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# ROAD & TRACK

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IT IS EARLY IN THE MORNING, AROUND 7 A.M. AT BUTTONWILLOW Raceway Park. In front of the two paddock garages are two unmarked car trailers that have just arrived. The first one opens and a fiery red Ferrari F40 backs down the ramp. A few minutes later a sparkling silver Porsche 959 follows suit. The other trailer is now ready and it unloads its cargo. And out comes a brilliant orange McLaren F1. This must be a scene taken straight out of a car enthusiast's dream.

These super-exotic sports cars are icons of the 1980s and 1990s, each representing the pinnacle of its factory's achievements. The 959 is the car that first drew me to the world of automobiles. The F40 is the gutsy race-car-turned-road-car. As for the McLaren F1, it is a stunning technological tour de force. At 240.1 mph, the F1 still holds the title of being the fastest production car in the world.

Lending us his rare Porsche 959 is Vik Keuylian of Keuylian Motorcars, Beverly Hills, California. Anthony Almada of Monarch Beach, California, is the kind gentleman willing to let us exercise his incredible F40. And courtesy of Dan Kennedy of Scottsdale, Arizona, comes the spectacular McLaren F1.

IMSA champion Steve Millen [shown above with the author], frequent R&T con-

tributor, is here to wring out these superstar sports cars on the track. And I am the fortunate soul who gets to sample the cars, and then go along with Millen in each for a few thrilling hot laps. Wait a minute, am I dreaming?

Somewhere off the coast of San Diego, California, in the ready room aboard the *USS Nimitz*, the pre-flight briefing takes about an hour. Afterward, I gear up in my flight suit. And with some butterflies fluttering in my stomach, I follow Lieutenant Craig "Merlin" Olson upstairs and arrive topside on the flight deck.

Wearing the number 130, our F-18F Super Hornet is sitting aft of the aircraft carrier's command tower. Merlin and I climb the fighter jet's built-in ladder and step into the first and second seats, respectively. The canopy closes. Merlin goes through a series of system checks and fires up the two jet engines. I take a few deep breaths. To the right, I see the catapult. Again, am I dreaming?

To the deep consternation of my family, I have always dreamed about going fast—not only in the world's most hyper-exotic sports or race cars, but also in a fighter jet catapulting off an aircraft carrier. My less-than-perfect vision (my excuse) and my average reflexes (read: lack of talent) have prevented me from becoming a racer or a pilot.

So here is my chance. The Porsche 959, the Ferrari F40, the McLaren F1, the F-18 Super Hornet (see sidebar) all are thrill rides I have been lucky enough to experience. What is it like to be in these extreme machines? Fasten your seatbelts and read on.







“Find a long straightaway on the track, grab the steering wheel and stomp on the throttle. **Hold on!** What follows is an immense acceleration rate that firmly presses my body into the seat.”





#### PORSCHE 959

When the Porsche 959 first met the public in the mid-'80s, it instantly made me a car enthusiast. It was at that time the most modern and technologically advanced sports car: Kevlar and fiberglass-reinforced plastic body panels, aluminum doors, zero-lift aerodynamic package, all-wheel-drive with adjustable torque split, 6-speed manual transmission, variable shock damping and ride height. Only in the past few years have we seen these technologies appear on expensive luxury or sports cars.

Climb aboard the Porsche 959, where the familiar 911 (pre-996) ergonomics reside. The instrument panel has the ignition switch on the left closest to the door, and the various gauges fan across the dash. I

“When the 959 first came out, I thought it was the ultimate road car at the time. Compared with the one I drove in 1989, the car here has a lot more turbo lag than I remembered. But on the positive side it is great coming out of slow corners because you can just put your foot hard to the floor, turn the car in the direction you want to go and it pulls itself out of the corner without getting into a big slide. The suspension feels soft, so the car has a lot of movement through the corners. The brakes are terrific. It definitely has the best brakes of the three cars here.” —*Steve Millen*





grab the steering wheel at about an arm's length, and my right hand extends out to the shifter easily. Everything is within reach. The familiarity of the car brings a sense of comfort and security.

Turn the ignition and the car comes to life with no hesitation. Rev the 959's twin-turbo 2.8-liter engine and its robust engine note rumbles through the exhaust, though somewhat muffled by the turbos. According to the factory, the Porsche 959's flat-6 is capable of producing 450 bhp (DIN) at 6500 rpm and 370 lb.-ft. of torque at 5500. This is enough to rocket the car from a standstill to 60 mph in 3.9 seconds, and trip the timing lights at the quarter-mile mark in 12.5 sec.

On the straightaway, mash the throttle and the 959's twin turbos kick in at about 4500 rpm. Beyond that, it takes a bit of concentration to keep the upshifts in sync with the fast-rising tach needle. Thanks to a precise gearbox and positive clutch take-up, the Porsche can build speed in a hurry. Racing down the near half-mile straight at Buttonwillow, the speedometer hovers near 130 mph—this, without really pushing the car to its limits. Equipped with ABS, the 959 decelerates quickly and confidently. The brake pedal effort is just right, and it has plenty of feedback.

Through the corners, the Porsche 959 responds swiftly to steering input and rotates with moderate understeer. And due to the significant turbo lag, it is difficult to power out of the turn. However, because of the awd system's superior traction, the secret is to maintain the Porsche's forward momentum. Let the car turn in a little faster. Then as soon as it clips the apex, just stand on the throttle while unwinding the steering wheel. The torque transferred to the front tires helps pull the 959 through the turn.

Riding in the Porsche with Millen around the track is like being in any other 911, except the speedometer is showing a

PORSCHE 959	
Curb weight	est 3190 lb
Wheelbase	89.5 in.
Track, f/r	56.4 in./58.7 in.
Length	168.9 in.
Width	72.4 in.
Height	50.4 in.
Fuel capacity	23.8 gal.
Engine	twin-turbo dohc flat-6
Bore x stroke	95.0 x 67.0 mm
Displacement	2849 cc
Compression ratio	8.3:1
Horsepower (DIN)	450 bhp @ 6500 rpm
Torque	370 lb-ft @ 5500 rpm
Fuel delivery	elect. port injection
Transmission	6-sp manual
Layout	rear/awd
Brake system, f/r	12.7-in. vented discs/ 12.0-in. vented discs
Wheels	magnesium; 17 x 8 f, 17 x 9 r
Tires	Bridgestone Potenza RE71; 235/45ZR-17 f, 255/40ZR-17 r
Steering type	rack & pinion, vari pwr asst
Suspension, f&r	upper and lower A-arms, coil springs, dual shocks, adjustable ride height and damping, anti-roll bar
PERFORMANCE	
0-60 mph	3.9 sec
1/4 mile	12.5 sec*
60-0 mph	125 ft
Skidpad	na
Slalom	65.0 mph
	*Factory claim.

much faster reading. The cockpit is quiet. The suspension setup is soft by race-car standards. But as the pace picks up, the damping stiffens to match the cornering demands. Millen notes: "The Porsche changes directions with stability and inspires confidence. Its brakes are very good. And its gearbox is silky smooth."

My heart rate after the ride: 120 bpm (beats per minute).

T H E S U C C E S S O R . . .

PHOTO BY BRENDA BRIDGY



## Porsche Carrera GT

► In 1986, the 959 inspired us—a car capable of light aircraft velocities attained with twin sequential turbos, delivered through sophisticated all-wheel drive yet served up with the comfort and control of a standard-issue 911. In 1998, the 911 GT1 *Strasseversion* dazzled us—a brutish Le Mans winner, skinned with a light veneer of road-going civility. What, then, for an encore? Poised for a fall 2003 introduction as a 2004 model is the Carrera GT, a \$350,000, 558-bhp mid-engine Porsche supercar that is an ideal fit between—and a fitting successor to—its *Autobahn*-conquering forebears.

Production is a go for this 205-mph car, 1000 examples of which will be built in the new Leipzig plant in eastern Germany, alongside the Cayenne, though its 4-cam 5.5-liter V-10 engine will be manufactured in Stuttgart. Performance should be eye-opening, with Porsche promising 0-100 km/h (0-62 mph) acceleration in less than 4 seconds. That's easy to believe, especially if the production car's weight comes in anywhere near the show car's 2750 lb. That would be 4.9 lb./bhp, compared with a 911 GT's 6.9, and that car needs just 3.6 sec. for the 0-60 sprint and 11.9 for the quarter mile.

This light weight is achieved with a carbon-fiber monocoque and bodywork. The engine sits amidships and mates to a 6-speed transaxle, and suspension is double A-arm all around with pushrod-actuated shocks and springs. Styling is a joint effort between Porsche's California studio and Germany-based designer Grant Larson.

Porsche is building this car with an eye for competition, as funding came from the coffers of Porsche Motorsport, which helps to explain Porsche's lack of a factory Le Mans effort since 1998. Things will come full circle when racing versions of the Carrera GT will most likely return to La Sarthe in the GTS class, or its engine appears in an LMP car.—Doug Kott