

PORSCHE
PANORAMA

APRIL 1994





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Contributing Editor

LE MANS CHAMPION: The Sonauto 914/6 GT

Porsche's mid-engined roadster proved itself at the rain-soaked Sarthe in 1970



RANDY LEFFINGWELL

The story of Porsche's 914, a car seemingly out of place within its own company, has been told often. Corporate politics were at the root of the problems which beset what remains to this day one of the most modern design concepts ever to come from Zuffenhausen. Those woes stemmed from the death of Heinz Nordhoff, the man who helped build Volkswagen into the corporate giant it is today.

A friend of Ferry Porsche's, Nordhoff had brought the war-torn firm back into the VW fold as engineering consultants to the Wolfsburg-based manufacturer almost before Porsche itself had geared up to produce its own cars. The link between the two firms had remained strong, with early Porsches using what were reworked VW drivetrain components. In the mid-1960s, Nordhoff and Porsche agreed on a joint program to create a new sports car, one that would bear both companies' names.

There were to be two versions: a four-cylinder, the newest version of VW's boxer-type sedan powerplant, and a Porsche six-cylinder, a less powerful variant of the 911 unit. The four would be Volkswagen's, while the six would belong to Zuffenhausen. A byproduct of the program was the establishment of a jointly owned corporation that would market the entirety of Porsche's line-up.

All of this might have worked well had not Nordhoff died in April 1968, about 15 months before the 914's introduction. His successor, Kurt Lotz, was a detail-oriented individual who had been brought in from outside the automotive industry. Lotz saw little

need for the 914, and was further annoyed when he discovered that Porsche would have its own version. From that point on, the road for the mid-engined roadster became a great deal rougher.

Ultimately, the four-cylinder models, the majority of which came to North America where the car was known simply as a Porsche, were a success. The same could not be said, however, for the six-cylinder 914/6 which suffered from the fact that it was sold at a price not far removed from the 911 which offered more advantages to the customer. (In large measure this situation was due to the price charged Porsche for the 914 body shells — these being the property of Volkswagen under the final contractual agreements.)

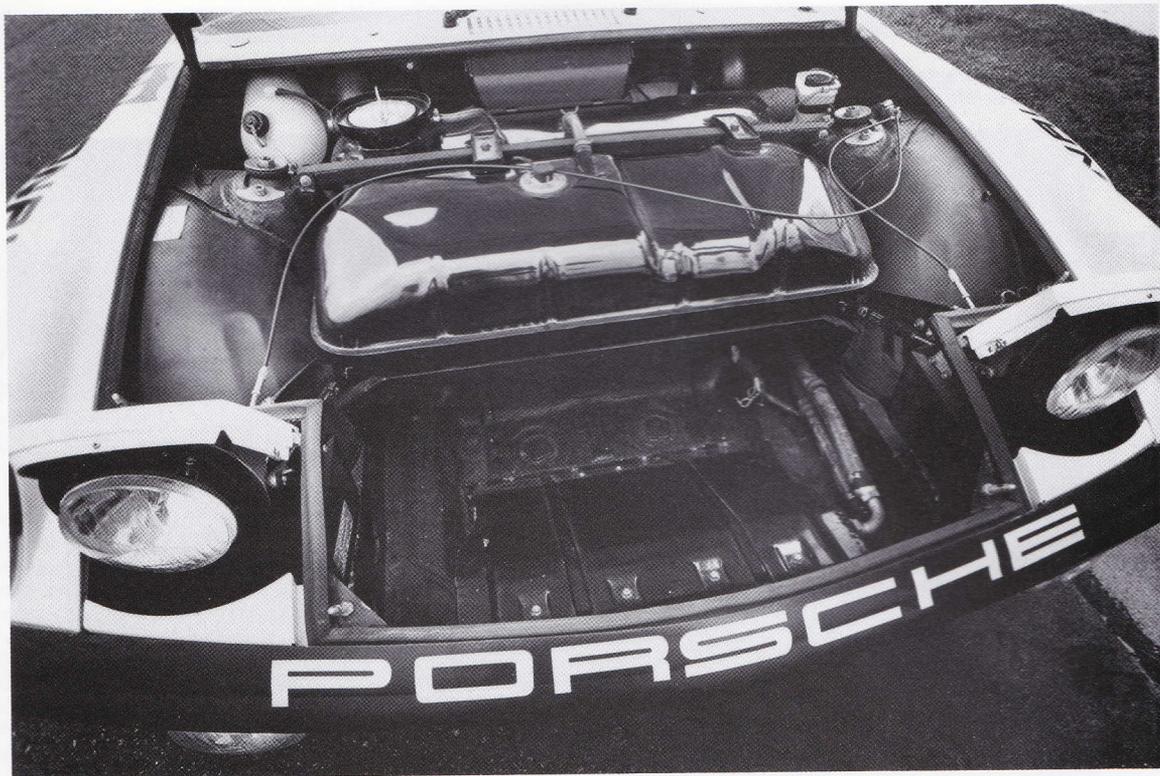
Despite the fact that Porsche would sell relatively few of its 914/6s before shutting down the line after what amounted to two model years, the roadster achieved quite a competition record both in Europe and here in America where it not only brought Peter Gregg his first IMSA championship in 1971, but often beat the larger, more powerful Corvettes it ran against that season as well.

Perhaps the 914's greatest triumph came in 1970 at Le Mans where it finished sixth overall and first among the GT contenders. Considering that the top five that year consisted of a pair of Porsche 917s and an equal number of Ferrari 512s split by the three-liter prototype-winning Porsche 908 in third overall, it was heady company.

The idea of racing the 914 began to become a reality in the winter of 1969-70, shortly after the car's



Porsche stripped clean the already spartan 914 interior, replacing the standard seating arrangement with a racing bucket for the driver and thin fiberglass shell for the "theoretical" passenger.



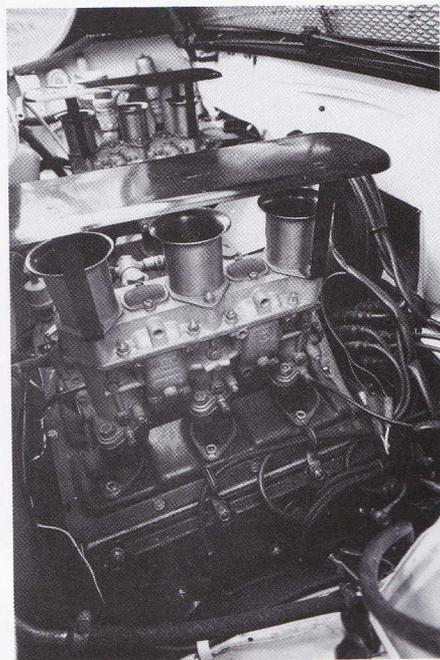
RANDY LEFFINGWELL

Much of the 914's front trunk area was taken up with the 26.4-gallon competition fuel tank. Note the removable brace added between the shock towers to provide extra stiffening for the chassis.

first appearance at the Frankfurt Auto Show. Although today's *Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile* (FIA) production car regulations have changed, they are not all that far removed from the rules which governed the sport at the start of the 1970s. Essentially, one started with an approved (homologated) street vehicle, bolted on a variety of also equally blessed bits and pieces made for the intent of racing, tossed in a few other legal modifications and came up with a transformed competition entry.

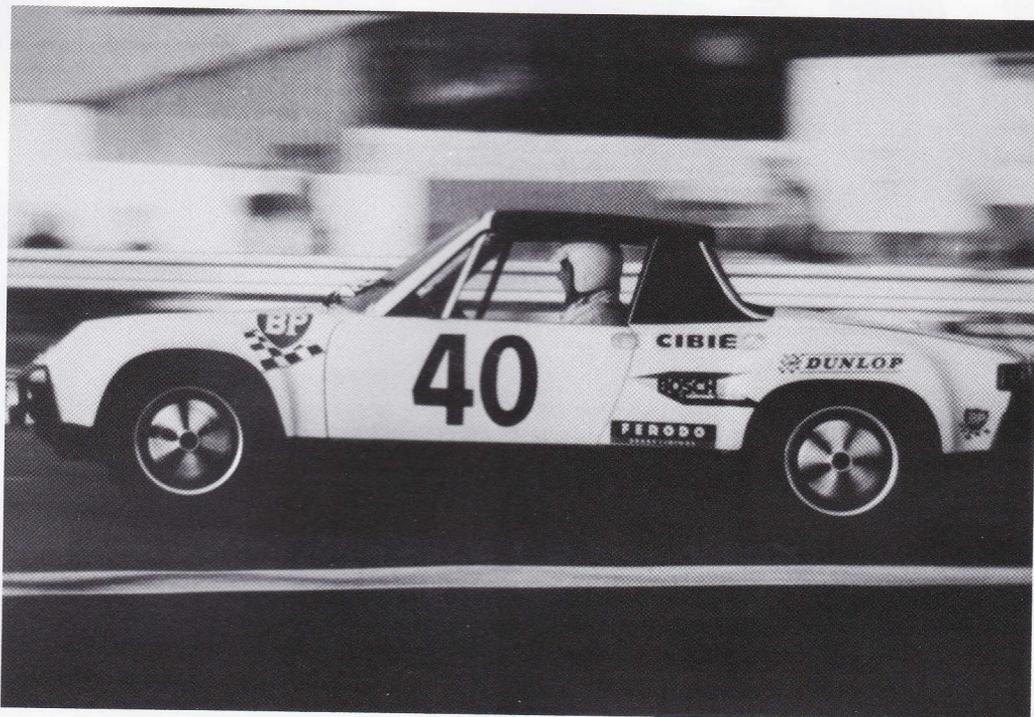
That was the way the 914/6 began its journey to what would become known as the 914/6 GT. The critical factor chassis-wise was the need to increase tire width, which in turn provided more grip or cornering power. While they might seem small now, the 6x15-inch front and 7x15-inch rear forged Fuchs rims were considered quite large for their time. Indeed, Trans-Am sedans didn't ride on wheels that great in size and they weighed a third more than the 1950-pound racing 914/6. In order to clear the extended rims, Porsche developed steel fender flares that were welded directly to the body structure. Installed, they gave the 914/6 GT the distinctive hunched appearance that would always characterize the top-of-the-line 914 competition version.

Additionally, six reinforcing frame plates were installed to increase stiffness, as well as an FIA ap-



Porsche transformed the 914/6's powerplant into a 210-horsepower unit that, except for its carburetors, was a virtual duplicate of that found in the 906 sports racer.

Entered by Porsche's French importer, Sonauto, the 914/6 GT covered itself with glory at Le Mans in 1970, finishing sixth overall and first among the GT contenders.



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Alongside the Sonauto 914/6 GT is the 911 that came across the line seventh overall. The 1970 edition of the race was so tough that only seven cars were classified as finishers.

proved roll bar, this fitting underneath the rear cab structure just behind the doors, as well as a reinforcing brace arrangement attached to the roof panel.

Beyond this, there was a removable "X" brace bolted over the enlarged 26.4-gallon fuel tank, the doors were simplified, plexiglass was substituted as the material for the rear and side windows, while fiberglass was used for the front and rear bumpers and rocker panels. To top off the body modifications, racing bucket seats replaced their assembly-line brethren.

As for the suspension, competition shocks were used, along with stronger lower front control arms and front and rear anti-sway bars. Other changes included a lowered ride height and increased negative camber settings. The original brakes were replaced by 911S ventilated discs with 908-type alloy calipers. Spring rates varied according to track conditions.

The 911S five-speed transaxle assembly remained unchanged (except for modifications to allow the addition of an external oil cooler), as did the shift linkage which left something to be desired when it came to the matter of precision gear changes. Bolted to that unit, though, was an engine of considerably different characteristics. Indeed, although the standard 1991-cc displacement and Weber carburetors were kept, most everything else was revised. A crankshaft with additional counterweights, as well as different, higher-crowned pistons (to raise the compression ratio) and forged steel rods (these from the 2.2-liter 911 powerplant) were all substituted as were differ-

Taking It to the Limit

Two 914s with eight-cylinder race engines: one for the open road and one strictly for Weissach

The 914/6 GT is considered by many to be the ultimate 914 performance vehicle. Certainly its competition record, which includes its Le Mans victory plus two IMSA championships and dozens of other wins, would seem to justify that accolade. In reality, the competition-bred six is not the ultimate. Rather, that honor has to be reserved for two special 914s that never left the factory's control and never saw a race track for competitive purposes.

These were a pair of cars powered by Porsche's 908 flat eight-cylinder racing engine. One, constructed with milder cams and Weber carburetors, plus a full street exhaust, was given to Dr. Ferry Porsche in 1969 for his 60th birthday. Other than slightly flared fenders, an opening in the bumper for a front-mounted oil cooler and an external fuel filler cap, Dr. Porsche's car could have been mistaken for a standard 914/6. The sounds it produced, however, and its 260 horsepower served quickly to dispel that notion. Dr. Porsche kept and drove the car for some 10,000 kilometers before retiring it to the Porsche museum in the face of stricter German noise regulations.

The second such vehicle had no pretensions about meeting any of the German road-going rules whatsoever. This was a car that Dr. Ferdinand Piëch had con-



The second of the two 908-engined 914s was a factory hot rod built for Dr. Ferdinand Piëch, with double wide headlights and a bumper without parking light grills. Both 914/8s had a central opening at the front for the 908's oil cooler.

structed for himself. From the outside it could be distinguished from its brother by its wider, dual-lamp front headlight assembly and lack of bumper grills or parking lights. Underneath, its 908 powerplant remained virtually unchanged from its on-track configuration with its Bosch mechanical injection system. Instead of 260 ponies, Piëch's 914 boasted of some 300 horses, the most ever seen up to that time in a 914.

Run on manufacturer plates during its few forays outside the factory, Piëch's 914/8 was an awesome piece of equipment whose performance today would be on par with Porsche's latest Carrera Turbos. Ultimately, it too was consigned to storage as other

ent heads featuring larger valves, new camshafts and twin plug ignition.

All in all, this added up to 210 horsepower from a horizontally-opposed six-cylinder engine that was more akin to that used in the 906 than anything else. To help keep oil temperatures down, the oil cooler that came with that fast paced unit was retained, being placed in the nose behind the front bumper which acquired an opening to feed its needs.

If this transformation seems mild when compared to what we have become used to today, keep in mind that other than the rally 911s and the lightweight 911R of 1967, Porsche's motorsport efforts had been almost solely focused on full-fledged sports racers such as the 917. The 914/6 GT represented one of the few departures from that mode of operation prior to

1972 when work began on the 911-based Carrera RSRs.

By early 1970 the basics had been worked out to the point where the 914 could have gone to the Monte Carlo Rally had not Porsche's driving corps been set against giving up the quick, reliable 911s. Two cars were taken to practice for the Targa Florio to see what might break under some of the most stressful conditions in all of road racing.

The 914/6 GT that was to bring the model so much glory at Le Mans in June 1970, chassis number 9140431020, was built in the spring of 1970 by the competition department, but was not a factory vehicle. Rather it belonged to and was entered under the banner of Porsche's French importer, Sonauto. (The French firm was also the official entrant for



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For his 60th birthday, Dr. Ferry Porsche was presented with a street-legal 914, powered by a 908 boxer eight-cylinder. Dr. Porsche used the car for some 10,000 kilometers before retiring it to the Porsche Museum.

projects overtook it.

Interestingly, there are hints that the two cars, known officially as 914/8 S-IIIs, were intended to be something more than simply play toys for Porsche's senior management. When the 908 powerplant was designed, it was done so with the idea that it might become a road-going engine. The prices Porsche would

have had to charge for a 914 so equipped, however, would not have been cost effective as far as the consumer was concerned, and thus the project was dropped. Still, there are times for dreams, and if one is a Porsche enthusiast, there couldn't have been a fantasy much better than the 914/8 S-II.

— Bill Oursler

Porsche's first Le Mans effort in 1951 with a factory-prepared and run Gmünd coupe that won its class that year.) Assigned as drivers for the 914/6 GT were Guy Chasseuil and Claude Ballot-Lena, who would later make a name for himself behind the wheels of various Zuffenhausen products.

Through the rain, in a year in which the attrition was so high that there were only seven classified finishers, Chasseuil and Ballot-Lena were nearly flawless, their 914/6 GT continuing on as if on a tour of the Sarthe region's scenery. So easy were they that they not only didn't have to change brake pads, they stayed on the same set of tires.

In the end, the pair covered an amazing total of 2382.50 miles at an average speed of 99.27 miles an hour. This was 27 miles better than the 911S that fin-

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Seen here are the fender flares that transformed the 914/6 into a GT racing car which showed its mettle first at Le Mans in 1970 and went on to win the first IMSA championship in 1971.



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ished seventh overall and second in class. Beyond winning the GT category overall, the Sonauto 914/6 GT topped the two-liter division, was second in the Index of Efficiency and fourth in the Index of Performance. Surprisingly, that Sonauto overall triumph came at the expense of Henri Greder's massive Chevrolet Corvette, a car that ought to have left the 914 a long way back in its wake.

Later that year, repainted yellow with green bumper's, the Sonauto roadster finished sixth overall in the hands of Ballot-Lena at the Tour de France, beating a much modified factory prototype 914 (chassis number 9140430457) that suffered a series of mechanical woes in taking eighth. Interestingly, after that affair, 9140431020 went back to the factory to have the much larger rear flares that the Porsche entry had sported grafted on.

After that, the car passed through a series of owners until in the late 1970s it wound up in the hands of Wolfram Reuter who displayed the car in the Auto + Technik Museum at Sinsheim, not far from Stuttgart. Later it was purchased by Kerry Morse who brought it to the United States and sold it to Californian Mike Hagen.

Ironically, other than its rear flares and being repainted back to its original white color, the ex-Sonauto machine remains virtually original. It is of note that this was one of only three 914/6 GTs ever entered at Le Mans, and the sole one to finish (the other two ran in 1971).

The glory for the 914 as a lead factory-supported

vehicle was short. In many ways, the 914 was the factory's warm up for the efforts that were to later transform the 911 into the legendary winner it would become in various forms over the years. That one June weekend at Le Mans in 1970, however, ensured the 914's place in the legend of Porsche, no matter what its other contributions have been. ☺

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the 914. To mark the occasion, PANORAMA is looking for the oldest 914 in continuous usage in North America, the highest mileage 914 and the most unusual 914 conversions, adaptations and modifications. If your 914 fits any of the above categories, send us a snapshot and a brief paragraph about your car.

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