

The Mutt



THIS POLO RED 1966 912 LOOKS LIKE A MONGREL, BUT IT'S A PURE-BRED PORSCHE.

STORY BY **DAVID MATHEWS** PHOTOS BY **MICHAEL ALAN ROSS**

Be honest. When you go to an event like Parade, Rennsport, Werks Reunion, or the local Cars and Coffee, what catches your eye? Is it that beautifully restored Convertible D? The unobtainable 911R or GT4 bad boy? How about one of those resto-mods, like an RGruppe 911 or an outlaw 356? • Or maybe, just maybe, it's that car parked on the street a little away from it all—the one not entered in the show. The mutt. The junkyard dog. The one with that certain “don't you dare turn your back on me” look. The scruffy one with the splotchy coat, the cropped ear, the stub tail. The one that gives a low growl as you pass by. The one that makes you smile. Rick Becker owns such a car—a Polo Red 1966 912, which we spied while walking to lunch at this year's Parade in Spokane.



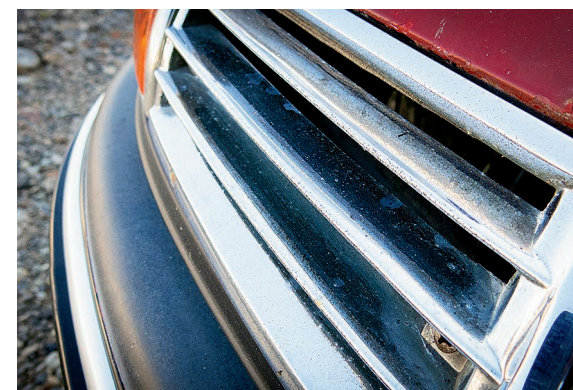
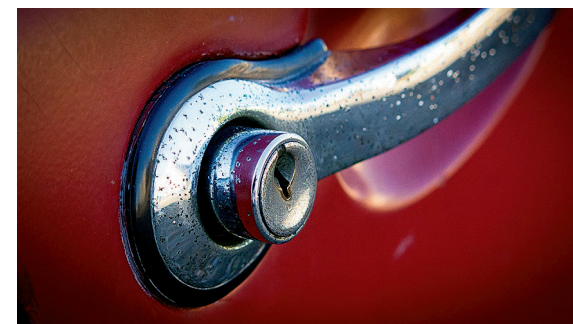
“Concours is not our thing,” said Rick. One look at his coupe confirmed the obvious. Its faded, checked paint and rusted chrome trim attest to Rick’s aversion to clay bars and carnauba wax. Dull hubcaps reflect scratches and dents; the hand-painted crests are chipped and nicked. Old-fashioned, water slide decals adorn the windows, with “Becker California” shouting its owner’s Hermosa Beach surfing heritage. A Benton Performance grille badge belies something mischievous under the engine lid. Rick’s 912 epitomizes the term *driver*. Perhaps one could add *sleeper* to the description as well.

THIS PORSCHE, VIN 353844, rolled off the production line on March 24, 1966 at the factory in Stuttgart. Rick purchased the car, his first Porsche, in June of 1977. Fresh out of college and settled in his first real job, Rick wanted a

However, the 912 was a numbers-matching car and had never been involved in an accident. A pouch containing the original driver’s manual/service booklet/accessory catalog and contact information for the original owner, Mr. Martin Frost from Orange County, California was in the glovebox. For better and for worse, Rick Becker officially entered Porschedom.

With the car came another challenge. Rick did not know how to operate a manual transmission. Youthful audacity prevailed. “My brother let me practice with his old truck,” recalled Rick. “But when I went to pick up the car, I had to drive 30 miles back home in heavy Los Angeles traffic.” For the next year, the 912 was his daily driver, racking up 70 miles a day to work, plus exuberance on weekends.

From 1977 until 1986, Rick did his own maintenance. Short on disposable income but long on enthusiasm, he



Opposite: Unapologetic, this Polo Red 912 stands ready for whatever comes its way. **Left:** Pitted chrome and stone chips reflect life on the road. Becker decal hints at California cool.

Porsche like some of his friends had. Rick’s brother called one day while Rick was at work, telling him about a 911T he’d found for sale. “It was too expensive for me, but my buddy, a co-worker the next desk over, overheard our conversation,” said Rick. “He said that if I bought his car, he would buy the 911T. One thing led to another, and...”

At least three other people had owned the car before Rick, and to repeat a phrase, the Porsche had been driven hard and put away wet. More to the point, not put away at all. The San Fernando Valley sun had already baked the paint into a flat matte finish. “The dashboard and rear package tray were badly weathered,” said Rick. “The weather stripping had shrunk to the extent that rain dripped onto the seats and floorboard during thunderstorms and wind whistled through the gaps. It needed work.”

combined his engineering background with dogged determination and a Clymer Publications *Porsche Service & Repair Handbook* to learn about the car and do the work himself. After a year of daily commuting, Rick bought a pickup and retired the 912 from mundane, workaday driving. The 912 “became a car I could tinker with, have fun with, but not depend on to get back and forth to work.” In his spare time during the next nine years, Rick replaced the master cylinder, brake pads and lines, shock absorbers, distributor, generator, exhaust manifold, and muffler. He also replaced both front and rear stabilizer bars.

After a nearly terminal incident at a wedding party, Rick rebuilt the carburetors and renewed the gas lines. “I rolled into the parking lot and a friend noticed my car

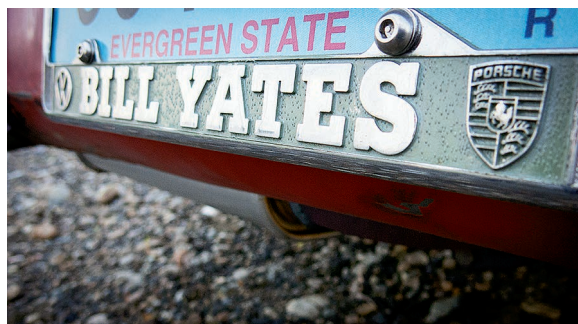


Hiding under the engine lid of this unassuming 912 is a Benton-energized 125-hp flat four.

was dribbling something onto the ground,” he said. “He yelled for me to take a look. It was gasoline. If that gas would have sprayed the wrong way, it might have sent the entire car up in flames.”

In addition to the car’s mechanicals, Rick tackled the cosmetics. “I removed the dash for re-covering, replaced the carpeting, headliner, rubber seals, and radio, and added a factory-option outside temperature gauge. I applied many coats of wax, trying to shine up the paint. From Stoddard, I bought OEM replacement tools for the toolkit, NOS Hella headlights, and a Bosch turn indicator.”

IN THE EARLY 1980S, things changed. “While I was driving down the 405 freeway, a black soft window Targa blew past me. I thought to myself, *I want one of those*. I’d never seen a soft window Targa before. It didn’t hap-



pen right away, but several years later, when I could swing it financially, I started looking for one in earnest and ended up buying a white 912.”

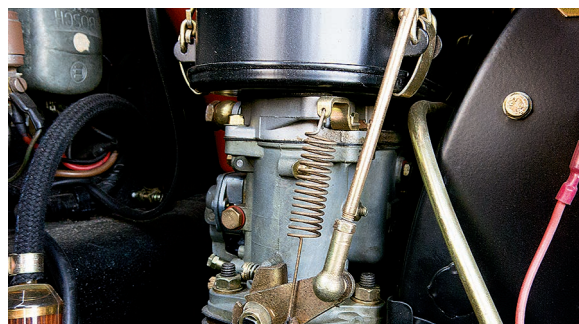
It was a quandary—what would he do with the coupe? Rick couldn’t, shouldn’t, keep two Porsches, should he? “By pure coincidence, I bumped into my friend, the one from whom I bought the 912. He told me he wanted to buy it back,” said Rick. Now wait a minute, didn’t that guy sell the 912 to buy a 911T?

“My friend’s 911 was stolen while he was eating breakfast at a local coffee shop,” related Rick. “His companion said, ‘Hey, isn’t that your car driving out of the parking lot?’ Two cops, also having breakfast, gave chase. The thief lost control during the pursuit, spun, and crashed, totaling the car. That was all for the 911.

Besides that, my friend wanted to give the 912 to his college-bound daughter. She admired the car when her dad had it before and was disappointed that he sold it.”

Although the deal got close, it was not consummated. “He didn’t give me a deposit, saying he wanted to think about my asking price. And then my family talked me out of selling the car, telling me that I’d regret it. After all, it was my first car, and it did have a lot of, uh... character.” Was his friend mad? “Not mad, just disappointed.” As was his daughter.

For the following year, Rick drove each car a little, but it didn’t work out well. He didn’t have enough time for both cars, and the coupe started to develop burps, coughs, and other idiosyncrasies. Making space in his family’s garage, Rick shoehorned the Polo Red coupe beside the riding lawn mower, the leaf rake, and the bags of Scotts Turf



Builder. And there it sat—for the next 25 years. Rick visited his car from time to time, doing minor work.

“I even found a pair of period-correct Recaro seats with factory headrests at the Pomona Swap Meet and installed them while the car was in the garage,” he said. Although the 912 remained parked, Rick occasionally started the engine to let it warm up, but even that stopped after the battery died. “I didn’t want to buy a new battery for it, because the car was just sitting,” he explained.

RICK AND HIS WIFE, Cindy, got serious about resurrecting the coupe in the spring of 2013. “It was really Cindy,” he admitted. “She wanted to drive the car again. She said that if we didn’t get it running, it would never happen.”

Rick realized that restoring the car would be a ma-

jor project, so he enlisted the help of his friend of 15 years, John Benton. Yes, *the* John Benton, owner of Benton Performance, LLC in Anaheim, California. John began wrenching on air-cooled Porsches 33 years ago. He cut his teeth on four-cylinder cars, Volkswagens and Porsches, and bought his first 912 in 1984 at the tender age of 23. After John began to outdrive and outperform others on the racetrack, competitors asked who did his work. When John replied that he did it himself, well, a new career was born.

“I asked John if he would do the work for us,” said Rick. “He agreed to squeeze us in.”

Fitting the 912 into John’s busy schedule was the first challenge. Getting it to Benton Performance (BP) was the second. “John brought a trailer to pick up my car,” said Rick. “He had to drag it out of the garage because

the wheels were locked up and the brakes frozen. He put the car on wheel dollies and pulled it onto the trailer.”

Rick recalled John’s initial impression of the car. “Rick,” John said, “you didn’t tell me it was in this kind of shape.”

Once the 912 arrived at BP, John assessed what needed to be done, and together with Rick and Cindy developed a plan aligned with their budget. “We’re people who like to drive,” said Rick. “We considered a full repaint and rechroming parts, but Cindy and I realized that if we fixed it all up, we might be afraid to drive it. It might stop us from enjoying it. Like most Porsche owners, we park away from all the other cars, but we wanted one that if it did get a ding, it wouldn’t be the end of the world.”

Rick’s bent toward engineering definitely became apparent. His overriding concerns were performance,

Low sunlight diffuses against the Porsche’s right flank, while Rick Becker and his son Eric roar beneath a railroad underpass.



The Motometer outside temperature gauge works perfectly. Hockey puck horn button shows little wear. The 912's fresh interior provides a stark contrast to its dull finish.



practical usability, and safety. “We started with the basics—the engine, transmission, brake system, and suspension. I wanted dual-circuit brakes. I wanted...”

The “Benton Boys” certainly met Rick’s expectations. They massaged the numbers-matching engine into something athletic and energetic. And boisterous. Bark with the bite.

The 912’s crankshaft was custom-ground, heat-treated, balanced, and polished; the flywheel lightened and balanced. Camshaft and lifters were re-ground. Benton installed its proprietary 86mm aluminum alloy forged pistons and an RS0012 distributor with Pertronix ignition, specifically matched to this particular engine. The Solex 40 PII-4 carburetors were renewed by 356 Carburetor Rescue in Sedona, Arizona. The generator was re-wound and the fan balanced. A full-flow oil system with a high-performance Fram filter was installed beneath the left rear fender. The four-speed transmission was rebuilt, utilizing 904-type half-shafts.

The result? A 50-year-old, air-cooled flat four that spins enthusiastically to 6800 rpm and produces considerably more horsepower than when it left Stuttgart. According to John, “The entire motor was lightened and balanced. [Our] careful tuning meant that this car makes 125 horsepower on 91 octane gasoline.” Bite with the bark. Before reinstalling the engine, John detailed the engine compartment—using new hoses and powder-coated pieces.

With the newly developed power came the need for improved braking. BP technicians incorporated a dual-circuit system, rebuilt the calipers, installed a new master cylinder and new rotors, and added Mintex brake pads.

Despite the new braking power, there was no stopping the Benton Boys when they got on a roll. While some worked on the engine, others tackled the undercarriage and suspension. All parts were media-blasted and inspected. The good stuff was renewed, refinished, and reinstalled. The bad stuff was replaced. Elephant Racing provided upgraded bits and pieces. New Koni shocks were used. John sealed and resprayed the bottom of the car before installing the suspension components.

Other BP employees addressed the interior, careful to keep it period-correct yet livable. Ian Benton, John’s son, carefully disassembled various interior parts and worked with Tom Scott, owner of Collin’s Auto Trim of Downey, California, to preserve the original look while fixing past gaffes.

“My wife definitely wanted new carpeting,” said Rick. “I made the old coverings myself, tracing the outline of the original pieces onto a piece of carpet I bought from a store. It was hideous. The seats I bought at the Pomona Swap Meet needed to be re-stuffed, so we did that and re-sprung the

seats. They’re really comfortable now.”

A set of Stoddard 15-inch steelies and four Dunlop DZ-102 195/55R15 tires contributed to the 912’s scrappy look. One bad dog.

After the 912’s restoration, Rick added minor enhancements like a sealed Exide battery, LED interior lights, three-point safety belts, and Cocomats, a popular period option. A slight adjustment to the suspension was needed.

“When John asked what I wanted to do with the car, autocrossing came to mind,” Rick told us. “I didn’t realize that lowering the car for that purpose presented such a daily driving challenge.” Rick’s 912 scraped on driveway approaches and speed bumps. The tire aspect ratio compounded his problem. The car returned to Johnson Alignment in Torrance, California, where they “raised the car a little bit to make it more streetable, adjusted the Konis, and then fine-tuned the suspension.”

SO HOW DID Rick and Cindy like the finished product? Cindy took turns with Rick driving the car back home to Washington State from Southern California, a distance of 1,300 miles, smiling most of the way. With his son Eric, Rick participated this past July in the Pacific Northwest Region’s 200-mile driving tour to snow-covered Artist Point on the Mount Baker Highway in Washington, 5,000 feet above sea level. “Our 912, which was at least 15 years older than any other Porsche participating, performed great on the windy roads, keeping pace with the newer cars.”

As with any encounter with a mongrel, passersby are both cautious and curious when walking around Rick’s 912 for the first time. Its rough-shod look is off-putting but intriguing. Pitted chrome, cracked paint, frayed upholstery, and the vintage Bill Yates license plate surround hint at years of hard living. Yet the pristine trunk and detailed engine compartment reflect a high level of care. And the menacing growl it makes when Rick twists the ignition key? Awesome. This mutt may not garner a blue ribbon at Westminster, but it’s a show-stopper nonetheless. 🐾



To see video of “The Mutt” go to:

PCA.org/news/ becker-912