

# Company Man

DESIGNER GRANT LARSON ON HIS  
30-YEAR CAREER WITH PORSCHE.

WORDS BY **DAVE MATHEWS** PHOTOS BY **MICHAEL ALAN ROSS**

**GRANT LARSON IS A SUPERSTAR** in the Porsche design world, credited for his work on the Boxster, the Carrera GT, and the 997. More recently, Larson has led projects like the extraordinary 935 build that debuted at the 2018 Rennsport Reunion and the Boxster Bergspyder, an experimental concept car based on a 2015 Boxster to determine the feasibility of bringing an extremely light, roadworthy sports car to market.

Larson is a dyed-in-the-wool car guy who doesn't mind a few spots of oil on his jeans or a little grit under his fingernails. He is a gracious, good-natured man who enjoys poking a little fun and getting poked in return. We caught up with him at the 2019 Porsche Parade in Boca Raton.





PORSCHE  
LEGEN  
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2014



**What are your title and responsibilities at Porsche?**

My current title at Porsche is Director of Special Projects, Style Porsche. The projects encompass special editions, limited low-production cars, and derivatives such as the Speedster, as well as the 911-derived race cars.

**How and when did your passion for cars and design begin?**

My passion for cars began around the age of five, when I started to draw a lot. I always liked the noise and smell of cars, as my dad was often working on one. Mechanical stuff and anything oily and smelling of exhaust was interesting to me, even if it was a garden tractor. At around ten years old I discovered that cars were actually designed by people who did that as a job, and that they start with drawings. Of course, I had no idea at the time that one could make a career out of it. I got in trouble with it instead, by drawing cars all over my desk in a class called Engine Mechanics and getting a detention. I had to stay late and wash off *all* the desks!

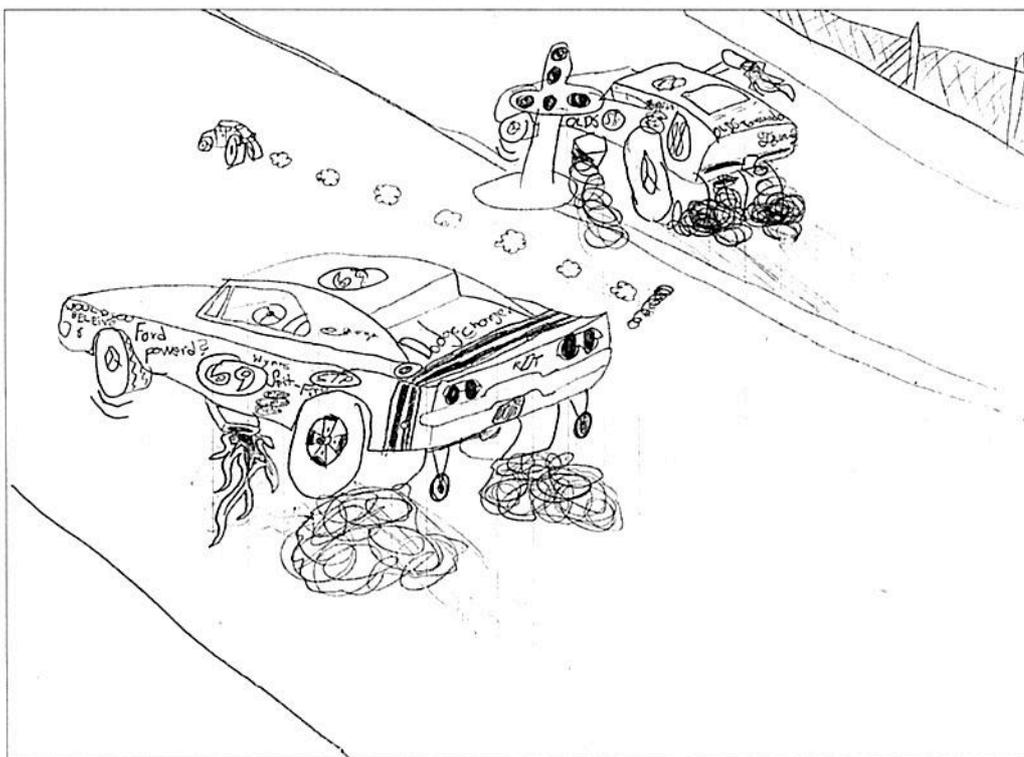
**What were the first cars that captured your imagination?**

Growing up in Wisconsin, the cool thing to have was a muscle car. Imported cars were somewhat rare or rusted out beyond drivability. Despite that, my father had a DKW Junior from 1960 because he thought it was funny, which was succeeded by an NSU Prinz 1000 from 1967. Both rear-engine, by the way. But I was blown away when the older neighborhood kids were frequently burning out in their Camaro SSs, Mercury Cyclones, and 340 Dusters. My brother-in-law had this bright red 1968 Coronet with a real loud 440. We all inhaled a lot of smoke from burned rubber. Flash forward to my first studies, I became aware of European design and fell in love with the sportiness, quality, and of course the design of European and especially German cars. I cultivated and redirected my tastes. I eventually became one of those kids with Porsche 930s and a Lamborghini Countach on my bedroom wall, and started doing illustrations of them to better understand them.

**What is your formal education in design?**

I stayed local at first, studying industrial design at MIAD, the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design. I had this mega advantage, because at 16 I was cutting grass and dusting cars at the Brooks Stevens Automotive Museum in Mequon. Subsequently, I discovered the design studios there. I worked there during the summers in the model shop and doing some design, as well as my MIAD projects. After graduation I took on a full-time job there, and then a couple of us younger guys were laid off a year later as times were tough. Then after some local freelance, I dropped it all and joined Texas Instruments as a designer for consumer electronics. It seemed like the place to be while the automotive industry was recovering. Upon meeting some highly talented designers at TI, I dropped everything again and attended Art Center College of Design, the place to be to study automotive design. I was lucky to attain advanced standing, which allowed me to skip the first two semesters. That was a lot of

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money and a year of your life! Upon graduation in 1986, being totally focused on Germany, I joined Audi in their Advanced Studio in Munich for three years before I joined Porsche.

**Do you still sketch?**

Definitely. And as often as possible. It is the best and most intuitive way to get an idea out. I can also sketch during meetings or at home when drawing with my kids.

**When did you begin working for Porsche, and what were your early assignments?**

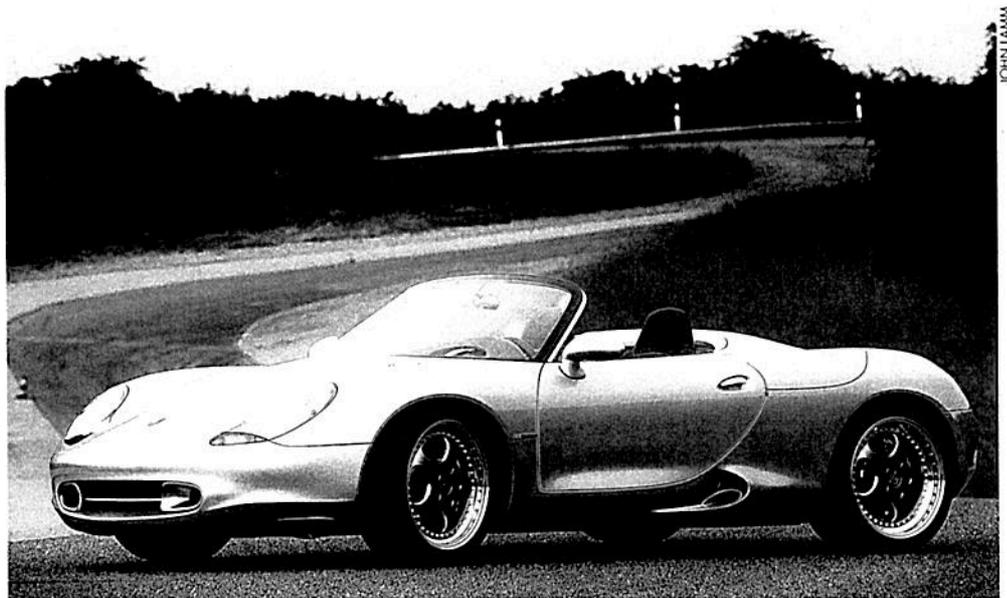
I joined Porsche, hired by Harm Lagaaij, in April 1989. After leaving Audi, I was expecting to work on rear-engine sports cars, but instead we commenced work on the 989, the first shot at a four-door front-engine sports car from Porsche. Parallel to the 989, I also worked on the 944's successor, the 968. In October 1991, the cost of the 989 got out of hand and it was canceled. The general mood was down, the press did not have much of anything positive to say about Porsche's future, and

there was a lot of chatter about a buyout and takeover. Nevertheless, being at Porsche at that time was something really special. There was an aura and pride here that was comparable to no other company. I felt like a member of a real small team with the task of turning the company around. In the fall of 1991,

we then turned our efforts toward the 986 and 996.

**What major projects?**

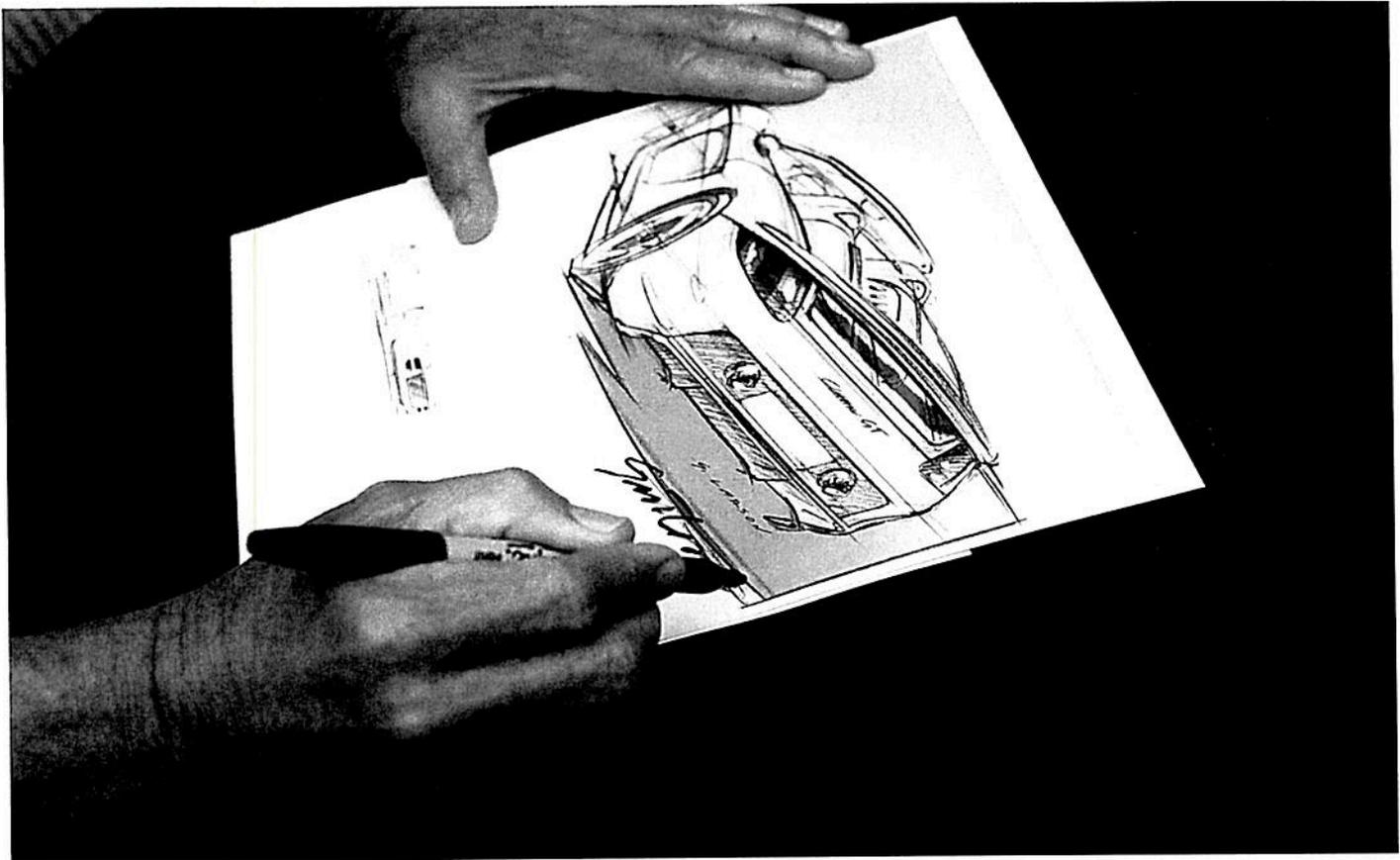
The first project of mine that was to see the light of day was the Boxster Concept, shown for the first time in Detroit in 1993. I was responsible for the exterior, and Stefan Stark did



JOHN LAMA



**Above: The Boxster Concept. Sexy. Sleek. Successful.**  
**Far left: Early on, Grant captured Porsche's mantra—light beats might—as a little German import bests brutish American iron.**



**Above: The hands of an artist and the mind of an engineer. Far right: Grant makes a splash wherever he goes. All kidding aside, it was hot at the Parade in Boca Raton.**

the interior. That was followed by the production version, introduced in September 1996. In 1998 and 1999 we did an early study for the 997 and the early phase of the Carrera GT nearly simultaneously. Tony Hatter took over the production Carrera GT while I finished the 997. The Turbo version of the 997 followed, and I worked closely with Matthias Kulla on that car. I had a lot to do with the early stages of the Panamera, and subsequent to that, I worked on a lot of derivatives, such as the 997 Speedster, Sport Classic, the Targa based on the 991, and both Boxster Spyders. Most recently, I have been working closely with Exclusive and Motorsport on low-production cars and race cars such as the 935, RSR, and GT3 R. We did the Bergspyder based on the 981 Boxster back in 2015, but the Porsche Museum decided to unveil it only recently.

***How does the design phase transition from first conception to a physical build?***

The beginning of each project

and their design phases are different. Sometimes the initial project idea comes from the board of directors, demands from marketing, or from the design studio itself. Each and every project begins with a so-called *Steckbrief*, which lists the basic goals of the project.

Using that as a framework, the creative phase starts with 2D sketches based on a so-called package. The package determines how many seats, basic dimensions, and the powertrain. After several designs are chosen, we go into digital data—which means the 2D ideas are digitally constructed in 3D and are viewed virtually on a powerwall. From there, 1/3-scale models in clay are milled and reworked by hand by clay sculptors. In the case of an interior, most models are full-size right from the beginning.

The chosen proposal or model is then scaled up to full size and manually worked further. There is a lot of handcraft in this phase. When all the design and technical requirements are fulfilled, we then

have a hard model made where the glass areas are transparent and a bit of the interior is visible. This is all accompanied by many virtual reality visualizations. It sounds simple, but this phase of the project for a new car would take about one and a half years. The complete development timeline is just under four years. In the case of derivative cars such as the 935 or Bergspyder, the timeline is significantly shorter.

***How does tradition impact design? Are there any sacred cows at Porsche?***

One of the mottos of Porsche is "Tradition and Innovation," so we are bridging both areas as our company strategy. It therefore plays an important role. It is obvious that the 911 is an evolutionary design, and it is meant to be that way. The success and longevity or timelessness of the 911 is based upon that principle. The 911 is also the basis for the form language of all other models, but we are able to explore a bit further with a new model range.

**How does E-technology impact design?**

With exterior design, it all begins with proportions and the packaging of the larger components. Because the E-technology components are smaller and the batteries are separable, they can be more easily distributed throughout the car. Small, powerful motors mean lower hood profiles and cowl lines. The proportions of a car used to be based on the height of the engine from the oil pan to the air cleaner. The electrification of cars also makes all-wheel drive possible, as there is no driveshaft through the middle of the car. In addition, some manufacturers get away with fewer radiators in the front or "face" of the car, so electric cars also look different. E-technology opened up areas of design that were previously unimaginable, especially in the interior. It is now possible to combine functions,

achieve a higher level of clarity in design, and at the same time make it more driver-friendly.

**How has the design process changed over your 30 years with Porsche?**

How a car is designed is nearly identical to how it was done in the past, only now we have a lot more technology to make it happen faster and to be much more accurate. From an idea to a full-size presentation model, the process and content is very similar. I guess the biggest difference is the complexity of cars today, as they are electronically very complicated. There are also so many more regulations to fulfill. Much more is happening digitally and virtually, and sometimes we can develop certain variations without having a full-size model occupying the measuring plate for months.

**What Porsches do you own?**

I have three 356s, one of them being my absolute dream, the 1956 Speedster. I also have a 911S from 1967, and my wife has a nice Polo Red 912 from 1968. Recently I added an early Boxster S because it is such a great car for little money. In addition to a couple of American V8s, I also have several air-cooled VW products. ☺

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