

What a difference a day makes



If you thought Porsche had taken leave of its senses when it abandoned endurance racing two years ago, then think how it must have appeared in 1980 when the company entered Le Mans with a trio of turbocharged 924s. Peter Morgan recalls how Weissach confounded the sceptics. All photos from the Porsche Archiv

The German-team car of Jürgen Barth and Manfred Schurtl at speed in the rain at Le Mans in 1980. Tubular-aluminium roll-cage can be seen through the rear window



The cabin of the 924 Carrera GT Le Mans was utilitarian. All unnecessary trim was removed, including the dashboard and the door linings. Some items survived, though, such as the door handles and fresh-air vents. Large knob on central tunnel is turbo-boost adjuster

Twenty-one years ago, in the summer of 1980, Porsche flirted with a race programme that even then was scarcely believable. Today it seems almost unimaginable.

In simple terms the factory entered a team of three 2.0-litre 924s in the 1980 Le Mans 24-Hours, shunning the near-700bhp sports prototypes and flame-splitting 935s that had won three out of the previous four events at the French road circuit.

Today, evidence that the 924

ever enjoyed a full works programme is almost non-existent. But the fact remains that in 1980 a trio of full-race, 320bhp turbocharged 924s was entered in the world's most famous race. All three finished, too, the best achieving a remarkable sixth overall. After another supporting appearance the following year, though, the 924 never ran again as a factory entry.

Head of Porsche at that time was Dr Ernst Fuhrmann (also responsible for the quad-car, four-cylinder Porsche engine of

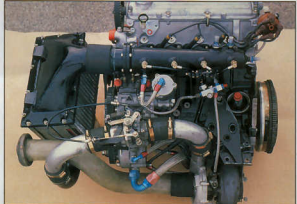
the 1950s). Fuhrmann faced a big problem with the company's product range. The 15-year-old 911 appeared to be reaching the end of its life, and yet the two new models – the water-cooled 928 and 924 – weren't hitting their sales targets.

Fuhrmann believed he had to raise the profile of the new models, and that this would enable him to kill off the 911. He directed the engineers at Weissach to get busy on the 924.

The first step in this pro-

gramme was revealed at the Frankfurt motor show in September 1979. The road-going 924 Carrera GT stole the show, and a limited edition of 400 cars sold out predictably quickly.

The Carrera GT looked gorgeous, and its already well-balanced chassis was given a healthy 210bhp engine. And Tony Lapine (styling head at the time) had perfectly complemented the 924's curves by adding enlarged and fashionably squared-off wheelarches to cover



The 320bhp turbocharged two-litre engine of the Carrera GT Le Mans cars. Note that the turbo has been relocated to the left-hand side of the engine, with intercooler ahead of it

No 3: 924 Carrera GT Le Mans

the wider wheels and tyres.

But this car was always intended to be more than a lucrative special product. In fact, by building 400 for the road Porsche would qualify it as a production-based racer. Furthermore – and this was the real reason – it would inject much-needed charisma into the 924's conservative character with an entry at Le Mans.

This really raised some eyebrows. But Fuhrmann stood his ground. He wanted a factory entry of Carrera GT race cars at Le Mans in 1980, and a small team led by Norbert Singer (project engineer for the amazing 'Moby Dick' 935 racer featured in the May issue; see pages 80–82) was given the not inconsiderable task of developing a car.

Singer knew that the modifications permitted in the modified GT class wouldn't allow him to build a machine representative of Porsche's or the car's potential. Instead he decided to enter the less restrictive GT prototype class.

Porsche's 1980 Le Mans challenger was revealed just weeks before the event. But the 924 Carrera GT Le Mans, as it was known, wasn't the sleek prototype journalists had been expecting. It was said the new GT was good for 175mph on the long Le Mans straights, but that was 50mph slower than the 935 K3s (which had won the previous year), and as much as 60mph slower than the 936.

It was even suggested by some that a 936 be smuggled out of the Porsche museum and given to Reinhold Joest so that at least a Porsche had a chance of contesting the overall honours. But Fuhrmann was adamant. There would be no 936s at Le Mans in 1980 (although Joest was allowed to raid the 936 parts bin to upgrade his much-modified '908/80' to as close to 936 specification as possible).

When the three Carrera GT LMs were wheeled out for the first practice session they were all painted white, but each was given an individual national identity in the form of a flag painted on the body behind the rear wheels. There was one car for Germany, one for the United States and one for Great Britain.

Jürgen Barth, Manfred Schurti and Günther Steckonig were nominated for the German car. In the American car would be Hurley Haywood and Peter Gregg, while Derek Bell, Tony Dron and Andy Rouse were nominated by Porsche Cars Great Britain to drive the nominally British car.

Compared to Jacky Ickx's best qualifying time in the Joest-entered 908/80, the best Carrera GT was some 20 seconds slower. The new cars were simply blown away, not only by the prototypes, but also by no fewer than 15 heavily modified 935s.

The 908/80 started from fourth on the grid, for example, but the best Carrera GT LM – the American car – started from a lowly 34th, while the others trailed in 44th and 46th positions. It wasn't where one expects factory Porsches to start at Le Mans. And then two of the driving team were put out of the running before the start.

Peter Gregg, the American ace who had dominated IMSA throughout the 1970s in various forms of Brumos 911, had been



The 924 Carrera GT LM supported by Porsche Cars Great Britain, and driven at Le Mans in 1980 by Tony Dron and Andy Rouse. Nose section is a one-piece moulding, unlike that of the later customer Carrera GTR, which had separate wings and nose sections for easier replacement

involved in a road accident and suffered concussion on the way to the first qualifying session on the Wednesday evening. Derek Bell moved across to partner Haywood, leaving Dron and Rouse – both well known in the UK – to drive the British GT.

More serious, though, was the news that the veteran driver Günther Steckonig had suffered kidney failure. He, too, would take no further part in the event, leaving Barth and Schurti to manage the German car.

And then, in the early stages of the race, Tony Dron was nearly blown off the course by a 935. But as the hours passed the event turned out far better than anyone could have imagined. Changeable weather and the unreliability of others brought some welcome unpredictability.

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The drivers' views: Bell and Dron remember

Derek Bell, MBE, remembers the Carrera GT well. His Le Mans drive in 1980 revitalised his career, opening a long (and very successful) relationship with Porsche and the American driver, Al Holbert.

'I was due to drive with Andy Rouse and Tony Dron, but then Peter Gregg had an accident. So they put me in the American car, which was fantastic, because I ended up driving with Al Holbert for the next seven or eight years. It made my American championship career.

'There wasn't much you could change in the car, but little things could alter it a lot, so we tried splitters at the front and the back, different ride heights and so on. I qualified quickest of the Carrera GTs, but we started about thirty-fifth, with the others about ten places back.

'In the race it poured down with rain at the start, and at our first fuel stop – about an hour and a half into the event – we were lying thirteenth.

'We stayed there all through the afternoon. And then during the night we gradually worked our way up, not because of our speed, but because of our reliability, and the fact that the car was phenomenal in the wet.

'In fact, by eight in the morning we'd climbed to fifth place. We were very competitive. I was disappointed that we didn't finish well up, though, because I wanted to continue driving with the factory.'

Far from being the end with Porsche, it was only the beginning for Bell. Indeed, the fact that he has an immaculate 924 Carrera GTS tucked away in his garage today is a clear indication of the very special role the model has played in his life.

Tony Dron received the call to drive the 924 Carrera GT Le Mans from 911 & Porsche World columnist Mike Cotton – who was at that time press officer for Porsche Cars Great Britain.

'I had won six of the nine rounds in the Porsche 924 championship in 1978 and Andy [Rouse] was runner-up.

'We went down to Paul Ricard to do a 36-hour test with Norbert Singer. We had a digital readout of the cylinder-head temperature in the car, and halfway down the long straight there the temperature would go through the roof!

'Singer told us we should ignore it, but after 18 hours the exhaust valves burned, and the engine had to be rebuilt. At Le Mans we asked if we should ease off on the straights to conserve the engines, but they said they had modified them.

'It was the best-handling car I had driven. It had a stiff chassis, and was brilliant in the dry and the wet. It wasn't quick in terms of lap times, but it ran for longer, so we crept up the field. I did nearly a four-hour stint on the Sunday morning. Then the valves went and we dropped right back.

'I remember a couple of worrying moments. I was halfway down the Mulsanne straight and I could see a 935 coming up. I moved in behind a slower car, and as the 935 passed I slipped left into his slipstream. But there was so much turbulence that it tore away the left-hand mounting of the nose section!

'During the night a guy in a [935] K3 spun in the Porsche curves, then when I was almost on top of him he started to roll back across the track. I went off in the dark, sideways with the headlights pointing at the Armco, and then sideways the other direction. But I got through and carried on. It was a fabulous car.' ■

Indeed, by dawn on Sunday all three Carreras were running inside the top 10. And this was after another drama in the early hours when the German car hit an unfortunate hare that had wandered onto the track, wrecking the Porsche's nose section and radiator.

Bell and Holbert were seventh, Rouse and Dron lay eighth, with Barth and Schurti catching up in 10th position. But then both the American and British cars suffered burned exhaust valves.



Porsche went back to Le Mans in 1981 with a brand-new 2.5-litre engine, and the car entered the event as the 944GTP (above). Later that summer the production 944 would be announced – and herald a period of record sales for the company

The German car was still running well at that point, though, and so the team was able to enrich the air/fuel mixture and thus keep the valves slightly cooler. The other two cars continued on three cylinders, and all the drivers were instructed to slow their pace.

By the time the chequered flag fell the German car had worked its way up to a remarkable sixth, with the British car 12th, and Bell and Holbert 13th. The lckx/Joest 908/80 finished second, and only one 935 managed to beat the best Carrera GT. It was, in spite of everything, a very satisfactory performance, indeed.

On 1st January 1981 Dr Fuhrmann was replaced by Peter Schutz, who inherited the difficult task of reviving sales of both the 924 and 928. Schutz wanted nothing less than overall victory at Le Mans. He directed that the 936 be pulled from the museum, and a suitable campaign planned. Fortunately, though, this would include further development of the Carrera GT LM.

During what remained of the winter, then, Norbert Singer's

team developed a brand-new, Porsche-designed, four-cylinder, twin-camshaft engine. It was, in essence, half a 928 power unit, and with a turbocharger produced no less than 420bhp.

A single car ran at Le Mans that summer as a 944LM, and in the hands of Jürgen Barth and Walter Röhri finished seventh. One of the previous year's 924 Carrera GT LMs was also driven to a class win by Manfred Schurti and Andy Rouse.

Under Schutz's direction the race team then shifted back to prototypes, and after winning the 1981 24-Hours (with the 936) it turned its attention to the new Group 'C'. The following year the ground-breaking 956 would finish Le Mans in first, second and third positions. Memories of the four-cylinder cars faded fast.

A small production series of Carrera GT race cars had followed the 1980 success at Le Mans. The Carrera GTS and GTR, as they were known, provided a platform for customers to enter international or national competition – or simply to enjoy heartstopping performance on the road.

Among those who put the GTR on the international racing map were Swiss driver Peter Zbinden, whose Formel Rennsport car won



The 1981 customer Carrera GTR (above) offered no less than 375bhp (thanks to increased maximum turbo boost) but otherwise was little different to factory racers of 1980

the GT class at the 1981 Silverstone 6-Hours.

Britain's Richard Lloyd entered another car that year for himself and Tony Dron. The Canon-liveried machine became a familiar sight in the European rounds of the World Endurance Championship, winning its class at Brands Hatch. The white GTR shown here (above) is the Almeras Frères car that raced at Le Mans, also in 1981.

George Drolsom, Doc Bundy



Head to head: the German-team Le Mans car (left) meets the limited-edition road car

1980 Porsche 924 Carrera GT Le Mans

BODY/CHASSIS

Lightened 924 steel body shell. Cruciform aluminium-alloy braces between front- and rear-suspension turrets, both integrated with full tubular-aluminium roll-cage. One-piece glassfibre front wings and nose assembly. Glassfibre rear wings and bonnet. Plastic side windows; stripped-out interior, automatic fire-extinguisher system; rear-mounted bag-type fuel tank

ENGINE

Type 924GTP in-line four cylinder (based on M31/50). Cast-iron cylinder block with aluminium cylinder head: two valves per cylinder operated by belt-driven single overhead camshaft. Single KKK turbocharger; Küggelschiefer mechanical fuel injection; front-mounted air-to-air intercooler

Capacity: 1984cc

Bore/stroke: 86.5mm/84.4mm

Compression ratio: 6.8:1

Maximum power: 320bhp at 6500rpm

Maximum torque: 383Nm at 4500rpm

TRANSMISSION

Rear-mounted type 937/50 five-speed gearbox with internal oil pump and external cooler (the latter located in the rear spoiler). Single-plate clutch with sintered metal lining. Fully locked differential

SUSPENSION AND STEERING

Front: MacPherson struts with Bilstein damper inserts and rising-rate titanium coil springs. Rear: cast-aluminium trailing arms with stiffened rising-rate titanium coil springs over Bilstein dampers

BRAKES

Type 935 four-piston light-alloy calipers with cross-drilled and ventilated cast-iron discs

WHEELS AND TYRES

BBS Luftfederl-design 11.0J x 16-inch centre-lock magnesium-alloy wheels front and rear. Dunlop Racing tyres; 275/600 x 16 front, 300/625 x 16 rear

WEIGHTS & MEASURES

Length: 4254mm

Width: 1849mm

Wheelbase: 2400mm

Weight: 930kg

PERFORMANCE

Maximum speed: 175mph (approximately)

Acceleration: 375bhp/950kg GTR recorded at 4.7 seconds from 0–100km/h (62mph)

RACE CREDITS

1980 Le Mans 24-Hours: 6th (Barth/Schurti/Braun); 12th (Dron/Rouse); 13th (Bell/Holbert)

1981 Le Mans 24-Hours: 11th (Schurti/Rouse)

and Tom Winters led the charge with the Carrera GTR in North America, with Bundy and Jim Busby running a BFGoodrich-sponsored car to 16th place at Le Mans in 1982.

Twenty-one years on it's easy to forget the huge contribution of the 924 Carrera GT Le Mans. But the simple truth is that Dr Fuhrmann's seemingly mad idea paid off handsomely.

Happily, of course, the 911 wasn't axed – Schutz reversed that strategy – but the Carrera GT LMs played a pivotal part in Porsche's future. They previewed the styling that would become the 944, and played a big part in the

development of the 944's 2.5-litre four-cylinder engine.

Sales of the subsequent 944 were spectacular, and the re-invention of the front-engined, rear-drive Porsche quite literally transformed the company's fortunes during the 1980s. Record sales resulted in the accumulation of huge cash reserves which underpinned Porsche's independence during the early 1990s.

And the inspiration for the 944 was, of course, the Carrera GT in all its forms. In simple terms this shy Cinderella was nothing less than the catalyst for the new Porsches you see today. ■