



Two's the One

AFTER MIXED EMOTIONS ON THE FIRST 997, WE THINK TAKE 2 IS A HOME RUN

STORY BY PETE STOUT PHOTOS COURTESY PCNA

What this event needs is a little youthful exuberance," quips factory ALMS driver Patrick Long. He's at the wheel of a 2009 Carrera and we're slideways. Again. Big, hairy corrections follow. This isn't the fast way around Miller Motorsports Park and Long knows it. But it's not scary, either. It's a stunning display of car control, and we're both grinning like kids cutting class.

Thing is, I want to get back to school, seeing as "class" is a 4.5-mile, 23-turn, 28-apex (!) race track just outside Salt Lake City, Utah. The primary teaching tools are four 2009 911s: two Carreras and two Carrera Ss with and without the new PDK dual-clutch transmission. And we'll drive

them back-to-back on one of America's most challenging tracks.

How challenging? Few if any visual references, no elevation changes, and multiple corners that only *look* similar make this a tough track to learn. How tough? "For me, driving here is like driving at night," says Long. But if Porsche wants to underline PDK's advantages, MMP was a great pick. Removing the need to shift as Long feeds me a constant stream of information — "right turn, 5 out of 10 braking" — allows for greater focus on steering, braking, and throttle inputs. Tiptronic allowed that, too, but its delayed shifts were hair in the cake. With the optional Sport Chrono Plus pack-

age, PDK's ability to *anticipate* the need for a downshift in Sport Plus mode is freakish, its execution perfect. And in the two places on track where downshifts are desired but Sport Plus *doesn't* call them up, a brush of a button gets the gear.

The shifts come fast. PDK reacts to fingertip inputs in 0.04 second in standard mode or 0.02 second in Sport Plus — versus a 0.30-second delay with Tiptronic. Shift times are faster, too: Tiptronic took 0.75 second to shift; in Sport Plus, PDK swaps cogs in 0.4 second. Add the times up and PDK wins, 0.42 to 1.05. That, totally seamless shifts, and drive-offs to rival a torque converter make this the

2009 Carrera/Carrera S

Type Rear-engine, 2+2 coupe
Engine 3.6/3.8-liter flat six
Power 345/385 bhp
Torque 287/310 lb-ft
Weight 3,120/3,142 pounds
Base Price \$75,600/\$86,200



world's best two-pedal transmission. So, does PDK spell the end of the true manual? Michael Niko, an ex-F1 engineer that Porsche hired to help develop PDK, says no for two reasons: 1) Porsche needs a lighter car for homologation purposes and 2) Porsche likes to offer options.

Would we order PDK? If we planned to keep the car for 2-3 years and wanted to become better track drivers, we might. Otherwise, we would stick with a stick. PDK removes a layer of involvement, and involvement is what great road cars are all about. Viewing PDK as a mere replacement for Tiptronic, however, is a mistake. Its performance advantages far outweigh its 66-pound penalty.

As for Carrera vs. Carrera S? This time, we prefer 3.8-liter S to standard 3.6. In the past, we liked the base 3.6 for its sweetness and willingness to reach for redline, something the torque-rich 3.8 couldn't match in anything other than its 381-bhp X51 Powerkit form, a \$17,000 option. The new 385-bhp 3.8 beats the X51 on power and matches the 3.6 for sweetness. That said, the 3.6 still offers plenty of pace; it's just 10 horses short of 2008's 355-bhp S.

Worked hard, the latest 3.6 and 3.8 are remarkably similar in character. Both have

broad powerbands, make great noises, and offer the elasticity we cherished in 3.4-liter 996 and 987 engines. The all-new 9A1 flat sixes are smoother at idle than the outgoing M97s, but that has a downside: the subtle rumble to be had when tickling an M96/M97's throttle is gone.

The new chassis demonstrates similar improvements. The electronically-variable PASM suspension — still standard in the S — is more transparent as it alters shock valving. The rest of the suspension revisions yield front and rear ends that feel more cohesive, more connected. When we mention this to Long, he says racing engineers call this "roll coupling" — a key ingredient for a reassuring and thus fast setup. We'd say it adds *joy*, too.

The regular Carrera's standard suspension, with its conventional, fixed-rate dampers, is still beautifully matched to the standard 18-inch tires. But good as the setup is, we've got to give the newly sorted PASM system the nod this time. Its ability to firm things up on a race track or soften the chassis for rough roads is a real advantage.

Porsche's latest PSM stability management benefits from similar advances in programming brilliance. Like the new GT2's traction control, its corrections are no

longer heavy-handed. It can apply small, hardly noticed, non-intrusive strokes — and it does so only *after* giving you a chance to fix things. This new, more permissive PSM allows everything from mild drifts to fairly serious steering corrections, so long as it senses that you know what you're doing.

As for faults? The styling updates seem a bit fussy to our eyes, but that's about it. So we're big fans of the latest 997s and especially of the new S. While we still see the basic 997 as all the 911 we *need*, we find the 997S more compelling and well worth its \$10,600 premium — especially in light of the outgoing X51. Either way, though, there's a lot to like here. Both of these 911s make more power on less gas with fewer emissions. Their chassis are superb. And an already good interior has been greatly improved with a new control interface for the audio, navigation, phone, and Sport Chrono Plus systems.

In our eyes, this is more than a facelift. It's more than a new engine or transmission, too. Every element of the driving experience has been improved, and the latest 997s have that subtle finesse we cherished in most 996s but failed to find in some 997s. Are these the best "basic" 911s yet? We'd have to say yes. ■