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Porsche O106 Victim of Circumstances

By Bill Oursler Contributing Editor

One of the most interesting of Porsche's aborted production efforts, it still captures the imagination



The newly designed front air dam reduced frontal lift at high speed. Fitted with the strongest engine available at the time, the 2.4-liter 911S powerplant, the 916 reached 60 mph in less than seven seconds.

T oday the 916 is only a dim memory of what might have been; a dusty, forgotten sidebar in the chronicles of the often troubled history of Porsche's controversial mid-engined, two-seat 914. Whether or not the 916 will eventually be considered the victim of circumstances, or a publicity stunt designed to provide a boost for the flagging interest of the public in the six-cylindered version of the 914, this unique Porsche remains one of the most interesting of Porsche's aborted production efforts.

The ultimate fate of the 916, indeed the reason for its initial gestation, is tied to the environment which spawned and eventually ended the career of the entire 914 line. Originally, the 914 project was conceived as part of a joint marketing scheme between Dr. Ferry Porsche and his friend Dr. Heinz Nordhoff, the man who as head of Volkswagen in the immediate post war era was responsible for VW's remarkable growth into one of the industry's giants. Under the plan put together by Porsche and Nordhoff, a joint venture corporation was established. The 914, designed by Porsche and manufactured by VW, represented a lower-priced, entrylevel model for first time prospective Porsche customers that would also increase Volkwagen's prestige by carrying the VW nameplate as well as that of Porsche. (Ironically, in America where the joint marketing program had created the Porsche Audi Division of VOA, it was decided the 914 would appeal to a much broader audience if the VW logo were removed; thus all 914s sold here were pure "Porsches.")

Ultimately, the question of the 914's pedigree or lack of it (as with the 924) forced the corporate decision-makers to seek other paths to increased sales volumes. Still, the 914 might have found greater customer acceptance had not its public introduction come in an environment which was not totally conducive to a spirit of mutual cooperation between the partners involved.

The change in atmosphere was due to the death of Nordhoff and the subsequent assumption of power at Volkswagen by its new boss, Kurt Lotz, who eschewed the informality of the relationship between his predecessor and Porsche for a far more structured situation. Lotz, an "i" and "t" man, was not terribly happy with the 914 program overall and he was even more displeased that Porsche would be



To accommodate wider wheels and tires, the 916's fenders were flared, making it about 3.5 inches wider than the standard 914. The rear skirt was redesigned and the detachable 914 roof was replaced with welded steel.

producing its own version of the car; one that not only replaced VW's four cylinder with Porsche's flat six, but which used Porsche brakes, wheels, hubs and other suspension components in the bargain. Adding even further to his displeasure was the fact that the 914/6, unlike its less powerful brethren, was to be assembled at Zuffenhausen.

Surprisingly, it was the 914/6 and not the 914 which ran into real sales resistance. In all, only about 3300 914/6 models were manufactured, with just 250 leaving the factory in 1972, the final year of 914/6 production. There were some possible explanations. In addition to the feeling of many potential 914/6 prospects that they weren't getting the "real thing" in the mid-engined roadster, there was also the very small price differential between it and the "real thing," the 911T. One other factor in this equation was that while the salesmen were trying to increase enthusiasm for the 914, the engineers at Weissach were already moving on to other projects, such as the one which would ultimately become the 924, leaving 914 development at a low ebb.

Still, Porsche's management hadn't lost all of its interest in the car, particularly the 914/6, and in late 1971 decided to see if they couldn't pump some new energy into the program. That company-mandated burst took the form of orders to Porsche's chief stylist, Tony Lapine, to redo the 914/6 for that year's fall show car circuit. Supposedly, if the reaction were favorable enough, Lapine's creation might even go into production as a full assembly line item, although in retrospect there is considerable doubt about that supposition.

In any case, it took Lapine and his crew about 11 days to make the initial transformation of the 914/6 into the first 916. Visually Lapine and his people created a strikingly handsome automobile with new fiberglass bumpers which followed the car's natural contours. Lapine also added the steel fender flares of the 914/6 GT racer to cover the 7x15 forged Fuchs wheels which were shod with 185/70-15 Michelin XVR radials. To strengthen the chassis (something that was done in 21 different places), Lapine replaced the normal fiberglass removable top with a welded steel structure.

One reason for that latter process was the 916's full 911S-specification drivetrain, including the 2341 cc six that pumped out a healthy 190 horsepower at 6500 rpm and 159 footpounds of torque at 5200 rpm (interestingly the horsepower figure was just 20 less than the one given for the 914/6 GT). Given that the 916, at 2200 pounds, was 165 pounds lighter than the 911S, it wasn't surprising that it was the fastest of all the intended 1972 Porsche models, possessing a top speed of 145 miles per hour and a zero to 60 time of under seven seconds.

To handle the extra ponies found in the 916's engine compartment, the factory modified the standard 915 five-speed with a different tailshaft. And to utilize the additional power on the road, the 916 (continued on page 10)



Built for Dr. Ferdinand Piëch in 1969, this 914/8 produced a solid 300 horsepower via the eight-cylinder, four-cam engine of the 908 race car.



On April 18, 1971, at Danville, Virginia, IMSA staged its very first race. Peter Gregg and Hurley Haywood won it

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with Gregg's 914/6 GT.

914 Variant: The 914/8

It was a hot rod, a full competition 908 motor stuffed in a nearly too small 914 engine compartment

It sits now in storage along with the other Porsches that together constitute the heart of the West German car maker's tradition for excellence. To the casual observer the 914 appears little different from the thousands which emerged from the company's mechanical womb during the first half of the 1970s. Despite its innocence, this 914, one of two constructed in the factory's experimental department, is perhaps the fastest of its breed.

Belonging to Dr. Ferdinand Piëch, it was a hot rod, a full competition 908 boxer eight stuffed behind the firewall in the almost too small engine compartment that usually hosted either a Volkswagen four-cylinder or a 911 flat six. The project had begun as a birthday

914 Variant: The 914/6 GT

It was the first-ever champion of the IMSA GTU series, bringing Porsche a manufacturer's crown

The international successes of Porsche's 914/6 GT have been well documented, including its 1970 Le Mans class triumph where it finished sixth overall, the first production-based car on the scorers' time sheets. Less well known is the fact that the 914/6 GT was the first champion of the International Motor Sports Association's GTU series. Indeed, there is much truth to the contention that without the mid-engined Porsche the then-fledgling sanctioning body might not have gotten its now high-stepping, Camel-backed circuit off the ground.

Certainly, one can find in the presence of the 914/6

present for Dr. Ferry Porsche who was presented with a similar car on his 60th birthday. Porsche's 914, however, was somewhat civilized by the substitution of four 46 mm Weber twin-throat carburetors in place of the on-track Bosch mechanical injection. While that reduced the noise and improved the drivability, it also left Dr. Porsche's example with a "puny" 260 horsepower output at 7700 rpm. Still, his 914/8 S-II covered nearly 10,000 kilometers on the street before being retired to the Porsche museum.

Piëch's car, on the other hand, since it was never intended to operate using anything other than a temporary factory tag (most of the time it performed at Weissach), was not under any such constraints. The mechanical injection was left intact, giving the fast moving Piëch some 300 horsepower to play with. Considering the fact that represented about 90 more horses than the competition 914/6 GT and was 110 on the plus side of the 916, it doesn't take too much to imagine the kick provided by Piëch's mid-engined two-seater.

Because of the standard external bodywork, this overpowered car was severely (at least by today's standards) under-tired and the resultant handling was, at least judging by pictures such as that in Joe Rusz's *Porsche Sport 1976/77*, hairy at best. Neither Piëch's nor Dr. Porsche's examples of the 914/8, however, were intended to please the normal driver. These 914s were and are unique and no amount of dust will ever detract from their stature even a decade and a half after they were first conceived.

-Bill Oursler

GT the foundation of the love-hate relationship between IMSA President John Bishop and the engineers of Weissach. At the time when Bishop and then Porsche North American racing boss Josef Hoppen were discussing the two-seat Porsche roadster, however, the only goal was to increase the public's interest in a championship which had yet to run its first event.

That historic moment came on April 18, 1971, at Virginia International Raceway in Danville, Virginia. There, among several 914/6 GT's, was the red-orange entry of Trans-Am two-liter titlist Peter Gregg and his 24-year-old rookie partner Hurley Haywood (who at the time had only been racing for a total of three years).

Despite the best efforts of Dave Heinz and Or Costanzo (who would go on to claim the season GTO crown), Gregg and Haywood used the handling of their Porsche to collect the overall victory. In all, Gregg and Haywood would lose only once in GTU (that at the November Daytona finale where they were second in the division and fourth overall), while posting a total of three race triumphs—the other two coming at Bridgehampton, New York, in June and Summit Point in September.

Added together with second overall placings at Talladega and Charlotte, Gregg and Haywood emerged as the first-ever GTU titlists, Porsche earning the under-two-liter manufacturer's crown in the process.

-Bill Oursler



Officially, the 916 was a version of the 914 without separate type number. The "916" nomenclature on the rear apparently varied from car to car. This is Peter Gregg's 916; factory press photo on page 7 shows different arrangement of insignia.

(continued from page 7)

peared with the swaybars and brakes of the 911S. In all, the modifications produced a well balanced vehicle which Brumos' Bob Snodgrass (who owned Peter Gregg's 916) called a tremendous car for all normal and most all aggressive driving situations.

As so often happens at Porsche, the public and internal designations for the 916 didn't match. Officially, the car was merely another version of the 914, distinguished by the numerals "23" following the 914 three-digit combination that started the model's serial number complex. Despite the engineering decision not to allocate a separate type number for the project, others at Porsche responsible for the mid-engined roadster's show car tour debut decided that it would be appropriate to distinguish this unique automobile from its more ordinary brethren. Thus was born the "916," and while the factory records may not reflect it, that's the way the two-seater will be remembered by all Porsche enthusiasts.

With its looks and obvious performance potential, then, how was it that the 916 never got beyond the pre-production stage? According to Karl Ludvigsen's book, *Porsche: Excellence Was Expected*, twenty 916s were made, a number Snodgrass claims is really only 11. In his research into the 916, Snodgrass says that of the others, two were the 908 race-engined two-seaters made for Dr. Ferdinand Piëch and Dr. Ferry Porsche, while the remaining seven, although assigned serial numbers, were never built or completed. The reasons seem to come down to three: price, lack of development time, and possibly the overall attitude towards the whole 914 project at Porsche.

In terms of cost, the 916's estimated sticker came out to DM 45,000 in 1972, or about \$14,000. At the same time the 911S was right around DM 30,000. Being conservative, Porsche's marketing people were not sure that the factory's customers would spend the additional money for something they might not even consider a "true" Porsche. As for that latter attitude, it too was felt among the factory personnel and was, in fact, made somewhat stronger by VW's general lack of enthusiasm for the 914. Perhaps, though, the most important factor in the decision to scrap the 916 was the lack of time to develop it. As almost any California engine swapper of the 1950s could tell you, there are always a few "small" problems associated with such ventures. One of those in the case of the 916 concerned air conditioning.

Because most Porsches sold in America (the company's largest market and therefore the targeted environment for the 916) reside in warm weather areas, air is almost a mandatory option. Fitting the planning and the compressor unit into the 916, however, was not something Porsche had time to do before putting the 916 on the show car tour; a fact which leads to the story of how Gregg's 916 came to the United States, the sole example of its type to arfine here.

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he would have Brumos, who was already heavily involved in Porsche's racing efforts, undertake to engineer the air conditioning installation. Snodgrass says Brumos accomplished the task in relatively neat fashion. Because the bulky compressor had to be placed on the upper left of the engine at the front, however, a bulge had to be made in the firewall on that side of the car, limiting the driver's seat travel to about two inches, not enough for most long-legged Americans. (Indeed, Snodgrass, who purchased the 916 from Gregg's estate, sold it to William Hall of Jacksonville, Florida, because he was too tall to fit in it comfortably.)

Given such factors, it wasn't surprising that Gregg's 916 was one of the few to leave the confines of the factory and it had a busy life. Even before it crossed the Atlantic it had swapped its original icebox white paint color for a smooth silver finish. Once in Jacksonville, it quickly became the subject of much magazine interest, being tested by both *Road & Track* and *Car and Driver*. It also was the subject of an article in Joe Rusz' *Porsche Sport* 1976/77 as well as a piece written by this author for the 1983/84 edition of *Porsche Year*.



Though it has now almost slipped into the realm of mythology, the 916, because of its technology, will remain a subject of interest for Porsche devotees. An object of wistful longing and not obtainable reality. Given a different set of circumstances, the outcome might have been different. That can be said of a number of cars, but in the case of the 916 there are many who wish...