



INTERVIEW

“I’D LIKE TO BE A TURBO S”

Photos by Bernd Kammerer

Matthias Müller, Porsche’s new CEO, talks with Eckhard Eybl about the right ingredients of a perfect sports car, his closeness to the product—and the pleasure that non-Porsche drivers are missing.

What was the first change that you made as chairman of the executive board at Porsche?

The seating arrangement and the dates of board meetings.

What was your opinion of Porsche while you were working in Wolfsburg for the Volkswagen Group?

Porsche has always been a fascinating company for me, starting with the brand, and continuing with the products. From previous projects it had always been clear to me that Porsche is a great company—with superb technical potential and well-qualified employees, well organized in every aspect, and very disciplined. So I've always had a very, very high opinion of Porsche.

And what is your view now?

It has been confirmed in every respect. Of course I knew that a family-owned business of this size would have a different corporate culture than Volkswagen or Audi. I deliberately wanted to see what it was like and experience it. Now, after the first few months, I can say that I feel very much at home in this culture. And all the other aspects have essentially been confirmed as well.

As a Bavarian, how do you feel in Stuttgart? It seems that the country's soccer players, at any rate, are moving in the opposite direction.

I have been made to feel very welcome here in every respect, both at our company and in my personal life. I now live in the center of Stuttgart, in the Heusteig quarter. It's a very attractive part of town, and simply a pleasant place to live.

Have you always been fascinated by Porsche—like most people from Stuttgart—from childhood on?

Yes, starting in childhood. My father was the racing director for DKW, and later when we left East Germany and came to Bavaria, he worked first for Auto Union and then for Audi. So I've inherited, so to speak, a great affinity for racing. My father used to watch races on television with me,

Personal experience: Matthias Müller (left) and professional racing star Jacky Ickx on the track in Qatar



MATTHIAS MÜLLER ON HIS APPOINTMENT AS PORSCHE CEO

How exactly did your appointment as Porsche CEO transpire?

Volkswagen attested to my potential for handling greater responsibilities than the ones I had at the time. During an evaluation in April of 2010, Mr. Winterkorn made the first suggestions that I might be considered for this position. A short while later I was invited to a number of interviews in Salzburg with the two families who own the company, and then a short time later by the employee side, namely, the works council. That was in the early summer of 2010, in May and June, and then the supervisory board also made a similar decision. And that was it actually.

What was your reaction? Did you have to give it a lot of thought?

Not at all. There was a feeling of euphoria, which I tried to suppress until receiving something in writing. I didn't have to think at all about the fact that this is a very attractive job. From the very first moment it was clear that there is nothing more exciting or appealing in the automotive industry than this position. What did make me think was the responsibility for around 12,000 employees. I view that of course as a major part of the overall responsibility. But it was quickly clear to me that I would like to face this challenge, well aware that it would not be easy and would require great effort.

and we also went to racing events together. I can remember going to motorcycle world championship contests at Solitude as a little boy. That automatically meant coming into contact with Porsche, whether at endurance races or simply via the product, namely, the 911. The Carrera, which is still the greatest automotive icon for me to this day, was always my dream car. And now this dream has come true.

So it was no coincidence that you entered the automobile industry when you finished your training and studies?

No, not a coincidence at all. Somehow this fascination of my father's rubbed off on me. When I finished my apprenticeship and my studies, Audi was a very interesting employer.

Can you understand the cult that has arisen especially around the 911?

Very well in fact, for two reasons. One is theoretical, from the perspective of product strategy and planning—which are areas that I've always worked on. Besides that, there's now also my practical experience. Since coming to Porsche, I can understand this cult around the brand and also the individual models even better, because I have a better idea of the history myself and can therefore follow the individual steps much better. In other words, I now understand the causal chain that extends from the past to the present more deeply than before.

Is there a conclusive explanation as to why this rear-engine design has survived so convincingly in a Porsche of all cars, enabling the 911 to set standards for so long in the sports-car sector?

It's certainly not just a matter of the drive strategy, because the overall package is so impressive. Like no other carmaker before, Porsche has succeeded in building a four-seater that not only has incredibly sporty visuals but also performs and drives just as convincingly. The rear engine obvi-

ously poses no hurdle there. That's why the design has remained viable. Over the decades, our engineers have always managed to pursue further evolutionary developments and significantly optimize the already high technical level of the 911. That ultimately results in a car—now with the 997 or its many precursors as well as the planned successor—that for me is the best in the world. That's also why I've selected a 911 Turbo S as my company car, because the 911 Turbo is not only interdisciplinary, so to speak, but also a leader in every discipline.

Can you remember the first time you drove a Porsche?

I think it was in the year 1996. A Boxster, because that was right at the time when Audi was developing the first TTs. The Boxster was included in various test-drives for comparison, because it set the standards at that time for sportiness, agility, and handling—which automotive magazines the world over still attest.

Now you can choose any Porsche model that you want. Will this sensation of driving a Porsche become routine at some point?

I've thought about that too... Over the winter holidays I had a Cayenne—after which I was really looking forward again to my 911. As far as I'm concerned, this pleasure in driving a Porsche will never diminish. If someone were to take my Porsche away, I would miss something. By the way, that's how I now judge all the cars that I drive, and I view them with different eyes than before.

People who have never had a chance to drive a Porsche—what are they missing?

They'll never know or experience the automotive high point of our time.

In your new position, do you now have more or less contact with product development than before?

Nothing has changed for me there. I always seek contact with development and with our engineers. I continue doing here



A motorsports fan: Matthias Müller inherited his enthusiasm for racing from his father

MATTHIAS MÜLLER: MILESTONES

- 1953 Born in Chemnitz
- 1971 Secondary school graduation (Abitur) in Ingolstadt
- 1971 Toolmaker apprenticeship at Audi AG in Ingolstadt
- 1974 Degree in information science (Diplom Informatiker) from the Munich University of Applied Sciences
- 1978 Return to Audi AG
- 1984 Director, Systems Analysis Department, Audi AG
- 1992 Internship at Japan's Ministry for International Trade and Industry (MITI), Tokyo
- 1993 A3 Project Management Director, Audi AG
- 1995 Project Management Director, Audi AG, also Seat and Lamborghini
- 2007 Product Management Director, Volkswagen Group and VW brand, General Agent
- 2010 Since October, Chief Executive Officer of Dr. Ing. h.c. F. Porsche AG, Stuttgart

what I've always done, taking every opportunity to maintain the closest contact with all of the technical fields. And of course I always take part myself in test-drives that compare technologies.

How important are these comparative drives for development processes?

Very important. The creative process takes place both in the development offices and at the negotiation table, at the computer and on paper. It is then enormously important to make sure that all of these early decisions are later reflected in reality. Trust is good, but checking is better. Our adjustment rounds and our proven test procedures are important instruments for making sure that we're on the right path, not only with respect to our own ideas, but also with respect to the competition. It can easily become necessary to readjust our own targets.

In your opinion, what is the origin of the Porsche spirit and the high level of quality

at Porsche? Where does this come from—a result of evolution or from typical Swabian characteristics?

It certainly has something to do with the fact that cars have been developed in Baden-Württemberg for 125 years now, and that this expertise is concentrated nowhere as strongly as in and around Stuttgart. In addition to this background, there has also been a lot of further evolutionary development; at Porsche of course, and just as positively at Mercedes. Moreover, a highly competent supplier industry was bound to take root and develop around these two brands. The corresponding college and university departments have also been established, which puts an entire chain in place from training through to the finished product. The Swabian mentality definitely plays a role as well. It promotes what I'd call a Porsche-typical understanding of quality. Porsche has succeeded in imbuing, indeed cultivating, these highly complex processes with such refinement and precision that our produc-

tion lines yield very good results and quality. Furthermore, this promise of quality can also be kept over a long period of time.

Is driving a Porsche a great pleasure for you?

Driving a Porsche is an absolute pleasure! My chauffeur is always asking why I don't let him drive more often. And I always tell him it's simply because I like driving a Porsche so much myself.

Would you describe yourself as a hedonist?

No, but I could agree that I have an appreciation for luxury. For me that means working hard and making the necessary sacrifices—but also occasionally treating oneself to something.

Could you expand on what you mean by “something”?

Treating oneself to something beautiful, like elegant clothing, or a special tie, or a high-grade watch, or Porsche luggage as I did recently. I have to admit that I enjoy going out to eat on occasion, and that I also might spend a little more for a bottle of wine. What I like most of all is a weekend or a few days at one of my two vacation residences, which are a mountain cabin in the Zillertal and an apartment at Lake Maggiore. That's the height of enjoyment for me.

Are those the places where it's easiest for you to relax?

I'm someone who has learned to deal with problems and pressure, and also to let go. A change of location is very helpful in letting go of problems. And the chance to

actually drive to Tyrol or northern Italy always gives me the feeling that I can leave certain things behind and have some peace and quiet.

What goals have you set for Porsche's corporate development, aside from the number of cars or model series?

One goal for board members is to work on the Strategy 2018, and to use it to derive a continuous series of targets for each discipline. On the one hand these naturally include very operations-oriented elements like revenue, investment, and volumes, which are used to describe qualitative growth. But my goal is that we should work on shaping the company not only with respect to our products but also overall, so that the company and the brand achieve an even stronger public profile.

What is your view of alternative forms of mobility, given the general changes underway regarding both society and the environment?

We are devoting great attention to the fact that attitudes to mobility are changing. This means coming up with alternative forms of mobility, which also includes the question of alternative drives. We are holding intensive talks with other mobility and transport sectors such as aviation and rail, in order to come up with integrated mobility strategies and also put them into practice at some point. Of course the combustion engine also has to undergo further development. We're talking about a time frame here of ten to twenty years, but we have to start developing ideas and laying plans now.

How realistic is a Porsche-typical sports car that is not powered by a combustion engine?

That is indeed possible in the foreseeable future. I would say it could happen in five to ten years, either as a car with a purely electric drive or as a hybrid vehicle. I can well imagine that our first step consists of putting hybrid drives in sports cars too, as we've already done for the Cayenne and for the Panamera. And when the infrastructure later becomes available worldwide, that we also offer purely electric cars or think about fuel-cell vehicles.

What would this type of worldwide infrastructure for fuel-cell and electric cars include—is it just a matter of refueling or energy supply stations?

We'd have to think beyond fueling stations at public buildings and parking lots and extend the infrastructure to cover home parking facilities. A contradictory part of this scenario is that low-emission vehicles are especially well suited for urban regions, yet precisely these regions have the fewest number of garages and many cars parked on the streets. As long as no outlets are available, implementation will be very difficult. And we'll also have to deal with the question of how stable the electric grids are in Europe. In Germany they might be okay, but in Italy your fuse will blow if you turn on a hairdryer while heating up rolls in your oven. There's still a lot to be done there.

Have you developed a leadership philosophy? And can you summarize it in a few sentences?

No, I haven't developed a philosophy that I could write a book about, but one does accumulate some ideas over the course of time. One credo of my working strategy is certainly that I like to turn people who are affected into people who participate. That's an important aspect of my work.

Of course I don't always succeed, but I try. And I'm an advocate of setting targets, which also have to be attained. The third thing is that one has to delegate responsibilities. I'm more a proponent of decentralization than centralization. Or to put it another way, of managing as centrally as necessary but as decentrally as possible.

What do you consider Porsche's most important innovations, both historically and in the present?

In the present and in terms of products, certainly the Porsche double-clutch transmission, or PDK. Another innovation of course is the new museum, because I think it is an outstanding expression of Porsche's overall message.

It holds a wealth of good ideas that have been implemented in outstanding fashion ...

Assessing the historical side is very difficult given that Ferry Porsche and his father Ferdinand were both extremely innovative. I think that the Lohner Porsche made about 110 years ago, the VW Beetle, the Porsche 356, and today's 911 are major innovations in anyone's book. But I'm not able to single out any one, because the entire history of Porsche is one of innovation. No other automotive brand in the world has generated as many innovations as we have here in Stuttgart.

If you were a car, what model would you be?

A 911 Turbo S!

A key topic at Porsche is the idea of performance. Does this idea have to change in order to accommodate changes in general conditions?

One does of course have to adapt. But if “performance” used to mean power, capacity, cylinders, and speed, one should not discard those things but rather supplement them with additional key contemporary parameters, be they CO₂ emissions, fuel consumption, or vehicle weight.

Currently the lap time on the Nordschleife (North Loop) of the Nürburgring is considered the absolute standard.

That will surely remain a very important criterion, but no longer the only one.

How can Porsche reconcile the conflicting demands of lightweight construction and greater comfort and safety?

The art lies in reducing weight in such a way that despite enhancing the features, the overall weight at least will not increase.

So it's an illusion to think we'll achieve the weights of the past?

The question of vehicle weight will continue to be asked. That's why we're working intensively on new materials. At some point these too will become standard features at lower prices than we can imagine at the moment. When people talked about aluminum twenty years ago, it was always very expensive, whereas today even a high-volume model like the Audi A6 has aluminum features.

A famous quote by Ferry Porsche was that “the last car will be a sports car.” What will your contribution be to ensuring that the automobile survives on the one hand, and also that a sports car will remain the most coveted automobile?

I'm a sports-car fan. My contribution will consist of viewing Porsche as a sports-car company and thus putting my energy and

ideas into continuing to develop and offer attractive and desirable sports cars. These cars will always have a high priority in our product portfolio and will be further developed. And we will push ahead in the field of racing; I'll do my part to ensure this as well.

Is there already a concrete road map for racing?

At the moment everything is still under discussion. The important thing is that we continue to promote our customer and amateur racing and thus meet the needs of our customers. In the process, Porsche can always gain new knowledge to develop the sports features of our vehicles. And we'll take top-level racing as it comes.

And what would you never change?

The Porsche logo. ●