The Porsche 356 on the road to Rome

24/09/2021 The past and present of Porsche customer racing come together at a rendezvous in Rome. Marc Lieb drives one of the most important racing versions of the Porsche 356 and Herbert Linge revisits the birth of a legend.

Piazzale Giuseppe Garibaldi. Marc Lieb raises a piping-hot espresso to his lips, savours it, and revels in the moment. Before him, the Eternal City bathes in the glowing dawn. It's his first time in Rome, and he's not alone. He leans against the beauty at his side: a Porsche 356 A 1600 GS Carrera GT with more than half a million kilometres on the odometer. Its official licence plate reads WN-V2 – and in the world of motor racing, this car is a legend. In its day, it started in all the important European road races and rallies, including classics such as the Mille Miglia in Italy, the 1,000 Kilometres of Nürburgring, and the Targa Florio in Sicily.

The car can reach speeds of more than 200 km/h. Lieb is an overall winner at Le Mans and a former WEC champion. The two make a fast couple, that's for sure. But this story begins with a significant delay: 62 years, to be precise.

Let's turn back the clock. In 1959, the Liège–Rome–Liège rally was one of the most formidable road races in the world. More than 5,000 km nonstop. The speed restrictions set forth by the event holder, Royal Motor Union in Belgium, were impossible to meet even on the liaison stages. Of 104 starters, only 14 reached the finish, and none did so without incurring penalty points.

The overall victors that year were Paul Ernst Strähle and Robert Buchet. They did alternating stints behind the wheel for a staggering 86 hours. It was the greatest triumph for Strähle, then one of the most prominent German private racers in a Porsche. And it was the greatest victory for this illustrious 356. The name of the rally, incidentally, was a misnomer in the 1959 running. Roman authorities no longer wanted racing cars in the city during holidays; as a result, the route was changed several times and the turnaround point was situated in what was then Yugoslavia.

But now the 356 A has reached the Italian capital. Lieb is in love. With the city, with the sound of the Carrera engine, and with the unpretentious handling of this gem of a car. He is well aware of the its significance. After crowning his 14-year Porsche factory driving career with an overall victory at Le Mans and the WEC title in 2016, he shifted gears and got into customer racing management. His great role model: Herbert Linge. "Undoubtedly the coolest man I ever met," says 40-year-old Lieb with unabashed admiration. Linge was born in 1928. He dedicated his entire working life to Porsche. After starting out as an apprentice in 1943, he became a race mechanic, a racing driver, established the customer service organisation in the US, and was ultimately a guiding light in development.

Herbert Linge as Steve McQueen's double

He was also Steve McQueen's double in the driving scenes in the film Le Mans, found the land for the Weissach testing grounds, and received the German Federal Cross of Merit as the founder of the ONS Staffel (Oberste Nationale Sportbehörde crew) – an organisation dedicated to safety in motor racing and a part of Germany's motorsport governing body ONS, as it was known at the time.

Linge knew all too well the importance of such efforts for greater safety in racing. "We drove Liège–Rome–Liège full bore, day and night, nothing was closed off – completely mad, and completely unimaginable today," he says of the legendary rally. In 1954, he won it with Helmut Polensky. Later he contested this and many other road races together with his friend Paul Ernst Strähle. "You could only finish Liège–Rome–Liège as a good team," says Linge. "We alternated about every three hours. You had to be able to sleep in the passenger seat. Strähle could do it. At control points I would sometimes put on his hat and sign for him – he never knew a thing. I, on the other hand, barely got a wink of sleep.

Rest eluded Linge not only because of the breakneck speed over narrow streets and gravel mountain passes. He was also tapped into the technical state of the 356 with every one of his senses. He knew every last screw. Linge had been a test-driver for all of the early 356 cars. "They knew that I had some previous knowledge from motorcycle races as well, which is why they entrusted me with it. In the early days, we built three or four cars a day. After the test-drive, I had to report to Ferry Porsche that evening which of them were okay and which ones had to go back into the shop." The factory racing and rally

drivers caught wind of Linge's skills as a mechanic, and by 1954 he was a sought-after second man in long-distance races. "They said to Herr Porsche: 'When Linge's on board, he takes care of everything.'"

The fact that the Weissach native was himself a top driver would soon be common knowledge as well. Plus, he was known for a driving style that was easy on the material. Even from the passenger seat, he called for gentle gear changes. "The synchroniser rings were tricky!" As a matter of course, Linge changed the brake pads four to five times over more than 5,000 km. "Before the mountain trials I would change the front ones at least. The car would pull when they were half-worn. We didn't have disc brakes back then, but drums." The venerable 125 PS, 1.6-litre engine with four overhead, vertical shaft-driven camshafts burned though spark plugs at a rapid clip. "Before each liaison stage, if we had a few minutes' head start, I swapped out a plug. It wasn't possible to do more at one time or we would have lost our lead."

It's instructive to consider the conditions in place back then: some road races were championship races, and the squads drove the 356 from Stuttgart to far-flung regions of Europe themselves entirely under their own steam. And then they drove back home. Those miles added up too. And the network of filling stations was by no means ubiquitous. Linge thought ahead: "On the special stages we always wanted to have as little fuel weight as possible in the car. Mechanics drove ahead in a VW bus and deposited 20-litre gas canisters on the side of the road at agreed locations. Just like that – no one stole them. We all supported each other. When others were having trouble, I helped them out." That he himself needed help at some point was the foundation of his friendship with Paul Ernst Strähle.

Linge's friendship with Paul Ernst Straehle

Linge always had the backing of his bosses. So it came to pass that he was able to borrow a company VW bus over a weekend in 1952. When the bus broke down, he was pointed to the shop of the Strähle family in Schorndorf, and it was a lucky stroke: the junior boss Paul Ernst helped him get the vehicle back on the road. A few weeks later came the next chance encounter. On this occasion, using his VW Beetle, Strähle pulled Linge's and his friends' motorcycles out of a mud pit in which the squad had gotten stuck during a rally. It goes without saying that Linge told Strähle to get in touch if he could ever be of service in Porsche matters.

In 1956, Paul Ernst Strähle, by then a seasoned driver behind the wheel, procured a used 356 – but was still not competitive. With his 1.3-litre engine, he didn't stand a chance against the 356 cars that were already sporting the Carrera engine out of the Porsche 550 Spyder. The new benchmark was set by the Porsche 356 A 1500 GS Carrera with 100 PS, a total weight of 850 kilograms, a top speed of 200 km/h, and a 0 to 100 km/h time of around 12 seconds. Strähle also knew that Porsche had a GS Carrera GT in the works. The GS stood for Gran Sport, GT for Gran Turismo. The planned GT version included numerous lightweight parts, a racing exhaust and, on request, a larger tank for long-distance races.

Pre-series variant of the GS Carrera GT

Strähle was not in a position to afford any of the letters. But he knew Linge and found out that a rescue vehicle with the desired engine was for sale. The suspension and transmission were also still in working order, though the chassis had suffered irreparable fire damage. The vehicle was actually slated to be stripped for parts. But then Strähle asked Porsche for a replacement chassis, which was then ordered from Reutter with Ferry Porsche's blessing. Thanks to the assent from the top, Strähle received a pre-series variant of the GS Carrera GT in his desired colour of Adriatic Blue. "The gestation period of the 356," as Paul Ernst Strähle, who died at the age of 83 in 2010, once called it.

What was ultimately born was a race car that contained only the good stuff, and even that was relentlessly improved over the years by the two friends. After finishing work, Herbert Linge would head over to the Strähle workshop to tinker away. In 1957, the new 1.6-litre Carrera engine was installed in the car with his assistance. Linge still exudes childlike glee when he says: "We always had the best material! Sometimes we were able to install parts that the factory hadn't even finished testing. Shock absorbers and stuff like that." As a test-driver, he was well aware of the advantages of certain components. In 1957, the two scored the victory for the 356 with the class win and a 14th-place overall finish in the Mille Miglia. Many more would follow before Strähle stopped racing in 1964.

"Customer racing was always a priority"

Although Linge was not as well acquainted with every Porsche race car as with the 356 at that time, one thing is a point of emphasis: "Customer racing was always a priority. Every racing car type had to be available for sale. We immediately built 20 or 30 units – even the Porsche 917 was a customer car. That was very important to Ferry Porsche. Advertising was forbidden. He always told us: 'Our calling card is racing'." And racing is every bit as important for the brand today.

Even in retirement, Linge followed Lieb's career, from a standout driver in the Porsche Carrera Cup Deutschland – which Linge had once headed – and then from customer racing to the factory team and, later, as he scored wins and titles all around the world. Lieb says, "I've learned things from Herbert every time we've met – his knowledge is an endless treasure trove."

The qualified vehicle technology engineer looks in the rear-view mirror and indicates for the Colosseum. The large steering wheel in the 356 is surrounded by special instruments installed by Linge and Strähle. The marking at 3,500 rpm is still on the tachometer. The Carrera engine doesn't like anything less, as Lieb has already discovered. "Porsche now builds between 250 and 300 customer racing vehicles a year, but the philosophy is the same as it was then," he says. "It's not just about selling cars; it's about strategic project planning. Those who take an interest in a model – from the Porsche 718 Cayman GT4 Clubsport to the Porsche 911 RSR, as is used by the factory team – have more than just technical questions. They want recommendations for where to use it, they want to know which factory driver is available, and they want to know what technical support exists."

Development, motorsport and sales

The German acronym for the department, EMV, stands for development, motorsport and sales – and it is responsible for the intersection of precisely these three areas. Its reach extends into the market organisations and regional managers worldwide. It was with EMV that Lieb started his second Porsche career in 2017. "Just as it was for Herbert, it's about a shared goal with the customers, and that is to win races." The private racing drivers of today are, like Strähle was in his day, valuable ambassadors for the brand and have a direct line of communication with the company. Key account managers now maintain the contact, just as Linge did more than 60 years ago. And like satellites launched into the racing cosmos, Porsche engineers transmit the unfiltered customer feedback directly to Weissach. Now, as then, both sides benefit from the arrangement.

Lieb points the 356 swiftly in the direction of the southern outskirts of the city. He swims through traffic in the priceless gem, shifting gently but rapidly; and always double-clutching on the downshift. Unlike in 1959, there are few tourists in the city. Passers-by wave; two police officers give a thumbs-up as the bella macchina hums past with its inimitable sound. The buildings of the Via Appia Antica function as a sound box. Lieb inhales deeply, as if he wanted to breathe in the more than 2,000-year history of the road. "Everything we are is an evolution of the past." The 356 has arrived in Rome, and he has arrived in it. "500,000 km under the hood, the old seats, the cockpit – everything is different and yet so familiar. You drive off and feel immediately: this is a Porsche!"

Info

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