian Abt won the drivers' championship. This was followed by successes in the GT Masters or, of late, in the FIA Formula E. With the dynamic e-racers, ABT Sportsline shows that it's possible to combine innovation with sustainability.

Planning for future triumphs

For future successes, the company is also outwardly on track: while the ABT Sportsline Motorsports-Center is rather angular on the outside, it's very spacious inside. There are lavish work stations, e.g. state-of-the-art offices, a huge warehouse or a washing shed but also carbon or transmission workshops. Even the daily DTM pitstop exercises are run here in these "think tanks". After all, it has always been an ABT Sportsline forte that the crew is incredibly fast then. To keep it that way, the team even has its own gym. Of course, ABT Sportsline also services ordinary cars to keep them roadworthy and make them fun to drive. This includes extensive tests out there on the road and on the state-of-the-art dynamometer.

Bavarian high-tech

Cars are getting ever more demanding. This is primarily due to almost all of them being fully controlled electronically these days – injection as much as transmissions, safety systems or multi-media devices. If you want to continue to service and enhance cars, like ABT Sportsline does, you have to rise to these challenges. "Here, you can tell the chaff from the wheat," says Hans-Jürgen Abt. "These days, simple chip tuning is barely an option; the systems are much too complex now," the CEO adds. This means: ABT Sportsline also develops control units and the right software, exactly geared to the engine and all the components in question. For this, your engineering has to be top of the line, but it has traditionally been so with ABT at any rate. If you want more ABT POWER, you will get a sophisticated and extensively tested upgrade for YOUR car. ABT is in every detail. Upscale, e.g. for the limited-edition "roadworthy racer" ABT R8 GTR, all components are consistently developed towards weight reduction and optimisation. The result is maximum motorsport competence in a conventional car - and has been for 120 years.

E-xciting - ABT electric mobility

ABT Sportsline has many years of experience with e-drives. As early as in 2009, they did pioneering work here. First came the "E-Tour Allgäu" promotion project, developed in close cooperation with Kempten University and Deutsche Post AG. In 2013, the success story was continued with the "Schaufenster Elektromobilität" and a number of sustainable projects have already been successfully implemented – from the development of prototypes to small-scale production. Some good examples are the eCaddy and the ABT eT5, which have already been tried and tested by Deutsche Post - over more than a million km. And an electrically driven quad bike is also in production: the Jetflyer. ABT also develops engine control units for e-cars, batteries and software, e.g. for data analysis and the sensory system. As is usual with ABT products, it has all been technically tested most thoroughly and they all bring motorsport know-how onto the road. After all, the Bavarians are the only German team in the FIA Formula E and have enriched the automotive world for 120 years now.

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