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Ferdinand Piëch: 1937-2019

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Dr Ferdinand Piëch, 1937 to 2019 (photo courtesy of VW).

Ferdinand Piëch: 1937-2019.

Kieron Fennelly looks back at an extraordinary and crucially important career in the motor industry...

Ferdinand Piëch died suddenly on August 25th. Once the most powerful man in the auto industry, he was also instrumental in the early development of the Porsche 911 and on more than one occasion, its reprieve.

From his earliest days where he worked with Hans Mezger on the first flat 6 engine and later resolved the early 911's handling problems to his decades as an increasingly important figure on Porsche's supervisory board, Piëch's was the guiding hand behind the continued existence of the 911. He joined Porsche in spring 1963, the second of Professor Porsche's grandsons to arrive at the family firm.

Ferdinand Piëch was the younger son of Louise, Ferry's sister, a strong character who held Porsche together at Gmünd during the traumatic year when Ferry, husband Anton Piëch and Dr Porsche were detained by the French in 1946-7. Ferdinand Piëch's early career revealed that he had inherited his mother's single-mindedness: He tore through Porsche to become second in command, from assistant to Mezger to director of development and motorsport in four short years.

First he bundled aside Hans Tomala, Technical Director, over the 911's wayward handling, taking the role himself. This brought him charge of the racing budget and he saw competition as his way to the top at Porsche. There was no love lost between him and his easier-going cousin Butzi and he viewed the latter's elegant if heavy Carrera 6 904 with contempt, cancelling a Mark 2 version and devising his own 2 litre racer, the functional but astoundingly light 906.

Where Porsche had relied on instinct and experience, Piëch brought calculation and



analysis: he was obsessed with weight: no new component would escape the scrutiny of the bathroom scales on his desk. He applied this dictum to the 911 to produce the 820 kg 911R which never made production, but it became the template for the 2.7RS and the future RS - GT3 tradition; under his exacting oversight the flat 6 grew to 2.2 then 2.4 litres. Piëch himself worked on the 2.4 engine which met draconian new US emission standards with both better torque and minimal loss of power.

His energy was unprecedented: the rush to develop the 917 during 1968-69 meant endless overtime: "Just because he could sustain 48 hours at a stretch meant he expected everybody else to," observed Tony Lapine, sourly. The sheer cost of the 917 campaign alarmed the careful Ferry who despaired at how much his nephew was spending.

Piëch pushed hard for aerodynamic efficiency, but while the 917 was clearly extremely fast, because he did not believe in any element that created drag, the early cars were frighteningly unstable. It took a brave engineer, Helmut Flegl, armed with incontrovertible windtunnel data to persuade him to accept that front and rear downforce was essential to keep the car from taking off.

Piëch's huge Le Mans gamble paid off: In an unguarded moment during the euphoria of that 1970 victory he told a journalist that he thought he would have to resign if Porsche had not won. But if he thought this win could elevate him to the top of Porsche it was not to be. Ferry and Louise decided that integrating their children in the company had become too difficult (Ferry's exasperation with his nephew was the real reason) so the Porsche and Piëch families would no longer be allowed to fill management roles in the company. One of Ferdinand Piëch's last tasks was to persuade Ernst Fuhrmann to return to Porsche as Technical Director.

Then in March 1972 he left Porsche, taking a holiday in his native Austria where he had an affair with his cousin Gerd's wife. The child born of this union was one of twelve fathered by Piëch with four different women. The 356 specialist and long standing Porsche historian Michel Thiriar has suggested this interest in progeny was because Piëch was seeking to



create his own likeness and Thiriar says Piëch's own estimation was that he failed.

After designing a five cylinder diesel engine for Mercedes, Piëch joined Audi-NSU where his vision and energy transformed this discreet VW subsidiary through such spectacular innovations as the Quattro Turbo and the award-winning Audi 100 into a highly profitable premium brand. Meanwhile he had considerable input in the very successful Golf Mk4. Unstoppable, he went on to head VW, first as MD then in 2002 as president, entirely fitting for the man whose grandfather started the company and of whose brilliance Piëch believed he was the sole inheritor. There he reinvigorated the ailing VW, made the deft strategic acquisitions of Seat and Skoda and established the VW Group in China.

Throughout this period, he remained close to Porsche as an authoritative shareholder on the supervisory board. Initially a supporter of the 959 he became an increasingly harsh critic of its cost over-runs as he later was with the four-door 989 which also began with his blessing. Loss of Piëch's support was partly responsible for bringing the Porsche careers of Helmuth Bott, Peter Schutz, Arno Bohn and Ulrich Bez to premature ends.

"In a one-to-one with Piëch, you can't win," recalled 989 advocate and technical director Ulrich Bez. His own career at Weissach was effectively over the moment Piëch terminated the four-door project. But if Piëch could be brutal, he did not forget people. On a cold, wet day in May 1994 he bothered to attend the funeral of Helmuth Bott, a ceremony otherwise ignored by a Porsche which had evidently forgotten its former technical director's decades of contribution. But Ferdinand Piëch had evidently not forgotten his debt to Bott.

It could be argued too that Piëch always had Porsche's best interests at heart. In the dark days of 1990-2, it is certain he used his shareholding to block any takeover of Porsche - the names of Toyota and even Mercedes Benz were floated, and he manoeuvred Wendelin Wiedeking who would rescue the firm, into the top job. The plan to diversify into the eight times larger SUV market, profits from which would sustain the sports cars, could not have gone ahead without Piëch's approval. Neither though was he going to make it too easy for Porsche: If Lamborghinis were in a higher price bracket, the Audi R8 was pitched directly at



the 911, a reminder of the rivalry between the works and Porsche Salzburg racing teams in the days of the 917.

Ever the final arbiter, a typical Piëch intervention was his cancelling of a deal negotiated in 2005 between VW engineering and Daimler Benz whereby VW would use Mercedes' BlueTec technology under licence for controlling emissions. At a potential cost of €1000/vehicle, he considered it too expensive. VW would pursue its own TDI route to filtering emissions, rather disastrously as it would turn out a decade later.

In 2007, Wiedeking started buying VW shares in an audacious attempt to take the company over, but Piëch was never intimidated and when two years later his former protégé's casino gamble collapsed, bankrupting Porsche, Piëch intervened decisively: VW bailed out Porsche, but on his terms which meant Wiedeking and chief accountant Härter were promptly paid off. The Porsche supervisory board, led by Piëch's cousin Wolfgang Porsche which arguably should not have allowed its managing director so much rope in the first place, was roundly humiliated: 37 years after leaving Porsche, Ferdinand Piëch was now its master. Porsche's technical contribution to VAG was increased, a reflection that it was the Group's most successful subsidiary. When Wolfgang Hatz replaced Wolfgang Dürheimer as Porsche's R&D chief in 2011, Hatz also kept his responsibility as director of VAG engines and transmissions.

Then came press reports of major boardroom disagreements at Wolfsburg. After twice being voted down, Ferdinand Piëch did something no one had ever imagined; he resigned. His departure in April 2015 puzzled analysts who agreed with his contentions that VW manufacture costs were too high, that its 2% US market share was poor and the firm was too dependent on China; Group profitability overall was delivered by Audi and Porsche. The revolt against Piëch was led by Wolfgang Porsche. Piëch had been getting his own way for so long, it seemed his cousin and fellow directors were out for revenge.

Piëch's uncanny ability to read the future was such that analysts wondered whether the other directors had made their stand on the right issue for against expectations, Ferdinand



Piëch did not attempt return to VW. Then suddenly this all came brutally back into focus with VW's diesel emissions scandal, this time making not the business pages, but headline news around the world. Winterkorn was fired and eleven further senior VW Group managers, including Porsche R & D director Wolfgang Hatz, would lose their jobs. Whether Piëch himself was aware of the scam will now never been known, but insiders say that little at VW Group escaped his penetrating gaze and micro-management style.

Perhaps it is Porsche fans themselves though who have most to thank Ferdinand Piëch for: he turned a hobby shop into a racing machine, endowing Porsche with an engineering excellence which has sustained the 911 tradition when conventional logic had long said the design was obsolete. And incredibly, that 911 is now in sight of its sixtieth birthday.