



Once upon a time, a group of men drew up a plan...

From left, Franz Braun, Audi Sport, Ernst Müller (retired), axles and suspension, and later manager for running gear, and Hans Peter Gassen now complete vehicle and sport commercial, then running gear design and test.

ONCE upon a time, hidden in the frozen depths of a wintry Scandinavia, a group of men drew up their plan to change the course of automotive history... I think I feel a book coming on. It was 1977, and Hans Peter Gassen was one of a group of Audi engineers, led by then development chief Dr Ferdinand Piëch, on one of the company's regular winter test outings.

"There were all sorts of vehicles there," recalls Gassen. "Jorg Bensinger, manager for running gear, was out in front, I was following in an Audi 100 six-cylinder prototype, and behind me was Roland Gumpert in an Iltis with just 75bhp."

The Iltis was a four-wheel-drive military jeep developed by Audi to replace the DKW Munga. No matter what manoeuvres Gassen and Bensinger attempted on the icy surface, they just couldn't lose the damn Iltis and its paltry 75 horses.

Later, in some long forgotten hotel bar, the focus of the conversation was: if you could have so much fun driving this unrefined military lump, just imagine how great four-wheel drive could be in a road car. And so Piëch and his engineers decided among themselves that it would be so.

The initial Scandinavian plan had been to use the Audi 100 as the basis for the new venture but, back at base, attention shifted to the new coupé, which was in prototype form.

At that time Ernst Müller was responsible for axles and suspension. "The most complex issue was the packaging," he explained. He opted for the same MacPherson strut arrangement front and rear, which was coupled with the novel hollow shaft drivetrain layout. Despite the ground-breaking nature of what they were doing, Müller insists that it all came together remarkably easily.

It took just three years to bring the car from initial idea on to the show stage in Geneva. Says Müller: "Such a project would normally have taken five to six years. But we were such a small team, and our enthusiasm for the idea

was so great that we did everything we could to make it happen as fast as possible."

Wherever they could, the team grabbed hold of existing parts to keep lead times short and costs down. The decision tree was but a sapling, and with Piëch driving the whole project there were no internal barriers — at least not in Ingolstadt.

Wolfsburg remained to be convinced before the car could go into production. Carl Hahn was in the hot seat at the time, and was more than a little sceptical.

Müller and Gassen recall, with just a modicum of glee, the day Hahn showed up in Ingolstadt and was treated to a quattro demonstration.

The lads found a hilly meadow near Ingolstadt. "We had the fire brigade soak it with water," reminisces Müller, "and sent three cars on to it — the front-wheel-drive Audi 80, a rear-wheel-driven car, from a certain competitor in Munich, and the quattro."

Gassen picks up the tale. "Both the rear- and front-driven cars were slithering about all over the place," he says with a grin as wide as the quattro grille. "Hahn was amazed, and signed up right away."

The quattro was envisaged primarily as a road car. But, even on that fateful evening in Scandinavia it was recognised that such a project could only be carried through in parallel with a motorsport programme.

Franz Braun has been a mechanic and test driver with Audi Sport since 1975, and had already gathered experience in track racing with the Audi 80, but this was a whole new ball park.

He recalls the quattro's first outings at the end of 1980. "We were running the '0' car — not competitively, just to gain experience," he says. But already the competition was unnerved. It took some lobbying for the powers-that-be to admit four-wheel drive into rallying for the first time, with several competitors putting up fierce resistance.

But, Audi prevailed, and in 1981 quattro flew into the mêlée with a vengeance. The fledgling team won on its second WRC outing, in Sweden. Finn Hannu Mikkola blasted home in the first of many convincing victories. The rest, as they say, is motorsport history.

But the Ur quattro story is not just about motorsport history, or even about technical history. It's about changing the course of an entire company.

That small group of dedicated engineers set a process in motion that still defines Audi today. The compactness of the company also played a role. The decision was taken that all Audis from that point on had to have the facility for four-wheel drive built in. It was the definition of a brand, and is adhered to resolutely.

Motorsport success instilled an unprecedented level of pride, enthusiasm and corporate identity throughout the entire company. Twenty years on that enthusiasm is still alive and kicking, not only in the eyes of those engineers that were instrumental, but also in thousands of devoted quattro fans worldwide.

Thank God for that odd little Iltis, and winter testing in Sweden.

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