

The magnificent four

10/05/2017 Imagine you're at the Targa Florio. And imagine the heroes of yore – Elford, Linge, van Lennep and Steckkönig – were driving once more. In a Porsche, of course. In 2016 they did it again.

Chatting with Linge while he is driving the Spyder only proves to be difficult if you are unfamiliar with the Swabian dialect of southwestern Germany. "The first time I was here was in 1959," he recalls, "and the cars proved to be extremely reliable from the outset." In ten races, Linge was never able to get a win and came in second "only" twice; "but I always came in!" The racing director at the time, Huschke von Hanstein, always wanted to go to the "Targa", to show what the little cars from Stuttgart had in them: And this was not just any old race... But nor was Linge just any old Porsche employee. Born in Weissach, as an apprentice mechanic he became Porsche employee number 13, as his company ID still shows today. He always remained loyal to the company, occupying various positions, founding the ONS safety crew and becoming its technical director. Up until he 1993, he still managed the Carrera Cup.

From 1954 to 1970, he took up the racing wheel himself. In 1954, he drove the Porsche 550 Spyder in the Mille Miglia, winning his class and coming sixth overall, won the Liège-Rome-Liège Rally in a 356 SL, came second in the Tour de France in the 550 Spyder and took fourth place in the Carrera Panamericana in the same vehicle. 1961 saw him racing in the Targa Florio for the first time in the 356

B Carrera GTL Abarth. In 1963, he came third overall there (and first in his class) in the famous "Dreikantschaber" ("triangular scraper") 356 B Carrera GT. In 1964, he came in fourth overall in Le Mans in the Porsche 904, and repeated the achievement in 1965. Overall, Linge secured a phenomenal 90 class victories for Porsche.

His life at Porsche began in 1953. Originally from the town of Degerloch, he was at that time one of the first eight apprentices with the sportscar manufacturer; afterwards, he attended the technical school in Stuttgart. His occupation was what we call a "test driver". For 30 years in total, he worked in road tests for Porsche, introduced Formula Vee together with Huschke von Hanstein and drove almost all the racing cars that Porsche set on wheels at the time. In 1968, he received his first works assignment – and in return delivered second place in the Marathon de la Rout on the Nürburgring in the Porsche 911 R. In 1970, he became the overall winner among the GT sportscars at the Österreich-Ring in the 914/6. In 1976, he came in a sensational seventh place in Le Mans in the 908/03. He competed in the Targa Florio three times: in 1971 in the Porsche 914/6 GT, in 1972 in a 911 S (class winner and sixth overall despite an accident) and in 1973 in a Carrera RSR. "The spectators were always particularly friendly here," he explains, when the Fuhrmann engine lets him; "extremely enthusiastic even – you didn't get that anywhere else."

Between engines and transmissions

But in 1973 he was lucky to be able to start at all. He travelled in the spare parts plane between engines and transmissions – and as soon as he arrived he was told that his co-pilot had crashed the competition vehicle. "But I categorically wanted to drive," he recalls. "The sports boss Norbert Singer suggested the "Muletto" – the training car – for the race. So I got in the training RSR and familiarised myself with it during the race..." And still came in sixth overall. But it was after the car had done its work and he was taking it back to Stuttgart that Steckkönig really became a legend. Due to an electrical fault and a problematic restart, he did the entire stretch from mainland Italy to Weissach without turning off the engine once...

His encounter with the 356 B 1600 Carrera GTL Abarth in 2016 is, however, a first for Steckkönig. The car is the result of the cooperation between Porsche and the Italian tuner Abarth that began with the Cisitalia Type 360. At the start of the 60s, Porsche wanted to get in on the GT sport scene, and needed a lightweight version of the 356. Carlo Abarth sent the order for 20 lightweight coupés to Zagato in Milan. The specialists did a great job: The body was made a full 140 kilogrammes lighter than the normal Porsche 356 B. In 1960, with Hans Hermann and Joakim Bonnier behind the wheel, the car won, among others, the Targa Florio with a 1.6-litre engine, and in 1961 it started with a 2-litre Carrera drive.

Porsche developed the RSR as a GT racer on the basis of the Carrera RS 2.7. With 300 hp and a weight of just 900 kilogrammes, the Porsche won the 24 Hours of Daytona in early 1973. After that, the vehicle took part in the prototype class, which allows more technical freedom. Here, it gained another 10 hp, but also 40 kilogrammes in weight. A total of 55 RSRs were produced. One of them is now being

being vigorously and skilfully put through its paces by van Lennep. He curves round what are at times dramatic tectonic fault lines on the tarmac with agility, without slowing down. How was it possible back then for a GT car to overcome the competition? “Quite simple,” he says, “because the others made mistakes. Merzario had an engine failure; Ickx didn't know the route well enough and crashed. After three laps, we were already in the lead and just carried on driving with precision. In a road race like the Targa Florio if you make just one little mistake, that can be it…”

But whatever the car – the man with the photographic memory can drive them all. No wonder, since he has raced almost everything with four wheels. After a technical education, he became a works driver with Porsche in 1966 and first drove in rallies. Still in 1966, he achieved third place in the Tour de Corse in a Porsche 911, and one year later he won the Stuttgart–Lyon–Charbonnières Rally. His career soared upwards thanks to victories in the European Rally Championship in 1961 in a Porsche 911 T, among others. In the same year, he won the Targa Florio in a Porsche 907 KH, the 24 Hours of Daytona in the long-tail 907 and also brought back the trophy in the 1000 km of the Nürburgring in the 908 short tail. He similarly bagged the Monte Carlo Rally in a Porsche 911 T. In 1969, he took another second place at the Targa Florio in the Porsche 911 T, after which he switched to Formula 1.

48 years ago: his greatest triumph

“But the Targa Florio was always my favourite race,” says Elford – between 1967 and 1972, he drove it six times in succession. He won it only in 1968, but in each of the subsequent races drove the fastest lap. Hence “Quick Vic”. Who still today sings the praises of the helpful Sicilians who enabled him to achieve his greatest triumph 48 years ago. “Just after the start, I lost a wheel here between Cefalù and Cerda. The spectators came jumping down from the wall and lifted up my light car so that I could fit the spare wheel. Just imagine it: A Brit in a German car…” That did not bother the spectators a few bends further down the road either: “That's where I lost the next wheel. Again the people lifted up the car, and because I didn't have another spare wheel, one fan unscrewed the wheel from his own private car and lent it to me.”

Thanks to this trick, Vic was back in the race and won it. But maybe it was also down to his shoes. Because they, of course, come from the shoemaker Ciccio. To this day, he still has the original sketches of Elford's feet that he used to fashion the driving shoes. Unmistakable, because following a childhood accident Elford's left foot is missing the little toe. Today he drives in brown loafers. Looks like the “American way of life” has left its mark on him after all…

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