911 GT3: The first of its kind

27/12/2024 Twenty-five years ago, Porsche celebrated the world premiere of the first GT3, a 911 like no other before it. The puristic sports car continues to inspire Porsche enthusiasts to this day, including a prominent original owner.

A reunion after almost a quarter of a century. Walter Röhrl is overcome.

“This is like a journey through time for me,” says the two-time World Rally Champion and Porsche brand ambassador, gazing at the flawless 911 GT3 (996) with Clubsport package in front of him. It’s the first 911 GT3 in company history – the very same car in Arctic Silver Metallic with which Porsche celebrated the derivative’s world premiere at the Geneva International Motor Show in 1999. And as if that weren’t enough, it’s also the very same car that Walter Röhrl drove himself as a company car more than 20 years ago. The license plate from that time provides a clue of who the prominent driver was: S-WR 996.

Fits like a glove

Röhrl sits down on the bucket seat, which is upholstered in heat- and flame-resistant Nomex. Even at the age of 77 and a height of 1.96 meters, he squeezes past the roll cage with ease. The seat fits like a

glove. And the steering wheel: “Unbelievable how steep it is,” says Röhrl. His expert eyes take in the five distinctive round instruments. “Fantastic,” he exclaims. “At that time, the first GT3 was the sportiest Porsche on the road. As honest and puristic as only it could be.” A mischievous smile spreads across his face. “Should we do a lap or two?”

We will in just a moment. But first we spend some time exploring this special event location. We're visiting a lovingly designed carriage house near the Swabian town of Flacht, which is also known to fans as the home of the Porsche Motorsport Centre. The group of Porsche enthusiasts who operate this private retreat with a great deal of passion therefore call themselves FL8WERK (pronounced “Flachtwerk”). Vintage neon signs, poster ads, pinball machines, a pool table, and lots of cozy seating areas – the soul of Porsche has found a home here. “Every piece tells a story,” explains Timo Conrad, cofounder of FL8WERK and current owner of Walter Röhrl’s old company car in Arctic Silver Metallic. He gives us a tour of the display cases containing books and automobilia of all kinds, Porsche model cars of all standard scales, and countless souvenir photos. And just about every piece is a declaration of love for a single brand.

“We’ve been organizing tours together for around ten years, enjoy talking shop and tinkering, and studying the history of our special vehicles,” says Conrad. They do all of that “just for fun,” as the entrepreneur explains. “Most of us work in other fields.”

Today, the hosts have mobilized no fewer than seven GT3 models of the first generation in the rare Clubsport version and unusual colors such as Nogaro Blue, Lapis Blue, and Rainforest Green Metallic. “It’s estimated that only about 20 percent of the almost 1,900 units of the first version of the 996 produced were built in this variant, which was designed specifically for motorsport,” explains Alex Schwaderer, another FL8WERK cofounder. These can be identified by a variety of details such as the missing side airbags, a battery master switch on the central tunnel, the aforementioned Nomex bucket seats, and the fixed roll cage. Six-point harnesses and a fire extinguisher were standard equipment. There's another feature that’s not visible from outside: the single rather than the usual dual mass flywheel between the engine and transmission. “It ensures that the engine responds faster during acceleration,” says Schwaderer, adding with a smile: “And is responsible for the typical rattling when the engine’s idling.”

“What we love so much about the first 911 GT3, in particular, is the direct, unadulterated driving experience,” says Cleto Di Paolo enthusiastically, yet another founder of FL8WERK. “The car’s narrow and lightweight; the engine design is perfect for the intended purpose; everything is well balanced, and every movement of the steering wheel provides direct feedback.” Without today’s assistance systems, says Di Paolo, it primarily comes down to “driving skills.” “But that’s precisely what we like.” The FL8WERK friends are in their element when they push the limits out on the racecourse – as is the GT3 Clubsport. “You can actually feel the racing experience built into the car,” explains Timo Conrad. “And yet it’s also suitable for everyday driving. Only Porsche can master this balancing act.”

For customers with a penchant for sporty driving

While the company based in Zuffenhausen began setting new standards in comfort, safety, and efficiency in sports cars with the fifth – but first water-cooled – generation of the 911 Carrera (996) in 1997, the GT3 turned its focus to customers with a penchant for ultra-sporty driving. The model name is derived from the GT3 racing class, in which the corresponding motorsport version is used. “Back then, I tended to work with Roland Kussmaul at Porsche,” recalls Walter Röhrl, who himself was involved in developing the GT3. “He and the other engineers had a clear vision, which was to develop a race car that is also approved for road use.” This concept for the ultra-sporty 911 derivative established a successful tradition at Porsche, which to this day has lost none of its appeal. The GT models have been the sporty avant-garde of every 911 generation ever since.

A significant increase in power of 44 kW (60 PS) to 265 kW (360 PS), targeted fine-tuning on the chassis and body, and the elimination of comfort features for the sake of weight reduction set the GT3 apart from the more civil 996 version in 1999. To this day, the water-cooled naturally aspirated engine is a typical feature of every GT3 generation, just like the protruding, initially fixed rear wing. “Every last millimeter is designed for top performance,” Porsche once advertised in a brochure on its sportiest version of the 911. “When it comes to the GT3, form follows function. And function is followed by driving excitement. A driving experience derived directly from motorsport.” Timo Conrad of FL8WERK, too, feels a close connection with racing. “First I raced go-karts, then I did different Formula classes, including mountain races,” he explains. “But at some point, I had to really think about whether a career as a race car driver was feasible.” He ultimately chose to pursue a career at his parents’ company.

What has remained is a preference for a sporty form of locomotion. So it’s no surprise that Conrad developed a passion for the Clubsport version of the 911 GT3 early on. His first model in Rainforest Green Metallic was joined a few years ago by the “Geneva car,” as Conrad refers to it today, in Arctic Silver. “I purchased it from the previous owner in southern Germany and didn’t know a thing about its history to start with.” What proved to be revealing was the first owner entry in the registration documents: Dr. Ing. h.c. F. Porsche AG. “It was a factory car. That much was clear,” says Conrad. “But it took some time to unearth the discovery – like an archaeologist.” Certain components suggested that it was a so-called pre-series model, which was later confirmed through research. And then one thing led to another.

“I was familiar with the photos from the world premiere in Geneva, of course,” says Conrad. “And at some point, it just clicked.” The last piece of the puzzle was ultimately the license plate number eternalized in the registration documents – S-WR 996 – a replica of which hangs magnificently above the bumper to celebrate the day. “I saw Walter Röhrl at an event and asked him directly if that could’ve been his car.” He could remember it as if it were yesterday. “An unlikely stroke of luck,” says Conrad.

Walter Röhrl feels right at home the moment he gets behind the wheel of the GT3 Clubsport for the first time after more than two decades. He turns the ignition – and there it is again, the typical rattling of the single mass flywheel. Röhrl laughs. “If you didn’t know that sound, you might think the engine’s

about to break down." That reminds the former rally champion of a story. "We set a record with a GT3 of the 996 generation on the Nordschleife at Nürburgring: 7:56 minutes!" That was the first time a street-legal 911 had ever beaten the eight-minute mark. "Back then, the car was a sensation," says Röhrl. "And that hasn't changed to this day."

Info

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Image Sublines

Path: 911 GT3: The first of its kind/Images/img_1.jpg
Title: 911 GT3 (996), Walter Röhrl, 2024, Porsche AG
Subline: Visit to FL8WERK: Walter Röhrl instantly feels at home in his company car from 1999.

Path: 911 GT3: The first of its kind/Images/img_2.jpg
Title: Walter Röhrl, Porsche Brand Ambassador, Timo Conrad, Cleto Di Paolo, Alex Schwaderer (l-r), 911 GT3 (996), 2024, Porsche AG
Subline: A quick consultation: Röhrl tells FL8WERK founders Timo Conrad, Cleto Di Paolo, and Alex Schwaderer (left to right) about his Nürburgring record drive, which is a real highlight for the GT3 enthusiasts. The extraordinary day comes to an end when they have the Porsche legend sign their GT3 models.

Path: 911 GT3: The first of its kind/Images/img_4.jpg
Title: 911 GT3 (996), Timo Conrad, Cleto Di Paolo, Alex Schwaderer, 2024, Porsche AG
Subline: Auto quartet: FL8WERK members are most enamored with the Clubsport models of the 911 GT3 (996), with their distinctive rear wing.

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