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June 8, 1992
\$1.95 USA \$2.50 Canada

AutoWeek®

FAST TRACK TO NOWHERE

*Quick decision to kill
U.S. Carrera Cup
reflects poorly
on Porsche*



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HOLDING UP AN EMPTY CUP

Porsche planned for U.S. Carrera Cup series to replenish its reputation on both the racetrack and in the showroom, but then it pulled the plug



By Larry Edsall

Who could blame Americans if they thought "Porsche" was the German word for "racing," or even for "winning"?

It began with the original 356s that raced—and won—on the runways and racetracks in the post-war period of American sports car racing. The legend grew through RS and 900 series models and got stronger when professional sports car racing emerged to join Indycars and NASCAR as the big three of American motorsports.

There was the 917, with Mark Donohue and others dominating the Can-Am series. There was the 935, with Peter Gregg and the rest winning race after race in the early days of IMSA. Then along came the 962, which carried Al Holbert and more into the Camel GT winner's circle.

And that represented only Porsche racing in the U.S. Don't forget about LeMans. Karl Ludvigsen didn't call his Porscheography *Excellence Was Expected* without good reason.

It seemed Porsche was so good at racing it could turn

failure into success: An aborted entry into Indycar racing didn't produce the anticipated 500 winner (see page 52), but it did beget an engine that would dominate Group C and GTP. Dominate, that is, until Porsche faced more competition than even it could handle. There were Jaguar and Mercedes and Peugeot and new rules in Europe, and Nissan and Jaguar and Toyota in the United States.

Porsche's response? It couldn't, or wouldn't update the 962. It tried Indycar racing, but won only once. Then quit. There was the expense. There was the embarrassment. And there was F1. But that was an even bigger disaster.

And Porsche wasn't losing only on the racetrack. Its cars weren't winning in the showroom sales sweepstakes, either.

Something, or someone, was needed to breathe life back into the legend. So last November, Porsche Cars North America announced plans to bring the Carrera Cup racing series to North America—for at least a three-year run, and with at least \$60,000 in prize money at each race, with each race on television.



Altered interior among 110 hours of modifications to turn street car into Carrera Cup racer

The Carrera Cup series was launched in Germany in 1990 and was so successful that in 1991 Porsche started a second series in Germany, another in France and announced races in 1992 in both the U.S. and Japan. But early last month, only 24 days before the U.S. series was to debut at Lime Rock Park, Porsche pulled the plug.

"The last thing they needed," said would-be Carrera Cup racer Tom McCabe, "was another Porsche failure."

"They've done it again," said a long-time Porsche racer.

"Devastating," said a Porsche dealer.

Lime Rock had ticket and hospitality reservations canceled en masse. Toyo may have to eat the 1600 tires built for the series.

Porsche blames the "softness" of the economy, saying it neither could find a title sponsor for the series nor sell enough of the Carrera Cup cars to make the series viable. McCabe and others say they never were told securing a series sponsor was a requisite for actually racing and that all Porsche had to do was lower the price of the Carrera Cup cars and all 45 might have sold.

A Carrera Cup car begins life as a stripped-down variation of a \$63,900 Carrera 2. The chassis makes its way from Germany to Southern California, where Andial, a longtime Porsche engine tuner and race shop, needs 110 man-hours and assorted parts and pieces to do the conversion from street-legal to race-ready.

Early on, racers were hearing Porsche would offer Carrera Cup cars in the \$60,000 price bracket, much like it charges competitors in the German series. But when the price actually was announced, Porsche said it needed \$100,000 for each chassis, plus a \$10,000 performance bond to be refunded after a certain number of races.

"They pissed everybody off when they said \$100,000," said one longtime Porsche racer. "It was the kiss of death, a major tactical blunder."

"Porsche didn't do anything wrong," said a motorsports insider who thinks Porsche got caught in Washington's crackdown on gray market cars. "In Europe, Carrera Cup cars are built on the assembly line. When DOT and NHTSA said the cars couldn't be built in Germany as race cars and brought here, it made it very expensive (to convert street cars

to race cars. See sidebar.)"

It's fairly routine to import open-wheel cars such as those that race at Indianapolis. But it can be another matter when the cars look so much like street cars that you might remove sponsor decals and drive them on the street—without having passed all the assorted federal safety and emission programs. Porsche—which had problems when some of its original IROC series cars ended up on the street—worried that if it brought in race-ready cars, it could be forbidden to sell them—and would have to ship them back to Germany in three years. Others familiar with importing race cars say the rules aren't as complicated as Porsche was led to believe and wonder if Porsche and/or the bureaucrats were oversensitive because of the controversy over the 959 (AW, Feb. 1, 1988).

"The concept of importing the vehicles as street cars and changing them to race cars didn't help the overall cost of the cars," agreed Ed Triolo, vice president of marketing communications for PCNA and overseer of its motorsports effort. PCNA imported 45 cars; 25 had been converted.

Racers say they were led to believe that, in light of having deposits on only 18 cars, Porsche was meeting to consider an alternative financing plan with the price of each car being cut to \$75,000, \$50,000 to be paid up front, payments of \$12,500 to be made before the 1993 and 1994 seasons.

"I can't comment on the terms," said Triolo, "but it certainly was our intention to make the series happen by addressing the price problem."

Still, Triolo and other PCNA officials emerged from that meeting not with a new price, but to say the series had been canceled. Triolo said the decision was made within PCNA. Others note, however, that officials from the German parent, Porsche AG, were in Reno.

"Porsche has chosen to use its resources elsewhere at the present time," Triolo said.

Price wasn't the only difference of opinion between Porsche and potential customers, several of whom questioned the need for prize money and television.

"People who can spend \$100,000 for a car don't need the prize money," said racer/Porsche dealer Rick Mancuso of Lake Forest Sportscars. "Porsche says it will be in the

pros. Our position is, who needs them?"

"It shouldn't be club sport," countered Triolo. "It has to be purely professional. People also said to forget television. We think television is absolutely necessary."

Triolo said Porsche had to maintain the goal it had set for the series. "Had it gotten started and failed it would have been a serious black eye," he said. "I'm not saying it's not a black eye, but our goal was 'quality, quality, quality.' The last thing we'd want to do is what has happened with some other single-marque series: a weak championship or cessation before its term."

So the Carrera Cup was aborted.

"What do we do now?" wondered McCabe, who not only sold the car he raced in the Firestone Firehawk series but had assembled significant sponsorship for his Carrera Cup effort. McCabe said other racers had hired crews and purchased transporters.

"I spent money," said Mark Ulam of Champion Motors, which had announced a two-car entry for Derek and Justin Bell. Justin even had gone to Germany to drive in a Carrera Cup race. "Champion is the largest Porsche dealer in the country and this was a big part of our marketing plan."

Mancuso planned a service to transport

Entrants frustrated: 'What racing should be,' wasn't

But production racer praised

Tom McCabe had more reason than most to be disappointed in the demise of Porsche's Carrera Cup series.

It wasn't merely that McCabe had sold his Firestone Firehawk car to help pay for one of the Porsches. Nor that he had sponsorship in hand. It was that McCabe actually had driven one of the Carrera Cup cars and knows what he'll be missing.

"This is exactly what racing should be," McCabe said in late April after driving a Carrera Cup car at Bill Huth's Willow Springs International Raceway. Porsche Cars North America, then proceeding full-speed-ahead with plans to launch the series, offered the car to *AutoWeek* for a day's testing. We asked George Follmer to be our test driver; Porsche invited McCabe and two other potential customers to take a few laps.

"The races would have been a ball," McCabe lamented after Porsche changed its mind. "It would have been a refreshing change; drivers, not dollars, would have made the difference."

But dollars won out. There weren't enough of them.

"This is probably halfway to being a 'real' race car," Follmer said. "It's not a full race car, but a very good production race car." To be a "real" race car, he

and prep cars for racers, who would show up at the track with their driver suits and helmets. The goal was five customer cars and a sixth to be driven by former Indycar racer Chris Kneifel and Mancuso. But when it appeared Porsche was going to cut the price to \$75,000, "we had seven people ready to sign up," Mancuso said. Instead of racing, "Chris and I would have had to crew customer cars."

"The major problem," said Ulam, "was (that Porsche's) deadlines were way too tight. There wasn't enough time from their announcement date in November to be ready to race at the end of May. If Porsche would like to get themselves well organized and ready to roll for next year, I'd be more than excited to hear that kind of news and be ready to go out and race a full season. Carrera Cup is ridiculously successful in Europe. It's the best possible marketing tool the company could use."

"We're going to make an assessment of what our future motorsports program will be beyond the (IMSA) Supercar series and re-establishing the 968 in Firehawk racing,"

said Triolo. "A Carrera Cup in '93 is a very low possibility."

"Their hearts are in the right place," he said of those trying to save the series. "We would love to see it become viable, but without sponsorship and the ability to drastically change the price of the vehicles ... we had an insufficient number of teams willing to close the deal and purchase the car."

You may be struck by the fact that on one hand, Triolo said Porsche wanted to cut the price, and on the other hand said Porsche couldn't drastically change the price.

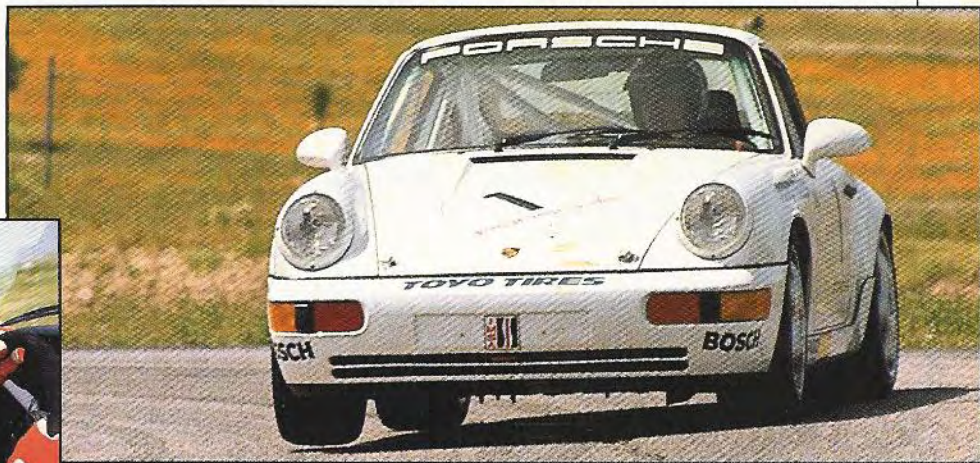
"The company can't seem to go one way or another," said someone close to the Carrera Cup's development and subsequent demise. "It's very hard to steer the ship. Attorneys and third parties get involved."

And what happens to those cars now?

Several in the collector car market already are circling like vultures. The 20 cars which were not yet converted into race cars are basically street legal, though modified C2's (not to be confused with the \$53,900 RS America, which is a decontaminated C2 with a 911 Turbo wing). The 25 race-readied cars are eligible for other racing series. Porsche also is looking into the cost of returning the 25 converted cars to street-legal configuration; that could drive the price higher, but as one racer noted, collectors would be willing to pay for such an exclusive Porsche.

"These cars should not sit on carpeting," Mancuso said. "These cars are meant to be on the racetrack."

But then, by definition, so is Porsche. ■



Follmer lapped in 1:34.6, near Willow record for SSGT class

said, would mean different gears, more tire and less weight (through fiberglass and carbon fiber). But that would have meant even more money.

Why, you wonder, would someone pay \$75,000 (let alone \$100,000), plus another \$5,000-\$10,000 per race in prep, transportation, etc., for a one-make spec series? McCabe was disenchanted with series in which cubic dollars and fooling tech inspectors meant more than driving ability. He remembers Sport Renault (another sealed-engine series), and racing against Dorsey Schroeder and others—and that it was how you did on the track, not who built your engine, that determined where you finished.

"I'd rather finish 20th to Ayrton Senna in this, because you know he doesn't have 20 more horses, than to win because you've got a killer motor," McCabe said.

Carrera Cup cars were Porsche Carrera 2s with 110 man-hours of modifications.

"We get a federalized, fully street-legal car and strip everything out—upholstery, rugs, seats, sound-deadening material, engine and gearbox," said Mark Popov-Dadiani, race shop manager at Andial.

After roll cages were installed, suspen-

sion work included springs and shocks, solid bearing mounts, front antiroll bar and steering rack bushings. Brake dust shields were removed, heat protectors installed around wires and sensors, longer rear wheel studs and spacers were positioned and the rear suspension camber changed.

Changes were made throughout the brake system. There were new wiring harnesses and electrical cutoff switches. The front bumper was removed and a tow hook installed. Front oil cooler fans were removed and an air dam added: "It lets the road air do the work instead of a fan," Popov-Dadiani said. Airbags were removed and a Momo racing wheel installed.

The exhaust system was tuned, then engines were dyno tested to within 1.5 hp, then sealed. Stock, the 3.6-liter six produces 247 hp at 6100 rpm, 223 lb ft of torque at 4800 rpm. In Carrera Cup trim, the engines turn out 270-275 hp at 6100, 232 lb ft at 5000 while maintaining federal emission standards, Popov-Dadiani said.

A racing clutch and steel synchronizers were installed and the transmission sealed. Alternator and cooling fan belts were modified and the air filter box was altered. En-

gine mounts were reinforced. The powertrain was reassembled and remounted.

A Recaro racing seat, driver's window net and fire extinguisher were installed, with 10 gallons of fuel and 167 pounds of ballast (to approximate the weight of a driver). The car was weighed (all were between 2525 and 2537 pounds). Corner weights were adjusted, wheels aligned.

With identical cars, the series, Popov-Dadiani said, would come down to "driver talent and the ability of the team to tailor the car to its driver with sway bars, tire pressure and minor alignment changes."

"What racing should be," McCabe added.

Follmer said the Carrera Cup car reminds him of the Porsche RSR he and Mark Donohue drove, and of the early Trans-Am cars, also production cars rebuilt for racing.

"This car doesn't have as much inherent oversteer," he said. "This car has better brakes, in concept, but the other car (the RSR) was lighter." This car also has ABS, which Follmer called, "the greatest thing you could put on a street car because the average driver isn't attuned enough to the vehicle to sense the car sliding until it's too late."

Sadly, the same might be said for Porsche's Carrera Cup. It slid away before anyone could save it. ■