

Making a comeback in a true icon

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15/11/2018 It had been ten years since Rod Emory, an American builder of vintage Porsches, got behind the wheel and competed in a race. That all changed at the Rennsport Reunion VI at Laguna Seca. The Californian Porsche enthusiast celebrated his comeback in a true icon – the Porsche 935.

Rod Emory struggles to find the words to describe how he feels as he grasps the wheel of his Porsche 935 and listens to the 3-litre engine rumbling right behind him, the sound barely masked by his helmet. He needs a few seconds to compose himself. But you can tell in his eyes what he's really feeling: whilst he's tense, with adrenalin rushing through his body, his child-like joy at getting back behind the wheel is clear for all to see. "I've waited for this moment for ten years," the 44-year-old explains as he finally finds the right words. "I can't quite believe that my first race here at Laguna Seca is taking place on Porsche's 70th anniversary – and that I get to race this 935," he adds.

The crescendo in the driver's paddock around Rod increasingly resembles the thunder of an earthquake. Alongside his Porsche 935, a whole host of other racing legends are warming up: there's the legendary

917 in both the short-tail and long-tail model, then a rare 904, and even various 911 STs, all waiting to finally be released onto the WeatherTech Raceway. The Rennsport Reunion, a classic meeting of Porsche race cars, is quite simply a must-see event for anyone wanting to experience Porsche's motor racing history up close. Rod feels quite at home in the midst of all the metallic noise and the hustle and bustle of the racetrack. Whilst he checks the stripped-back cockpit of his 935, he gives 9:11 Magazine an insight into his life with Porsche.

Rod's passion for Porsche started from a very young age. In fact, he made it into a Porsche 911 before he even made it into his cradle. In May 1974 his father Gary Emory picked up his newly born son with his mother in his treasured G model to take them home from hospital. Whilst Rod was growing up and spending his Sundays washing the 911, his father and grandfather dedicated their days to building cars and to their parts business. The two sometimes created the most extraordinary vehicles: racers, desert speedsters, and even typical American showcars.

At just 14 years of age, Rod modified a Porsche 356 under the watchful eye of his grandfather Neil. He wanted to use it for private races – and it is still in his garage to this day, 30 years later. “Whilst other boys his age went to American football or baseball training, I increasingly found Rod deep within the bowels of his 356," remembers Rod's father Gary. Two years later, aged 16 and with his official racing license in the bag, Emory Junior was finally able to drive the sports car he had always dreamed of as a child.

Looking back on his racing career, Rod explains: “I certainly wasn't a winner, but in every race I started I was able to make it into the top 10." At the end, a real racing spirit was instilled in Rod and became his passion, both on and off the race track. Although he had initially perhaps hoped to pursue a professional racing career, he ultimately gave it up to look after his family and business. “Instead of loading the trailer and putting the pedal to the metal at a race track somewhere in America at the weekends, I preferred to be there for my wife Amy and my children," comments the petrolhead and family guy.

Rod soon transformed the former family workshop on America's west coast into a real magnet for Porsche enthusiasts: Emory Motorsports. Despite having officially retired from motor racing, his yearning for the race track never quite disappeared entirely, and this is evident in his Porsches and his manner. So it comes as no surprise that, in the Rennsport Reunion VI, he saw a chance to finally get behind the wheel of a racing Porsche again and inhale that familiar smell of burnt rubber and petrol – not to mention the spirit of the race track.

When the Florida-based Porsche customer racing team Gunnar Racing needed a reliable driver for their 1977 Porsche 935 for the sixth Rennsport Reunion, Rod did not immediately think of himself as a potential candidate. It wasn't until Kevin Jeannette, who launched Gunnar Racing in 1978 and has even worked with the Porsche Museum, spoke to Rod that he could picture himself behind the wheel.

The Porsche 935 that Rod was set to drive has the chassis number 930 770 0904 and was supplied by Porsche more than 40 years ago specifically for use in customer races. Various teams have driven it on race tracks in Germany, Belgium, the UK and France, from the Nürburgring, at Hockenheim, the Norisring in Leipzig, at Zolder or later on at Brands Hatch, Silverstone and, of course, Le Mans. Even the former engineer and Porsche institution Günther Steckkönig sat behind the wheel of this 935 and competed in two races.

“It's crazy that I get to drive this very 935. It's been a part of so much racing history, not to mention the noise it makes and its immense power. I'm going to ask my wife to pinch me afterwards so that I know I'm not dreaming!” adds Rod, before disappearing with flames spitting from the exhaust of his iconic 935 at Laguna Seca.

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