



### *Changed days...*

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THE FIRST time I went to an Audi annual press conference was five years ago. It was a modest affair, held in a conference room at the Kempinski Hotel at Munich Airport and preceded the evening before by a dinner for a few dozen members of the financial press.

Five years on and I find myself standing in a winter wonderland constructed on the piazza in front of the Audi Museum Mobile (which also didn't exist five years ago) watching 20 or so ice skaters clad in silver body suits perform 'holiday on ice' quattro-style in front of 700 journalists.

A cast of hundreds had been labouring for weeks to build not only an ice rink, but also a 12 metre high, 37 degree 'ski jump' construction minus the 'jump' part, which I admit you would then probably have to call a ramp. In any event, a steep snow-covered slope appeared where previously there wasn't one, topped off by a closed-off, car-sized cabin. We had been promised a world premiere – points for guessing where and how it would make its appearance.

The theme of the evening was, of course, 25 years of quattro and, once the silver skaters had left the ice, we were treated to a parade of the quattro standard-bearers of the last quarter century, starting with a bright red Ur quattro driven by Michelle Mouton and including an Ur Quattro Rallye, the 200 quattro Safari driven by Ur Audi rally driver Hannu Mikkola, the S1 Sport quattro driven by Stig Blomqvist, the almighty S1 Pikes Peak featuring the equally almighty Walter Röhrl and, finally, the Audi 80 competition with Le Mans pilot Emanuele Pirro.

The finale was preceded by fireworks and, believe it or not, a huge flaming lizard (the logo devised in honour of the quattro anniversary year). With spotlights trained on the top of the 'ski jump', doors opened (surprise, surprise) and the latest vehicle to bear the quattro badge made its way carefully, but nevertheless smoothly, down the slope onto the ice rink. It was a bright yellow, all-new RS4 driven by none other than Audi boss Martin Winterkorn, who looked frankly relieved to have got that particular drive behind him. In the passenger seat was reigning DTM champ Mattias Ekström, who, when all the talking was over, then performed the *pièce de résistance* and drove the thing back up the slope again (a lot less gingerly than his boss made the downward trip), reminiscent of Audi's latest A6 advert involving a Finnish ski jump and a good head for heights.

Then, just as we thought the show had come to an end (feet were getting cold, and stomach was grumbling), the doors of the Museum Mobile slid open and none other than the new Q7 soft-roader stuck its chunky snout out. I admit that there was precious little to discern from this 'sneak preview', as the view offered to us was akin to that experienced by a dazzled rabbit on a country lane. By the

time our eyes had begun to make out the basis of a form behind the glare of the headlights against the darkened backdrop of the museum, it was all over. Ho hum, I guess we'll just all have to go to the Frankfurt Auto Show this autumn to get a better butcher's.

All-in-all it was a jolly impressive show; well choreographed, involving a huge amount of preparation and, presumably, a budget significantly greater than that five years previously.

What are we to read into the transformation in the scale of the company's annual jamboree in celebration of its financial results? Firstly, one would assume that, in the intervening period, the company has been performing well. Correct. While the VW brand has been sliding backwards into a gaping chasm, Audi has been pushing ever upwards, selling more and more vehicles year on year and, more importantly, making money.

It produced 3.1 per cent more vehicles in 2004 than in 2003, turned over 4.7 per cent more in sales income, and maintained its profitability at 4.7 per cent. As vital statistics go, this is more than respectable.

But, in many ways, the show on the Audi piazza was more indicative of the company's growing confidence as an independent entity. Technically, although it's an AG (the German equivalent of a plc), almost all of its stock is held by VW, so it is far from being independent in that sense. However, as a company and as a brand it has evolved a character that is much more Audi and much less VW's prestige brand, the thanks for which can be laid largely at the four sticky feet of that lizard.

