

The top 10 Auto GP drivers of 2013

The 2013 Auto GP title fight ended in a four-way showdown at the finale, and it was Vittorio Ghirelli who emerged as surprise champion. PETER MILLS ranks the stars of the season

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Vittorio Ghirelli emerged from a tense four-way showdown at Brno to lift this year's Auto GP championship. Putting aside critics' question marks over the championship's strength in depth, a strong case could be made that all four title contenders would have made worthy champions.

Early contenders Sergio Campana and Kimiya Sato sustained valiant efforts throughout their campaigns, but appeared unable to keep pace with the Super Nova pairing of Narain Karthikeyan - arguably the fastest driver in the series - and Ghirelli in the second half of the season, and ultimately Ghirelli claimed his maiden title.

1 Vittorio Ghirelli

Team: **Super Nova International**

Championship position: **1st (222 points)**

Wins: **2**

Poles: **2**

Fastest laps: **5**

Only 19 years old, Ghirelli has a wealth of racing experience but a relative drought in top results, which was brought to an end by the decision to opt for a sideways step in performance from FR3.5 to the similarly Zytek-powered Auto GP in 2013.



Teamed with reigning champion Super Nova, the seeds of Ghirelli's successful title assault germinated with a breakthrough victory in round three at the Hungaroring. The Fasano-born driver was only prevented from achieving the double in Hungary by a rare, slow left-rear tyre change.

Ghirelli's campaign was subsequently strengthened at Silverstone by the arrival of former Formula 1 driver Karthikeyan in the Super Nova camp. While Karthikeyan unquestionably had the edge in speed, Ghirelli was far from overshadowed.

Another dominant Super Nova display in the penultimate round at Donington Park moved

Ghirelli into the points lead for the first time. Exuding little sign of pressure at the Brno finale, Ghirelli went about capturing his first title in car racing in style by grabbing just his second pole of the season. A mature display was delivered in the races, resulting in two accomplished podiums.

The marked upturn in performance had already served to land Ghirelli a heavily subsidised seat in GP2 at the tail end of the season. It will be intriguing to see if Ghirelli can maintain his new-found career momentum through 2014.

2 Kimiya Sato

Team: **Euronova Racing**

Championship position: **2nd (213 points)**

Wins: **5**

Poles: **0**

Fastest laps: **5**

Eventual Auto GP runner-up Sato produced a number of impressive drives, including a dominant performance in a wet Monza season opener where he achieved victory by a remarkable 20 seconds.



Critics may question his outright qualifying speed. While it's true that four of the German Formula 3 graduate's five victories came in reversed-grid races, there was little wrong with Sato's racecraft.

This racing prowess was exemplary at the Nurburgring, where Sato emerged on top from two prolonged on-track spats with season-long adversary Campana. Both men ultimately failed to stop the late-season Super Nova steamroller, but Sato achieved everything that was asked of him in the final race, taking victory and fastest lap.

Spinning out at Donington was perhaps his only mistake of the season. Sato's talents have already been recognised by Sauber, which appointed him reserve driver at the recent Japanese Grand Prix, and he is keen to remain in Europe for 2014.

3 Narain Karthikeyan

Teams: Zele Racing/Super Nova International

Championship position: 4th (195 points)

Wins: 5

Poles: 4

Fastest laps: 3

Once established at Super Nova, Karthikeyan emerged, perhaps unsurprisingly, as the fastest driver in the championship. The ex-F1 driver's last-minute presence in Auto GP was a coup for the series, but his initial partnership with Zele Racing failed to produce anticipated results and effectively ruled Narain out of the championship hunt.



Several promising early positions in his tenure at Zele were lost through misfortune in the pitstops or unreliability. There was an immediate upturn in fortune after Narain switched to Super Nova. Karthikeyan took at least one win in every subsequent round and ended the year with the record for most poles and victories in the season. However, that hefty early points deficit in the drivers' standings proved insurmountable.

Karthikeyan would fall just 27 points short of Ghirelli's final tally (25 points are awarded for a feature race win), and may look back painfully at several moments where points slipped away.

4 Sergio Campana

Team: Ibiza Racing

Championship position: 3rd (197 points)

Wins: 3

Poles: 1

Fastest laps: 1

After wins in the opening two rounds, 2011 Italian F3 champion Campana's title charge faltered. Only one further victory was mustered, on home soil at Mugello.



Competing on a race-by-race basis for newcomer Ibiza Racing, and faced with an almost constantly changing roster of team-mates, the cash strapped Campana's eventual third place in the classification was a nonetheless worthy effort.

Having taken his maiden Auto GP win in Marrakech last year, Campana only received the call-up to drive for Giuseppe Cipriani's Ibiza Racing team in 2013 on the Wednesday before Monza's first race. His triumph was therefore crucial to retaining his seat.

That victory was achieved after a thrilling three-car fight with polesitter Riccardo Agostini and Sato, while in Marrakech he survived a nervous final lap when his machine developed a cracked exhaust and oil leak to take his second win of the year.

Like champion Ghirelli, Campana made his GP2 debut before the season was out, but perhaps faces a more uncertain future.

5 Kevin Giovesi

Team: Ghinzani Motorsport

Championship position: 6th (91 points)

Wins: 0

Poles: 0

Fastest laps: 1

Giovesi came agonisingly close to recording a shock debut win at Silverstone, where Ghinzani Motorsport had expanded to running two cars to accommodate the Lazarus GP2 refugee. The Italian teenager took the chequered flag first but picked up a clear-cut post-race one-minute penalty for making an illegal last-lap pitstop due to a team error.



This was the just the start of an incredible series of run-ins with officials. But if there was a question mark over Giovesi's/Ghinzani's understanding of the rule-book, there was none over the 2012 European F3 Open Copa Class champion's raw speed.

A surprise package, Giovesi could frequently be relied on to take the fight for victory to the Super Nova drivers and stood on the podium four times in his first four outings.

Giovesi was the on-the-road victor for a second time in 2013 in the reversed-grid race at Mugello, but a penalty for a track-limits misdemeanour dropped him to fifth.

For all the infringements, Giovesi's searing pace earmarks him as a potential title-contender should he decide to remain in Auto GP in 2014.