

A SLUSHBOX?! It can't be! Whatever happened to that old stoicism? Were did the purist go, the one who would never THINK of buying a Porsche with a slushbox? Nor almost any other car?

Yep; it's the same guy, only a little wiser. See, I had the "opportunity" to work for two weeks in Chicago last year, driving from my motorhome abode about 35 miles south of the city proper to Skokie, about ten miles north of the center, and along the lakefront. Right where the interstates split off to O'Hare, and the 16 mile drive at any time of day or night is at least more than it takes to fly to Syracuse FROM O'Hare. Sort of makes one wonder why bother. Anyway, besides the motorhome (I have yet to see a big rig like mine with anything except an automatic, and I was told to forget it when I wanted to change Tranny Trash to a nice manual gearbox), the only automatic vehicle I owned was my Ford Aerostar AWD mini-van, which I used.

So the Silver Bullet stayed in the garage collecting the dust of Lynne's refinishing of the kitchen cabinets. If sawdust were the ideal treatment to win a concours, I'd get the Manhattan Trophy. Unfortunately, it is just the opposite; gets into everything, and is impossible to get fully out, and shakes down into airboxes so when you turn on a fan months later, you again get little wood flakes! Anyway, I digress... But there I am off in the hinterland, while my beautiful Targa (never mind the rust-through or the oil leaks; it is MINE, which makes it beautiful in its own right) is parked in the garage. Lynne & Jess periodically started it, but it was starting to feel like Mike Darminio's car, only filthy. It felt like the suspension parts were hardening from lack of flex, and I was afraid the CV joints would rust on the top halves! And the REAL problem showed up in the induction system, as all the injector o-rings hardened from disuse, so starting became a chore with a lot of stumble, cough and sputter.

So I replaced them, but I vowed the car was to be driven; if not by me, then Lynne & Jess, now legal with her own Subaru, could take up the effort. Only problem; Jess fell in love with it, and started dropping hints that it was "time for another one, DADDY". That last word ALWAYS makes me hold my wallet, and I doubt you readers have been immune to similar circumstances. With age and diabetes creeping up on me, and the rigors of middle age, even Lynne decided it was time to look. If you've ever heard Bill Cosby on the subject of his Ferrari, you know he suffered years of "ties" as presents. He then goes on to say he wished, just once, that they'd buy him a Ferrari. He'd make the payments, he just wanted "permission". There I am, or rather was.

See, April 12 I bought what is merely the second in a long string of Porsches I will own. Like being too thin or too rich, there is no such thing as too many Porsches. That is of course until you a) marry a person who dreams of a house, and you find the banks do not consider a 911 to be a "home improvement", b) start a family with one more child seat needed than you have belts to accommodate, c) decide that said offspring need the best education money can buy, which leads d) spouse from a) above, who wants to change careers in mid-stream, and have you cover the family and education expenses yourself for the next few years. That is when your velocity portfolio starts to look like an early 924 is about your limit.

But that is why I've owned the Silver Bullet since March, Friday the Thirteenth, of 1981. I've put over 170K miles, of which I figure about 20K are on the track. Only twice in that entire time has the car needed a tow; when the fuel pump broke in Elmira during an interview trip to Pennsylvania, and when I decided not to press my luck when a main cross-bolt capnut decided to come loose and puke oil (like THAT was a new occurrence). It has been driven by more current and future Porsche Club members than any single vehicle of which I'm aware, and has been the recipient of plenty of scrutiny by the track flaggers to see what is dripping TODAY. To the point they probably wouldn't notice if I were driving naked with the roof off, and my arms flailing out the windows! But again, I digress...

So Lynne, the perceptive wife she is, could see I was getting depressed. My business and investments had made us financially secure, even while putting two women through private schools, and my clients were starting to approach me instead of my having to do all the selling. Helps on a resume, I assure you. So Lynne says; "I think you should look", but sets no specific guidelines. So I "look". EVERYWHERE. Found in the Porsche Market Letter what sounded like a terrific car; a '91 C4 Targa, White with Tan leather and blackout trim. Just under \$30K. Found some interesting ones in Pano, but (sorry Betty Joe if you read this, it isn't your fault) some PCA members seem to think economics is a force they need not be concerned with. DESPERATELY searched for a NON-red '89 normal nose factory Turbo Targa. Had one last year in Florida for \$30K and my insurance company (State Farm) wouldn't write comprehensive because I'd had some glass breakage claims under "full coverage for glass" clauses. What made that more tragic was the absurd fact that now that they have again agreed to write fire and theft, a minimum requirement for a car loan, they tacked on \$7.80 semi-annual "full glass" on the policy. Like I look THAT STUPID?! Again, though, I digress...

So here I am with an expectation of about \$30K for a Porsche. Rules: It must NOT be red, it MUST be open, and not like a sunroof or moonroof, like the latest "Targa", and it must have a rear engine. Coolant color optional. Based on what I've seen and heard, and also based on having gotten to DRIVE a 996 at Parade last year (testing the BFG G-Force tires which came out in Nov. last year, and will DEFINITELY be my next tire buy for a 911), plus my Audi Quattro experiences, the new C4 as a Cabrio sounded like a winner. Until I found I'd be looking at no less than \$100K by the time I equipped it and paid the luxury tax (WHAT luxury? Driving a car capable of saving my life is a luxury? Of course, as gummint views it, because their idea of a safe ride is a Centro Bus!). Again I digress...

But the whacky thing is the thinking which followed that train of consciousness. See, the neat thing accomplished by Porsche in the new C4 was the incorporation of the viscous coupling in the front axle assembly, rather than at the gearbox as before. If you don't know, a viscous coupling works like a differential and allows a small and slow rotation with little resistance so little heat, for slight differences in wheel speeds, but effectively locks up if one wheel turns rapidly relative to another. So they accomplish the same thing, but are unlike fixed limited-slip systems which have clutch disks which are statically harder to rotate than dynamically, so give one a choppy effect in all non-wetted road conditions, or the Porsche variable-slip systems as incorporated in the 959 and subsequently in the early C4, which are sinfully expensive and prone to maintenance headaches and cost. Just ask someone with a variable slip rear end on his/her 928 GTS. Now that the science lesson is over... I know, I know... Intuitively, based on everything you've ever witnessed, the faster you spin a fluid, the LESS resistance it causes. But trust me. I don't understand all the chemistry any more than I can really explain Einstein's special theory of relativity, but I know these couplings are the mainstay of any serious Full-Time AWD system today, allowing the driver the luxury of simply planting his/her foot and the wheels and system make their own decisions what torque to put where, and with essentially no complex controls whatsoever. Technology uber alles.

And do you know WHY that is so important? Let me give you what I'm sure will be a lot more technology history than you want, but this is my column. Any complaints, write your own... When Porsche AG was run by Peter Schutz, the only American ever at the Helm, he was primarily a marketing guy. It was he who insisted on a factory cabrio, since aftermarket shops were doing such systems to Targa body cars, because he could see there was a niche not being satisfied. Similarly, he brought back the Turbo, which had been killed as a US car. He also put into motion the idea that an automatic transmission in a 911 was a meaningful expansion of their potential market for the car (does any of this sound like any of the pre-release tripe you've read from the "automotive journalists" out there?). Anyway, they didn't want to spend big bucks, so they "adapted" an off-the-shelf tranny by putting what amounts to an external parallel shaft from the tranny output shaft, back to the differential housing, the "rear end". You see, a manual gearbox generally has two parallel shafts on which are gears running in continuous engagement on idle bearings. They are engaged by sliding a

synchronizer ring which is cut out to slip engage over the gear teeth, but splined to the shaft, so the gear rotation imparts rotational torque to the shaft. As such, the engine power can be brought in from either end via the “input” shaft, then use the second shaft for “output”. And key is the ability to use EITHER END. So for years the 911 has had a forward running input shaft, and rearward running output to what is called the Ring and Pinion which drives the axle in rotation perpendicular to that shaft. Of course, that same shaft can be used at the other end to drive the FRONT wheels by use of a torque tube through the floor tunnel to a similarly ratioed ring and pinion gear at the front axle.

But problems occur with an automatic, simply because no such “shaft” even exists. There is input at one end, which gets coupled to planetary (gears wrapped around other gears, with small driven pinion gears “orbiting” between them). The outer gears are typically part of spinning drums which are splined via idler gears to the output shaft, with the inner gears free to spin in the case. In “neutral” they all spin freely. But in Drive the “drums” are clamped on the outside, thereby forcing the driven pinions to impart torque to the inner gear, which drives it in faster rotation to the output, vs. clamping the inner gear, which causes the outer to turn slower. That is a simple example of first and second gear in any automatic. Higher gears are simply duplicates with different ratios. In any case, these are all coupled to the output shaft by “clutches” which are friction disk pairs squeezed together to allow rotational torque (like the limited slip systems) with each pair having one splined to the input element, and the other to the output shaft). So, to use an automatic with the 911, they had to add a gear to the front end (remember it is rear engined with a transaxle, which means both tranny and rear axle are the same assembly) to drive the external shaft back to the wider tranny case for the offset ring and pinion. And given the length of transmission plus that gear, there was no room to put in a viscous clutch. Ergo, the C4 has been exclusively for the Spartan among us, whose legs don’t die in traffic. That is until THIS year, because moving the coupling to the front housing allows a direct drive shaft from the tranny, WHICHEVER tranny it is!

Thinking about my Chicago experiences, along with some traffic jams I’ve been in a LONG way from Chicago, convinced me the new 996 C4 Cabrio Tip was practically the perfect package; AWD, open Porsche performance, a manual gate (or better; wheel buttons like them formula won racers) to let me control what gear I’m in on the track without allowing me to do anything stupid which would over-rev, but also not shift up simply because I lifted slightly in the middle of a turn), while allowing me the “luxury” of letting it make all those decisions while I simply pressed the loud pedal when I’ve had more pressing things to do than nursemaid a clutch.

But after deciding I was not going to reward the IRS for their recent efforts by paying a luxury tax on a car, when that tax was rescinded for yachts, so I looked for the ‘91 C4. Never had I so much information so poorly presented in my life. Cars.com has listings of classifieds from all over the country. But you can forget trying to distinguish Targa from coupe there: the choices covering all rear-engined Porsches are 911 and 993, and the ads are simply sorted by price. Now it should take no genius to figure that a 911 with an asking of \$150,000 is probably a ‘98 Twin Turbo S coupe. But the list in the \$30K range was everything from a ‘77 “Pristine” which really means his studs have yet to pull and is the world’s stupidest investment, to a ‘94 coupe, the last year before the 993. The 993 listing also includes some older and newer 911 models (don’t ask me why; if computers weren’t so ignorant, they’d reach out and slap the idiot who enters this crap).

So I went looking for financing. Someday, but I won’t hold my breath, someone at a bank is going to realize that people don’t give up their dreams until they’ve given up everything else. Because banks view a 911 in exactly the same light as a used Chevy. They will finance a maximum of five years old at favorable rates; beyond that at usury rates, your credit worthiness or the vehicle value retention be damned. So when, again on the internet at CarFinance.com, I found I could buy a 993 Cabrio C2 at only 20% more MONTHLY than the ‘91 C4, my brain started to ponder. And started looking at 993’s. Now I ideally would have wanted a C4 Cabrio, but a \$20K premium is a little whacko. I eventually

narrowed down to four examples, until the CarFinance papers arrived, and had a little clause that they could ONLY be purchased from a FRANCHISED DEALER! The two percent advantage in financing was enough to eliminate one of the possibilities outright, which would also be the case for the '91 C4, by the way. I don't like to buy cars from people who sell more than I buy; I figure it gives them an edge, but if you look at the nine vehicles I own, my wife might argue otherwise. Anyway, I digress...

It turns out that the three cars are all sold by independent dealers. So a call results in, "well... we've done SOME with independents, so we need info... yada yada yada." Well, ok, so maybe this is now a maybe. And maybe not. So I keep looking. At the low end are coupes, but the cabrio spread is crazy; \$48K to \$70K for '95 C2. I'm terribly sorry for the person who believes his or her Cabrio is the darling of the monetarily well-off but terribly ignorant populace out there, but PT Barnum was probably right. Just not for MY mother's little boy.

Final cut turned out to be two identically colored cars plus a purple/grey in IL. Of them, the lowest cost of all was in FL, and was the only Tiptronic. The asking price was \$5K below the other two, despite the Tip adding almost \$4K to the initial factory price. What sealed it was the pictures he sent via the net, as had one of the other two, and his going to bat for the independent dealer arrangements under the preferred financing rate, plus his offer to DELIVER the car to me in IN. That was modified slightly when he was asked to get it to me by last weekend, so I could travel to Chattanooga TN with it. He instead offered to meet me in Knoxville at a place neither of us had ever been, and eventually never found. Thank God for cellular phones.

Remember what I've said before about diagnostics skills are at the heart of buying a great car; recognizing what was really wrong and what it would really take to make it right? Turns out the prior owner lost manuals, a couple of (one VERY important - the tonneau cover to protect the top from wind when folded) pieces, and had some special mods. He'd also had the wheels refinished poorly, and they show it. The dealer showed me that it had a Porsche CD changer in the front, but "it didn't work" because he had the cassette in backwards! Works GREAT! Had a switch set on the left of the lights which did some beeping, but he had no idea why. It's a front and rear Escort Remote setup, with volume and city/hwy selectable. Works great! And though he knew it had the Tip, I think he'd talked to a few too many purists along the way, so he was pricing at wholesale to sell it quickly and make some room for one of those "macho" spartan leg killers.

Been there, done that. But what the hell kind of technology buff would I be if I limited my thinking that way? So I decided that the Tip was the most appropriate way to meet the more diverse requirements my life makes today than it made when I bought my last Porsche. And it is flat gorgeous! And does exactly what I had expected. And I have the last design vintage of the last air-cooled boxer six 911, with a power top, a dark Aventura Green Metallic (a blue-green like ocean water) with Light Grey power full leather interior, a stereo to die for, Porsche Alarm, and a slushbox. It's fun to play in the slush.

Oh, and by the way. Lynne; I love you. And thanks again. I needed that.