

Günter Steckkönig: a career comes full circle

15/08/2023 Günter Steckkönig's passion for motorsport began at the Solitude racetrack, and his career as a racing driver took off in earnest in a 914/6. Now, decades later, he's back at the circuit to the west of Stuttgart – in Achim Kächele's newly restored 914/6.

Sometimes things come full circle in a wonderful way. When life winds its way like a racetrack around bends and through ups and downs, and you find yourself passing your starting point again – now a changed person intensely conscious of the things that really mattered when you first started out. On this day early in the summer in 2023, as Günter Steckkönig takes a seat behind the wheel of a 914/6 in Stuttgart's west, two important life events have now come full circle for one of the greatest Porsche racing drivers of the last century.

It was around 70 years ago that the young Günter and his father visited the Solitude racetrack outside Stuttgart, not far from their home in the suburb of Degerloch. As Günter Steckkönig discovered his passion for motorsport to the west of Stuttgart, he started on a journey that would take him far from home, and decades later returned him to his starting point.

Günter Steckkönig, taking a seat at the start and finish tower in Mahdental, now finds himself having come full circle and talking about how it all happened. “On that day at the racetrack, a dream came to me: how can I become a racing driver?” In 1953, he began an apprenticeship as an automotive mechanic at Porsche. Later, he often sat behind the wheel for test drives, made optimisations and conducted tests, built up experience, and as a technician at races got to know important people in the world of motorsport. All of which helped him as he intensified his efforts in the mid-1960s to his own victories as a driver. He made it into the cockpit, and then participated in his first long-distance race in the World Sportscar Championship in 1970, a 1,000 kilometre race on the Nürburgring, in a Porsche 914/6 GT. At the Marathon de la Route on the Nürburgring that same year, all three Porsche 914/6 cars crossed the finish line almost simultaneously after 86 hours.

A regular on the podium

“I loved driving that car,” Steckkönig recalls. “The limit hadn’t yet been pushed to where it is today. Many drivers were mindful of the risk of spinning. But I didn’t have any problems – which wasn’t the only reason I came to love the 914.” Maybe it was because he also celebrated his first major successes with the mid-engine racing car. He soon became a regular on the podium, and in the 1,000 kilometre race in Zeltweg a few months later, he took the victory in Group GT2.0 – for Team Strähle Autosport in nearby Schorndorf. Having driven from this town of 40,000 people east of Stuttgart on this day in May 2023, Achim Kächele arrives in his restored 914/6 in which Steckkönig now takes his place behind the wheel and, now that things are coming full circle, turns the clock back a little. “If the 914 had benefited from as much love and development work as the 911, it might even have been the better racing car,” Steckkönig reckons. “A mid-engine format is the favoured layout for racing cars today, after all. And why is this? In my opinion, the equal distribution of weight between the front and rear axles is simply an advantage,” says the 87-year-old.

In 1971, the 914/6 also raced in the Targa Florio, which has meanwhile become another of Steckkönig’s favourite memories, and was a significant milestone of his career. “I’m a huge fan of the Targa – I really enjoyed the long, narrow mountain route. As far as I was concerned, the longer the better. I built up my speed over time, and then I was very fast. But then, all of a sudden, it’s over – that was difficult for me.”

“I don’t drive fast. I drive cleanly and precisely“

Günter Steckkönig remains an exceedingly polite and engaging man, and he beams as he talks about how motorsport moulded and defined him. He’s what Swabians call a ‘fine chap’ through and through. Steckkönig’s character was also evident on the racetrack. “I don’t drive fast. I drive cleanly and precisely. And that makes me fast,” he liked to say. He laughs as he tells this story now. And his life is his proof. In 1973, he flew with the spare parts to Sicily for the Targa, where he discovered that his competition car was not fit to drive. “So, I sat into the practice RSR and became familiar with it during the race.” He finished sixth – before earning himself a legendary status by driving the car non-stop to Stuttgart on

account of an electrical defect.

From 1976, Steckkönig was also active at Le Mans, initially with a second driver – "without today's assistance systems and therefore not quite as fast". The endurance test proved to be his metier, as he finished in a sensational seventh on his début in the Porsche 908/03 Turbo with Ernst Kraus. His journey then continued, taking him to the world's most important racetracks: Daytona, Silverstone, Brands Hatch, Kyalami. Steckkönig drove almost all the Porsche racing cars, both as a works driver and in privateer teams. Not just his favourite, the 914, and the 908/03. Of course, there was the 911, as well as the 930, 935J, 928 and many more. His incredibly wide-ranging technical expertise was always highly valued alongside his skills as a racing driver.

So highly, in fact, that this eventually brought his racing career to an end. Steckkönig found this hard to bear, even if he has now come to terms it. After he had just won a race, Porsche boss Ferdinand Piëch said to him: "I can buy good racing drivers anywhere, but good technicians are harder to find. You need to focus more on your job."

A total of 30 years in the test driving department

However, this didn't mean that Steckkönig had to give up the rush of speed, or that his skill behind the wheel was no longer needed. He worked for Porsche for a total of 30 years in the test driving department. For development tests, he sometimes sped down Germany's autobahns at 260 km/h, uncertain of whether all the other road users were aware of him. "Some fast bends were, however, important to us," Steckkönig recalls, adding: "On occasion, this was more exciting than driving in races."

But despite his satisfaction with his successful racing career, he was sad when his time at Porsche came to an end. The father of two daughters, who now lives with his wife Ellen in Vaihingen an der Enz, drove Mark Donohue's 917/30 at the Nürburgring Oldtimer Grand Prix in 1992 one last time. This appearance was a fitting finish that does a good job of summing up Günter Steckkönig's extraordinary career. Because the car from the museum was still sporting its decades-old tyres, he had to find replacements just before the race. His connections from his days as a technician held him in good stead. A friend at Goodyear found him his replacements. He made the first row of the grid. and, more importantly, returned the car safely to the museum. The full-blooded technician with a precise style of driving.

And this same racing driver now finds himself back on the Solitude racetrack. Seated in a 914/6 once again, just like in 1970 when his career first took off. "This car is really special," he says. "So many good memories." One thing that has come full circle for Günter Steckkönig – and there are many others still to come.

Info

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