

Making time for legends

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09/08/2018 They spend all day working for Porsche, and all evening indulging their passion for Porsche in both words and deeds: The group known as “Freunde Luftgekühlter Boxermotoren” [Friends of Air-Cooled Flat Engines] is the largest works sports team at Porsche. Their focus is on experiencing the culture of driving, as well as socialising and delving into a living (technical) history.

A large banner bearing the words “The Legend Moves On” hangs over a row of covered vehicles. Nothing stirs in this austere industrial building. But the silhouettes offer the promise of speed – if they were only freed from their tarpaulins. Bernd Stadler takes the task in hand. A deft movement, a whoosh of the cover, and the Saturn Yellow Metallic colour of his Porsche 914 gleams in the grey of the factory hall. And there's a glint in Stadler's eye, too. The vehicle is his winter project. He is in the process of restoring its engine. Needless to say, it is an air-cooled flat engine. Because this building on the outskirts of Weissach is home to the “Freunde Luftgekühlter Boxermotoren”, or FLB for short.

It is the largest works sports team at Porsche, with almost 600 members. They are all current or former Porsche employees, including Dr. Wolfgang Porsche, Matthias Müller, Oliver Blume, Hans Mezger, Norbert Singer and Walter Röhrl. Oliver Berg and Bernd Stadler act as chairmen. To join the club, you don't actually need to own a vehicle with an air-cooled flat engine. According to Berg, "A passion for air-cooled flat engines is all that we ask for". And this passion serves as the ideal foundation for achieving what the works sports team sees as its mission; to preserve generations of air-cooled engines – from the VW Beetle as the progenitor through to the 911 models of the 993 generation. It does this by building a network of experience and knowledge and passing on the company's culture, as well as socialising and (of course) driving together.

The air-cooled flat engine has been a focal point for the Porsche brand ever since Ferry Porsche installed a performance-enhanced Beetle engine in his 356-001. The nature of its design – two rows of opposing cylinders – means that the flat engine runs incredibly smoothly and boasts superb reliability and a low centre of gravity, as well as high revving ability thanks to its status as a short-stroke engine. And what's more, it's fast. As proven by countless victories chalked up for Porsche on the race track. Or by the absolute reliability for which the Beetle is so famous. Fans of air-cooled engines also value their pure, unadulterated and penetrating staccato sound. It undoubtedly stirs the emotions. This is perhaps why the works sports team has attracted so many members.

Fans of flat engines had been in contact on an informal basis for many years, with events organised primarily by Thorsten Klein, who was responsible for designing the interior of the 918. They met at a farm that Oliver Berg used to own in Möttlingen, where the air-cooled engines – ranging from the Beetle and its derivatives through to the Porsche 911 S Targa from 1975 – would line up in the barn. The works sports team was founded in autumn 2010 as the logical next step, not least because it was around this time that Berg met a like-minded soul in the form of Bernd Stadler, who was willing to take on some of the organisational duties. It was also at this time that Matthias Müller, who had a particular interest in emphasising the close links between past and present, took over as Chairman of the Executive Board at Porsche. The club was an immediate success; within just one year, its roster of members had grown to 270.

Over 30 member-owned vehicles await their next adventure

Herbert Linge was one of the founder members. He joined Porsche in 1943 as an apprentice before working as a racing mechanic and driver, and finally as a plant manager at the Weissach Development Centre. For decades, Linge – who will soon celebrate his 90th birthday – has been driving an air-cooled 911 Targa built in 1976. Back in 2012, it was Linge's wife Lilo who first found out about the austere industrial building covering an area of 1600 m² on the northern outskirts of Weissach. She contacted the town hall. Shortly afterwards, a long-term lease was signed, and the club had found a home.

They set up a vehicle storage hall where the four-wheeled members of the club can rest their wheels, and where over 30 member-owned vehicles currently await their next adventure. Oliver Berg's grey 356 stands out in a row shaped mostly by 911 silhouettes, but which also includes a rare automatic Beetle

in beige and two VW Campers. “The money we make from renting out the parking spaces covers the cost of leasing out the whole building”, explains Oliver Berg.

The hall next door is dominated by four sturdy-looking lifting platforms. This is the workshop, which is the ideal location for repairs, restorations and more. At one end, Stadler’s 914 is waiting patiently under the “Legend” banner for its engine, which with any luck will soon be overhauled. At the other end is a disembowelled VW T2b that still needs many hours of welding and grinding. Behind it lies a workroom and an enclosed space with an extraction system for sand blasting. This is where Stadler is overhauling the 1.7-litre engine for his 914. He is using workshop equipment that is no longer needed by the Development Centre, but which – as Berg emphasises – has been relocated in compliance with auditing requirements.

The basement houses the group’s crowning glory: a 150-m² club house where the members can meet together “in their natural environment”, says Berg with a grin. There are several groups of chairs, a corner sofa, shelves, glass cabinets, a wood-burning stove, a table football table and a bar, which carries the name “0.8 Bar” – a reference to the boost pressure of the first 911 Turbo from 1974. The walls of the clubhouse are adorned with Porsche posters, decorative images of vehicles from the 356 to the 911, racing suits and drawings of race tracks. Visitors can also see the club’s motto: “25 years of victory in its most elegant form”. And the display is completed by the autographs of racing drivers such as Jo Siffert or Brian Redman. A small library is filled with books on relevant topics. “Our aim is to fill the place with Porsche history”, explains Stadler.

That means a little work is required here and there. Herbert Linge praises the energy of the younger members of the club: “They do a brilliant job. Even senior heads of department aren’t afraid to sweep the floor”. In fact, the title of “Friends” seems to be taken quite literally.

This becomes particularly evident during the monthly club evenings or on the trips when up to 100 vehicles with air-cooled engines hit the road. The club house gets especially crowded during the film evenings and presentations that are held up to six times a year. People such as Linge who experienced the heyday of flat engines tell stories of things that seemed quite ordinary back then but would be unthinkable today. Like the time in 1954 when they drove a racing car from Zuffenhausen to Le Mans, completed the race, and then drove it back again afterwards.

“The 550 Spyder just wouldn’t fit on the trailer with the other vehicles”, explains Linge with a laugh, and adds: “I can’t get over the fact that the younger generation is so interested in the Carrera Panamericana or the Le Mans of the 1950s”.

One reason might be the allure of the analogue in a digital world. It acts as a counterpoint, highlighting the enduring values that serve as a guide even as a never-ending stream of new innovations appears over the horizon. The two chairmen are perhaps the best example of this principle. During the day, they secure the company’s future – Berg as Manager Motorsport GT Model Line, and Stadler as Manager

Exklusive Manufaktur. “But once our work is done for the day, we immerse ourselves in the culture of Porsche”, says Berg. And they document their efforts, too: “We film every presentation and the subsequent Q&A session. It’s important that the knowledge shared here is not lost”, says Stadler. After all, legends don’t stand still. They move on.

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