

“The Once in a While Racer”

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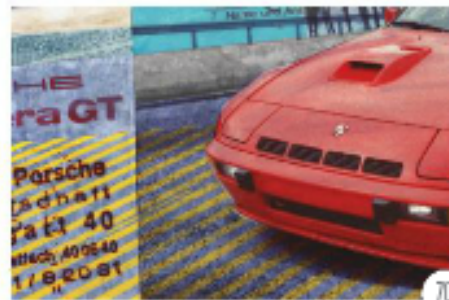
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THE ONCE IN A WHILE RACER

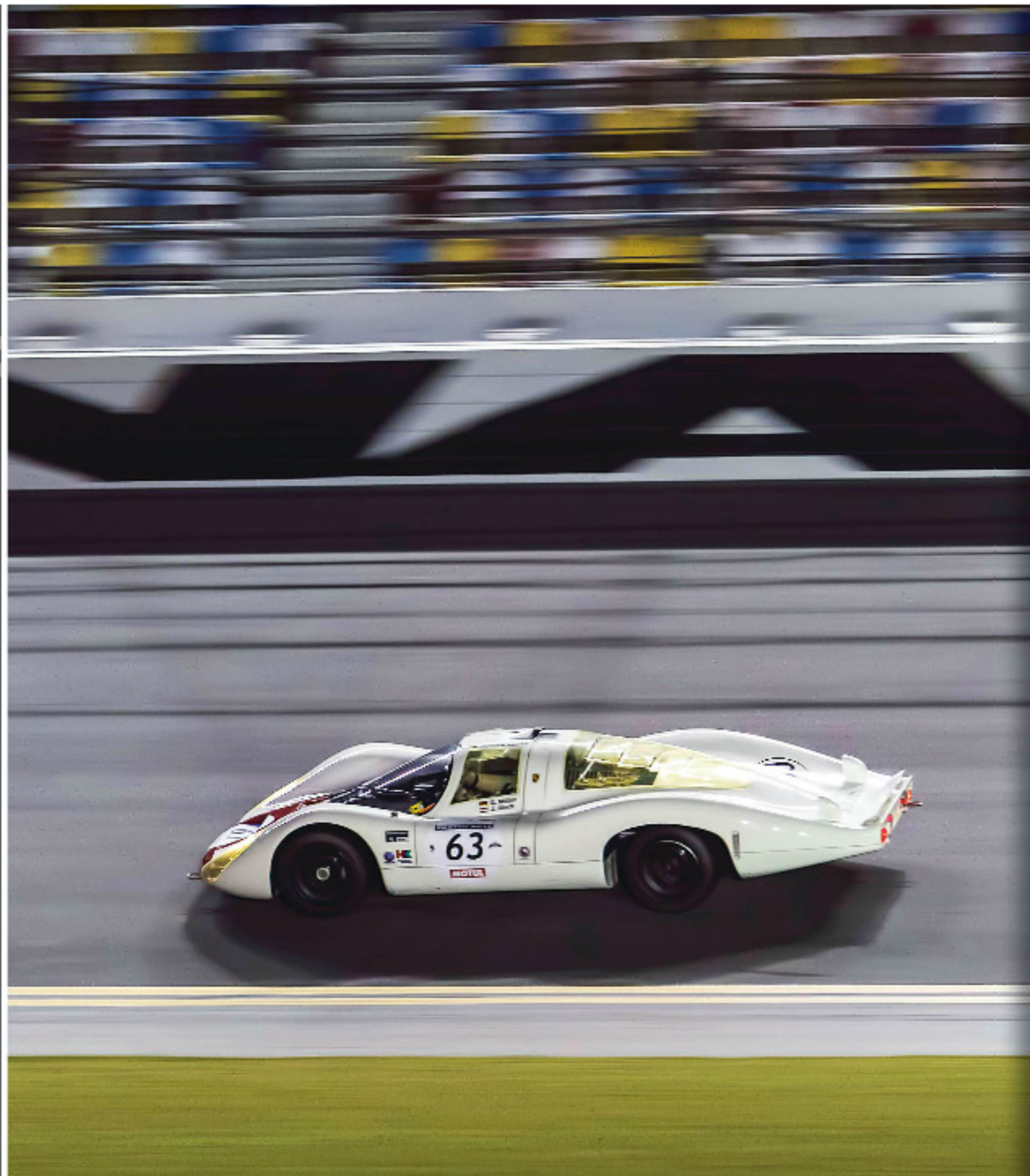
STORY BY **BILL OURSLER** PHOTOS BY **SEAN CRIDLAND**

BUILT AFTER THE 910, THE OFT-FORGOTTEN 907 WAS A CRITICAL STEP ON THE PATH TO PORSCHE'S FIRST OVERALL VICTORY AT LE MANS.

Do you believe in spirits? Had you attended last November's historic 24-hour race weekend at Daytona International Speedway, the ghostly white and wispy 907 longtail driven by Jürgen Barth would have brought that question to mind.

This isn't just any Porsche. It's the rarest of the rare, the 1967 907 of Gerhard Mitter and future Formula 1 champion Jochen Rindt. This car introduced the radical, pumpkin-seed shape that would characterize Zuffenhausen's longtail, high-speed sports racers for the rest of the decade.

The 907 is a car rarely remembered. Its factory career lasted less than a year, from Le Mans in 1967 to the spring of 1968. Of the three 907s raced by the factory, the only one to emerge from history's dustbins is this car, the Le Mans Mitter/Rindt entry bearing chassis 907-003. It disappeared for 47 years—until last summer, when it returned to the Sarthe region for the Le Mans Classic weekend.





IF THE 907 WAS MERELY A BLIP on Porsche's road to the Le Mans-conquering 917, if 907-003 has done but three races in nearly half a century, why—aside from its rarity—should we care? Especially since, in its one Le Mans appearance, the car retired with a blown engine in the opening hours of the event?

The answer is twofold. First, 907-003 and 907-004 were the only examples to compete with 2.0-liter 911 engines. The rest of the 32 built were powered by the Type 771 2.2-liter flat eight. 907-004 won Le Mans' prestigious Index of Performance award and took second in the Index of Thermal Efficiency. It was first in the small-

lution, with each replacement being an improved version of its predecessor. Thus, while the twelve-cylinder 917 was a far different vehicle than its forebear of 1965—the 2.0-liter, eight-cylinder Ollon-Villars Spyder hill-climb special—its lineage can easily be traced through the design of the cars that came between them.

While many historians consider the 904 to be the first "modern" Porsche sports racer, it is the Ollon-Villars Spyder—built in a span of six weeks with a then state-of-the-art tube frame and Lotus Formula 1-style suspension—that is the true progenitor of the "plastic Porsches." In fact, had it not been for the importance that Porsche



The wind-tunnel-honed 907-003 streamliner was sleek, but it was aerodynamically unstable in initial tests. The car incorporated a Plexiglas cover over the engine, a tall windscreen, doors with flush windows, and an adjustable rear spoiler.

bore prototype class and fifth overall. More importantly, the 907 represented Porsche's first serious attempt to craft the aerodynamics of its race cars through the use of wind-tunnel testing. The result? An ultra slippery car, with a drag coefficient of just 0.27.

The circumstances of the 907's birth and its brief existence as a works entry, while seemingly unique today, were quite normal during Ferdinand Piëch's time as the company's motorsport chieftain. The tale of Porsche's transition from a supporting actor in sports-car racing's cast to star under Piëch is well known and need not be gone into here, except to note that the huge costs involved created tensions within Porsche that ultimately threatened its stability.

Despite the pace at which the proliferation of new Porsches rolled out of the race shop under Piëch, the process was orderly. It was evolution rather than revo-

lution, with each replacement being an improved version of its predecessor. Thus, while the twelve-cylinder 917 was a far different vehicle than its forebear of 1965—the 2.0-liter, eight-cylinder Ollon-Villars Spyder hill-climb special—its lineage can easily be traced through the design of the cars that came between them.

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placed on hill-climbs, Piëch might not have been able to impose his will on the company's motorsport efforts. Porsche's domination of the European mountain racing scene was considered a critical sales tool—one that was under threat from Ferrari in 1965. The Italian firm had the edge with its mid-engined Dino 206 SP Spider. No Porsche could match it. If the German sports-car maker was to regain the advantage, a completely new car would be needed. The result was the hurried gestation of the Ollon-Villars Spyder, a radical design. The car offended Porsche's "old guard," who could do nothing but bow to Piëch and his team because of the need for a competitive entry. The car wouldn't bring Porsche 1965's hill-climb crown—which it would claim the following year—but its potential was so obvious that Piëch gained considerable freedom. He would put it to good use.



THE FIRST EVIDENCE OF WHAT WAS TO COME was the 906, which made its debut at the 1966 24 Hours of Daytona and incorporated much of the hill-climber's technology. Still, for Piëch and his engineers, the 906 wasn't perfect. It had been compromised by Ferry Porsche's insistence that it use 15-inch wheels and out-of-date suspension sets ordered for the second, never-built run of 904s canceled in favor of the 906.

Not one to accept compromise, Piëch set about building the 906's successor, the 910. The 910 was essentially a 906 fitted with the Ollon-Villars Spyder's suspension and wheels. In theory, the lower fenders allowed by the 13-inch diameter wheels and tires should have reduced the car's drag substantially. But, in its haste to build the 910, Porsche skipped the wind-tunnel tests.

The 910 debuted as a hill-climb car late in the summer of 1966. When it was finally put into the wind tunnel later that year, its drag figures turned out to be roughly similar to a 906's. Those disappointing results led to Piëch's decision to hang a new, aerodynamically friendly body on the 910. The result was the 907.

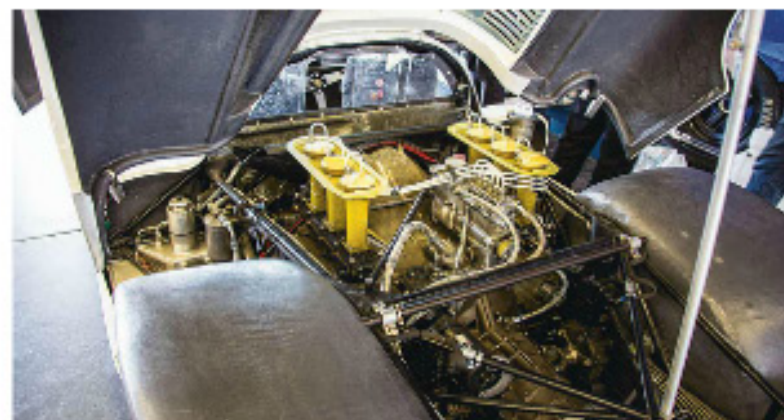
Other than its slightly revised front suspension, ventilated disc brakes, and 2.2-liter Type 771 flat eight, the 907 retained the basic dimensions and mechanicals of the 910. In the days before the Piëch era, veteran Porsche engineers would have agonized over a decision to

move on to the 907 so quickly, most likely choosing to stick with the 910 because a costly new car might offer little improvement.

The young and ambitious Piëch, who had a massive amount of money to spend on racing for 1967, thought differently. If he could increase his cars' speed potential by even a small amount over that of the 910 to make Porsche more competitive at faster tracks such as Spa, Monza, Le Mans, or Daytona, he would—even if others thought the expenditure excessive and unnecessary.

PIËCH'S ENGINEERS USED THE WIND TUNNEL to achieve their goal, leading to the 907's smoother, lower, more curvaceous body. It featured a far narrower, ovoid cabin and, for the truly fast circuits like Le Mans, a long tapering tail with a clear, deeply vented engine cover. The resulting pumpkin-seed shape of the 907 would carry over to its 908 and 917 successors. One other significant change was a switch to right-hand drive, a feature employed in Porsche's sports racers until today's 919.

When fitted with an extended tail, the 907's 0.27 drag coefficient was the lowest ever recorded for a Porsche sports racer—a fact that seemed to bode well for its intended debut at Le Mans that coming June. Hopes didn't match reality, however. With virtually no openings other than those for the front-mounted oil radiator, there were



Jürgen Barth drove 907-003 at the Daytona Classic. As it did at Le Mans in 1967, 907-003 runs a flat six, which breathes through louvers cut into the clear rear engine cover.



unexpected cooling problems with both the drivetrain and the brakes. Moreover, the 907's low drag came at the expense of high-speed stability.

During the Le Mans test weekend in April 1967, the car's handling on the 3.5-mile Mulsanne Straight was so bad that driver Herbert Linge refused to take his hand off the wheel to shift from fourth to fifth for fear of losing control. As a result, the 907 wouldn't exceed 145 mph.

The addition of cooling scoops and a small rear spoiler made the two 907s, chassis numbers 907-003 and 907-004, stable enough for their drivers to push them to their limits, especially on the Mulsanne Straight at Le Mans,

autobahn in Austria with the help of that country's national police, today an unimaginable testing method.

Porsche's concentration wasn't focused on Le Mans alone, where the 907s would employ a 911-derived flat six due to worries regarding the reliability of the 2.2-liter Type 771 flat eight. Porsche's focus was also fixed on the equally important goal of beating Ferrari in the manufacturers championship battle that year. The fight would come to a close at Brands Hatch in August with the BOAC 500, where the 907 made its second appearance. Powered by a 771 flat eight, chassis 907-005 came home fourth. Unfortunately, Scot Jackie Stewart's last-minute



Opposite page: The length of the rear decklid is evident. Although it looks massive, it weighs very little. Left: The cockpit, including the pedals, can best be described as spartan. The instrument panel is dominated by a central tach.



PHOTO: PORSCHE ARCHIVES

where they easily exceeded 180 mph. However, the 907 and its successors were never entirely comfortable to drive because they remained inherently unstable. The problem would eventually come to a head in 1969, with the 917. That car's stability issues were so frightening that only a brave few were willing to drive it. Ironically, the problems were cured by the use of raised, higher-drag tail sections that provided the necessary downforce to keep the 917 planted, turning a monster into a nearly unbeatable package.

That was a long way off in 1967, though. Porsche's engineers struggled to get 907-003 and 907-004 ready for Le Mans. 907-003 was tested at speed on the Zeltwig

charge into second place behind the winning Chaparral of Phil Hill was good enough to give the Italian firm the crown. Ferrari beat Porsche by just one point.

What no one knew then was that the 907—with just two races to its credit—was on borrowed time. It wasn't because the 907 was a disappointment, however. The sport's governing body, the French-oriented Federation Internationale de l'Automobile, had changed the rules, slapping a 3.0-liter displacement cap on prototypes for 1968. The decision favored the home-grown, government-sponsored Matra V12s to the detriment of the high-performance, big-displacement Ferraris, Fords, and Chaparrals. Piëch saw the opportunity, and took it.

Above: At Le Mans in 1967, the factory entered both 907-003 and 907-004. The latter, shown here in the background, would win the Index of Performance.



HAVING LEARNED EARLY ENOUGH of what was to come, Porsche engine designer Hans Mezger set to work. He created what became the 3.0-liter 908 eight, an engine based on an experimental dual-overhead-cam version of the 911's flat six. The new flat eight would be dropped into the 907 chassis, at which point the 907 took on the engine's 908 moniker.

Before that happened, the 907 would still represent the factory's interests—and represent them well—in the first months of the 1968 season before the 908's debut at Monza in April. Three months before the Italian race, the 907 swept Daytona's podium—1-2-3—in longtail form. In short-tail form, it claimed victories at the 12 Hours of Sebring and the Targa Florio, and finished second at Brands Hatch. While the 908 would garner its first victory at the 1,000-kilometer Nürburgring race in May 1968, teething problems with its supposedly less complex pow-

erplant kept it out of the winner's circle at Monza in April. That kept the 907 in the picture. At Le Mans in 1968, a 907 won the prototype category and finished second overall. The top 908 took second in class and third overall.

The 907's Le Mans win was to be something of a last hurrah. The 908, now sorted, would take over and give Porsche its first manufacturers crown in 1969 in a dominating fashion. Even so, the 907 would continue to race in private hands well into the mid-1970s, without disgracing itself or those who drove it.

BUT WHAT OF 907-003? What happened during its 47-year hiatus? Due to Porsche's policy of selling its works entries after just one or two events, 907-003's factory career ended in June 1967 with its early retirement at Le Mans. It languished for the rest of the year, and was purchased by German privateer Karl von Wendt in Jan-

uary of 1968. He soon crashed it during a test session.

Von Wendt took the broken and battered 907-003 with him when he moved to Canada. There it stayed—unrepaired and rotting away—until it was rescued several years ago by ex-Porsche test driver and former Inter-serie star Willi Kauhsen, who brought it back to Germany for a restoration. Its new tube-frame chassis and body are mated to low-time mechanicals.

Today, 907-003 is thoroughly correct in terms of its appearance and specifications, having been rebuilt to match its configuration at Le Mans in 1967. The car's reappearance at the Circuit de la Sarthe last July for Le Mans Classic served as a living reminder of a period of Porsche racing like no other, an era in which the department's developmental pace and intensity was as fast and furious as anything that happened on track between the guardrails. For a glimpse of that pace, turn the page.



Porsche engineers designed the air inlets to avoid aerodynamic disturbances—both up front for the front-mounted oil cooler and at the rear, where scoops (left) help to keep transmission temperatures in check. The rear deck was also fitted with an adjustable rear spoiler (left) to improve high-speed stability.



The tube-framed road to 917

PHOTOS: TOUCH ARCHIVES



OLLON-VILLARS SPYDER

Built in just six weeks during the summer of 1965, this tube-frame sports racer used Formula 1-style suspension and wheels. Powered by a 240-hp, 2.0-liter Type 771 flat eight, it weighed just 1,170 pounds. Named for its first event and later turned into a coupe, it served as the pattern for all “plastic Porsches” leading up to the 917. Although it failed to stop Ferrari’s charge to 1965’s hill-climb title, it returned the crown to Porsche in 1966.



906

The 906, or Carrera 6, was the first truly modern Porsche sports racer. Its design was based on that of the Ollon-Villars Spyder, but was something of a compromise because—like the 904—it used outdated suspension and 15-inch diameter wheels. Sold to customer racers as the 904’s replacement, the 906 was powered by a racing version of the 911’s boxer six. It was utilized by the factory with the same flat six as well as a 2.0-liter Type 771 flat eight.



910

Debuting as a hill-climb car in the summer of 1966 but intended as a factory circuit racer, the 910 was essentially a 906 using suspension and wheels derived from the components found in the Ollon-Villars Spyder. The 910 was raced by the factory with both six- and eight-cylinder engines. The ex-works 910s were sold to privateers after one or two events, and were fitted with six-cylinder powerplants.



907

As a wind-tunnel-honed 910, the 907 came in longtail and short-tail forms. With the notable exception of two cars for Le Mans in 1967, all were powered by the 2.2-liter Type 771 flat eight. Although its career as a works entry was short, the 907 brought Zuffenhausen its first overall win at Daytona in 1968. It also won at Sebring and the Targa Florio that year.



908

While the longtail 908 would feature the first rear wing on a factory-built Porsche, it was arguably little more than a re-engined 907. Its 3.0-liter flat eight was derived from an experimental DOHC version of the 911’s flat six. Available as a longtail streamliner and a short-tail sprinter, the 908 ensured its place in history by winning the 1969 manufacturers title for Porsche, the first of many to come. Unlike its non-hill-climbing predecessors, the majority of short-tail 908s were built as Spydors.



917

Technically a “limited-production sports car” and not a prototype, the 917 was the crowning achievement of the “plastic Porsche” era. In essence, it was a re-bodied 908 with its cockpit moved slightly forward to accommodate the massive flat twelve, which could easily push it to speeds well in excess of 200 mph. Although it suffered severe aerodynamic stability problems in its 1969 debut season, revisions turned the 917 into a winner that would dominate the world endurance racing scene as well as the Can-Am series. The ultimate Porsche race car? Many think so. 🍷