BLOOD BROTHERS

The more things change, the more they stay the same, as we found out taking two of the best driver's 911s on the open road

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On paper, this shouldn't even be close. They may both be united under Porsche's fabled Rennsport banner, but the statistics suggest these are two markedly different beasts; 18 years and nearly 200hp separates these virtuosi.

One is air-cooled, a bastion of the Carrera RS legacy; while the other was, until page 18 of this magazine, at the pinnacle of the hardcore GT3 RS genus. Both are gods, but they exist in diametrically opposed worlds. When we first considered this head-to-head, the prices of these two RS icons were at least roughly comparable. However, even the values of this dynamic duo have diverged in recent months, appearing to leave me with two (admittedly glorious) neunelfers at my disposal, but without a central tenet connecting them.

Released in 1991, some 16 years after the last true Rennsport 911, the Porsche 964 Carrera RS had big shoes to fill. Descended from the instantly legendary 2.7 RS and its full-fat brother, the 3.0 RS, the original 964 RS was tasked with continuing an impressive legacy. On the proverbial paper though, the 964 didn't look man enough for the job. Compared to a bog-standard Carrera 2, power was officially only hiked by a measly 10bhp and, while the car's mass was reduced by up to 120 kilograms (depending on trim specifications), the 964 RS wasn't as visually arresting as its Rennsport brethren. For one thing, where was the outlandish wing that had become an RS staple?

By comparison, the 997.2 GT3 RS was instantly admired upon its release just six years ago. Like the 964 RS, the 997.2 GT3 RS was the third iteration of its respective sub-brand but, while the former was the first of its kind for over a decade, the 997 was simply a follow-on to two superb water-cooled RSs: the 996 GT3 RS and the 997.1 GT3 RS. Complete with lairy decals, centre-lock wheels and a massive, motorsport-inspired rear wing, its success was guaranteed from the moment it rolled off the production line in Stuttgart. Its air-cooled cousin certainly seems to have its work cut out today if it wants to impress.

I had, until this point, never driven a 964 Carrera RS. In fact, I had only ever driven a 964 Carrera 2. Once. Despite this, the elder of the two Rennsports immediately fits me like a glove. Dropping into the as-new bucket seats, all the controls are straight to hand. With no electronic settings to play with, it's a simple case of slide in, strap up and switch on. And, when I do flick the key to engage the starter, the 3.6-litre flat six snarls into life with rumbling baritone, quite unlike any of its contemporaries. Its tone is rich, with the lack of rear seats and sound deadening behind me amplifying its effect throughout the cockpit. A few blips of the razor-sharp throttle highlights that despite the understated aesthetics, this is a true road racer, just like the 997.

Heading out of the sleepy village of Hathersage and onto the open roads of the Peak District National Park, the 964 is raring to be unleashed.

With a challenging set of twists ahead, I relent, burying the throttle into the bulkhead.

My god, no 25-year-old has the right to chase the horizon this fervently! While not as whiplash-inducing as the modern machines, the 964 RS's pace over the straight tarmac is unrelenting, with a smooth slug of torque through the flat six's mid range. The effect is amplified by the close-ratio G50 gearbox, with the second, third and fourth ratios sitting closer than they do in a standard Carrera. The clutch is perfectly weighted too, making each shift a joy. Lift, clutch, snick the next gear and back on the gas in one seamless transition.

Christian Ayres, the custodian of these two incredible RSs, is currently piloting the GT3 RS, leading the way through some of the Peak's finest roads, and while the 997 (with its extra performance) may be racing ahead on straights, the 964 certainly isn't losing face given its greater age. Christian isn't hanging about, but as we enter our first real cornering test, the gap begins to stabilise. Faced with a succession of parabolas, the 964 begins to show its true colours.

Despite only just getting behind its wheel, I'm instantly able to start exploiting the delectable chassis balance, pitching the car towards the apex with gusto. The steering's weight is perfectly judged, with just a hint of understeer on the initial turn in. The stiffened front damping allows the tyres just enough slip to inspire the confidence to carry ludicrous levels of speed into each corner. Yet, combined with the increased anti-roll control, the steering remains wonderfully precise and accurate. Despite its classic proportions and weight distribution, the steering doesn't go alarmingly light at these speeds, providing plenty of steering feel. It helps that Christian's car is just 6,300 miles old, but it's still apparent that the 964 RS is possibly the perfect tool for attacking a UK B-road.

For some 911s, carrying this level of entry speed would cause all manner of problems through the middle of a corner, yet the 964 is simply not fazed. Unlike later RS 911s, the 964 has a surplus of grip compared to power. You're not likely to find yourself doing long, lazy, oversteery drifts in it. Instead, you can immerse yourself in the most user-friendly Rennsport Porsche has ever built. From mile one, I've been instantly at ease in the 964 in a way that I've never experienced in any other car before, with the chassis allowing me to focus on keeping my momentum high. It's the classic 911 experience polished and purified to perfection.

All the control weights are ideally judged, unlike some of the other performance-orientated 911s, where things like the clutch feel artificially heavy. The brakes are similarly impressive. Sure, they

Left: The 964 RS's classic lines are even more prominent when contrasted with the various aero addenda on the 997 GT3 RS

997.2 GT3 RS
2010

Engine
Capacity
3,800cc
Compression ratio
12.2:1
Maximum power
450bhp @ 7,900rpm
Maximum torque
430Nm @ 6,750rpm
Transmission
Six-speed manual

Suspension
Front
Independent; MacPherson strut; telescopic dampers with coil springs; anti-roll bar; PASM
Rear
Independent; Multi-link; telescopic dampers with coil springs; anti-roll bar; PASM

Wheels & tyres
Front
9x19-inch alloys; 245/35/ZR19 tyres
Rear
12x19-inch alloys; 325/30/ZR19 tyres

Brakes
Front
380mm drilled and vented discs
Rear
380mm drilled and vented discs

Dimensions
Length
4,460mm
Width
1,852mm
Weight
1,370kg

Performance
0-60mph
4.0 secs
Top speed
192mph

964 Carrera RS
1992

Engine
Capacity
3,600cc
Compression ratio
11.3:1
Maximum power
260bhp @ 6,100rpm
Maximum torque
310Nm @ 4,800rpm
Transmission
Five-speed manual

Suspension
Front
Independent; MacPherson strut; telescopic dampers with coil springs; anti-roll bar
Rear
Independent; Semi-trailing arms; telescopic dampers; coil springs; anti-roll bar

Wheels & tyres
Front
7.5x17-inch magnesium wheels; 205/50/R17 tyres
Rear
9x17-inch magnesium wheels; 255/40/R17 tyres

Brakes
Front
320mm drilled and vented discs
Rear
299mm drilled and vented discs

Dimensions
Length
4,250mm
Width
1,650mm
Weight
1,230kg (Sport)

Performance
0-60mph
5.4 secs
Top speed
162mph

lack the ultimate pulling-up power of later 'Big Reds', yet they are easily the most sure-footed stoppers I've ever used on an air-cooled car. The pedal is stiff and reasonably short, giving plenty of feedback to my right foot as I anchor up for the next dose of dynamic brilliance.

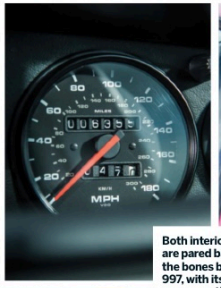
I could drive – and wax lyrical – all day in the 964 RS. It's so superbly judged. Before I jumped behind its wheel, I thought that the 964 RS was overrated, but after thrashing around for 100 miles, the hype that helped prices to snowball last year is well and truly worth believing. In the real world, it is probably one of the only 911s that could have kept up with Christian in the 997.2 GT3 RS. That, I think, says it all.

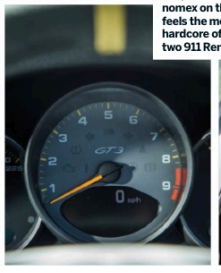
Age has been kind to its looks too. The 964's small footprint and squat stance (40mm lower than a Carrera 2) gives it a purposefulness that the 997 instead achieves through its various aerodynamic addenda. They are very different beasts, yet they both strive towards the same goal. That much becomes clear as I switch seats and buckle up behind the GT3 RS's Alcantara steering wheel. Like the 964, the single-mass flywheel chatters away with the car in neutral, and as I get underway, the throttle is not just razor sharp; it's positively cut throat.

The Mezger engine packs one hell of a punch too, giving the 997 plenty more power than grip. From 3,000-4,000rpm, the induction noise permeates throughout the cabin before the idiosyncratic howl from the motorsport-derived motor kicks in. Like the 964 RS's powerplant, there's a noticeable kick to the delivery between 4,800-5,200rpm too. However, while the 964's transition to this higher level of shove is smooth, the 997 punts you forward with an almighty blast.

With so much extra velocity, I'm glad that the 'Big Red' stoppers in the GT3 RS are some of the best in the business. The pedal is even shorter and harder than the 964, with superb bite that helps me shed speed deep into each braking zone. If I had one qualm, it would be that the pedals don't feel ideally placed for heal-and-toe downshifts on the road; you really need to be pushing the brake pedal through the bulkhead to get it comfortably aligned with the throttle. It's clear that while the 964 RS is a road car for the track, the 997 RS is a track car for the road.

After the instantly gregarious relationship I had developed with the 964, the 997 feels much more nervous as I tackle the Peak's twisting tarmac. The front end is so much stiffer (in both its damping and its anti-roll), providing almost too much ability on turn in, certainly at road speeds, where the limits of adhesion aren't being tested to their maximum. The GT3 RS noses into each corner like a hound





Right: On the open road, the 964 RS's instant user-friendliness makes it a very real rival to the 3.8-litre GT3 RS

Far Right: With nearly 40 years of Rennsport expertise behind it, the second-generation 997 RS is the ultimate road rocket

Both interiors are pared back to the bones but the 997, with its use of nomex on the seats, feels the more hardcore of these two 911 Rennsports

after a scent, dialling straight in towards the apex before I've even had a chance to fully comprehend my new trajectory.

It takes me a while to recalibrate my brain, but when I finally do, the 997 really does feel as if it is painted to the road. The more I become reacquainted with the car's talents (it was only a few issues ago that I found myself piloting Porsche's press car), the more I feel like I'm able to exploit its worth. However, while I'm pushing more on corner entry, the 997's ability to kick the tail out on the exit requires a more measured approach compared to the 964. With 450hp on tap, it feels a bit more point-and-squirt, especially as the car's stiff suspension settings don't give me the confidence to get on the power early. Combined with its pointy front end, the 997 feels more like a mid-engined car, while the 964 retains more of the classic 911 character.

This is where the 964, in the real world, was coming into its own. It's so easy to get on with that you really can exploit 75, 85, maybe even 95 per cent of its talents within 20 miles. By comparison, the GT3 RS is more stand-offish, testing your talents and only fully unlocking to those it deems worthy. The 964 wants to shake your hand, while the 997 wants to rip it off.

Don't take this the wrong way though; this is not a bad thing. Far from it. The 997's hidden reserves make it possibly the more appealing as a long-term prospect. At the end of another large loop of the Peak District, I still don't feel like I've got on top of the car. It's left me wanting more, wanting to further my skill behind the wheel. Despite its extra size, the water-cooled Rennsport feels noticeably more nimble. While the 964 was providing a heavy workout for my shoulders, the 997 simply requires some smooth wrist work to flick it from corner to corner.

The GT3 RS's extra dynamic aggression also shines through in its aesthetic appeal. There aren't many cars that look faster when sitting at a set of traffic lights. The classic red-on-white colour scheme and that table-sized wing let you know that this car means business before you've even opened the door. In reality, I suppose I knew I was in for a challenge the moment I stepped out of the 964 RS. Andreas Preuninger's team really has turned things up to 11 since water was deemed greater than air.

There's part of me that thinks the 997.2 GT3 RS is a little too much. After a while, it may become so, but paired with the 964 they probably create the perfect two-car RS garage. The early car is an inviting day-to-day proposition, while the 997 is the weekend toy that would make a pulse-racing tool for track work. I don't think I could choose between them; I'd have to own both, because in reality they are two sides to the same coin. Despite their obvious differences aesthetically, dynamically and statistically though, there is something intrinsic that bonds these two Rennsport heroes. They are the two greatest driver's cars Porsche has ever built, with an appetite for involvement that most 911s will never be able to match.

After a truly incredible day – such stuff as dreams are made of – the statistics that suggested this would be a one-sided fight are well and truly put to the wind. Weissach may have made huge strides since the switch to water-cooling – the 997.2 GT3 RS is undoubtedly a huge technological leap forward from the 964 Carrera RS – but this Porsche 911 pair are perfectly suited to one another. Blood truly does run thicker than water. 911