



YESTERDAY ONCE MORE

Original Porsche 928 Cabriolet conversions built in the 1980s and '90s are quite rare. Today, we check out one of two 928 S4 convertibles built by Uwe Gemballa.





STORY AND PHOTOS BY IAN KUAH

It is rare to be reunited with the same car you tested over three decades ago, although this has happened to me with the 911 Carrera 3.2 based Ruf CTR Yellow Bird. But it was a big deal when I finally got to meet the twin brother of the Gemballa 928 S4 Cabriolet I drove in 1989, as only two were ever made.

I first met the late Uwe Gemballa in 1983, and we remained friends right up to the time he was murdered in South Africa in 2010. Although small in physical stature, Gemballa more than made up for it with his Colgate smile and flamboyant personality. A visionary and gifted designer, he was also a natural salesman who convinced many a wealthy car lover that they really needed his extrovert Porsche 911 based conversions.

The Gemballa stand was always one of the big draws at the annual Geneva Motor Show and bi-annual Frankfurt Motor Show, and Uwe dropped a bombshell in 1986 when he unveiled the seminal Gemballa Avalanche. Based on the 930 generation 911 Turbo, it featured a flat nose with pop up headlamps, Testarossa style side strakes, and a massive rear wing that appeared to grow organically out of its roof and rear wheel arches. And thanks to its 375 hp Ruf BTR engine, it was as fast as it looked. The press and public alike went wild for the car, and Avalanche posters soon adorned the walls of car enthusiasts around the world.

While the Porsche 928 S4 also made its debut that year as a 1987 model, the 911 Carrera 3.2 was more popular than ever and it was evident that Porsche's grand plan to replace the 911 with the front engine, transaxle 928 was coming unstuck. Ironically it was the 911's quirky rear engine layout and tricky handling that was its attraction for many. In comparison, the more technically advanced 928 was almost too normal.





Most of the late Uwe Gemballa's reworked 928s weren't quite as over the top as the 911s he transformed. A 928 Cabriolet is a rare sight, as very few were made. Although a production 928 Cabriolet was once considered by Porsche, the only examples that made it onto roads around the world were the handful constructed by coachbuilders.



All large OE car manufacturers rely on specialist component suppliers to help them develop new and mainstream technologies. Thus, Bosch, Hella, and Siemens are the usual development partners for Audi, BMW, Mercedes Benz, Porsche, and Volkswagen for lighting and electronic systems. However, specialist partnerships also occur on a smaller scale, especially where low volume models are concerned.

In early 1980s Germany, a Hamburg based engineer by the name of Christian Hahn, trading under the Styling Garage name, was busy converting Mercedes' design head Bruno Sacco's sleek and elegant Mercedes 500SEC into a head turning convertible, alongside a Gullwing door version of the seminal pillarless coupe. Known as the SGS Marbella, this was a Cabriolet that royalty and the rich and famous simply had to be seen in, and in the first three years of its production over 300 of these hand built cars were sold to customers in the U.S., Japan and Middle East as well as Europe.

The original Styling Garage was a victim of the 1986 financial crisis, so Hahn quickly





formed Styling Garage Spezial Karosserien GmbH under the parent company Design + Technik GmbH to develop convertibles for OE manufacturers and aftermarket tuners. His unique specialist knowledge made him a sought after consultant to the likes of Karmann, who built VW's Golf Cabriolet, and even Mercedes themselves at one point. So it was no surprise that soon after Porsche's 928 S4 made its debut, Hahn received a call from Uwe Gemballa, who had a client asking for a convertible 928 S4. They struck a deal and the donor car was found and sent to Hamburg.

The first production Gemballa 928 S4 Cabriolet emerged in 1989, resplendent in Gemballa's motor show signature hue of Royal Blue metallic with contrasting light grey leather interior. It looked absolutely stunning, and I was pleased to learn that Gemballa had arranged for the Schloss Solitude, close to his hometown of Leonberg, to be our photo location. A Rococo castle and hunting retreat commissioned by Charles

Eugene, Duke of Württemberg, the Schloss Solitude was the perfect backdrop for this elegant one of a kind convertible.

Fast forward to May 2022, and I am in a Gemballa 928 S4 Cabriolet near Hamburg, recalling that day in Leonberg over three decades ago. However, this is not the exact same car, but its identical twin. The registration papers state that it was first titled on June 18th, 1990, over a year after the first car.

The donor 928 left Zuffenhausen with a coat of metallic grey paint, but the owner was so taken with the photos he had seen of the Royal Blue metallic car he asked Gemballa to repaint it in the same shade, with the same light grey interior. The car's present custodian, Klaus Öhlrichs, acquired it in December 2019.

"The second owner, Dieter Loss, was the rather flamboyant owner of a disco who acquired the car in 1993," Öhlrichs explained. "Eventually Dieter passed away, followed by his wife six years later, and the 928 and his wife's Fiat 850 Spyder were left to a close friend of the family."

This woman lived in Lübeck, about 60 km (37 miles) from Öhlrichs. She told a mutual friend that knew he was a car enthusiast that the cars were for sale. Already an owner of two 928s, Öhlrichs was very curious to see the 928 Cabriolet.

"She was very keen to offload the cars, so I bought them on the spot and sold the Fiat immediately," he said.

Upon inspecting the Porsche, Öhlrichs discovered that it was not in great condition, as it had been neglected after the owner passed away. The interior was dirty, and there was a hole on one of the seats. Once Klaus had taken delivery he set about restoring the interior and installed new brakes and tires to make the car roadworthy.

A friend in the know told him that the Cabriolet conversion was the work of Styling Garage in nearby Hamburg. This prompted Öhlrichs to contact Christian Hahn, who had revived Styling Garage in late 2018 to restore and maintain the cars he built in the 1980s and '90s. Hahn was delighted to hear from Öhlrichs as he had lost track of both Gemballa 928





SPECS 1990 928 S4 Gemballa Cabriolet

Drive	Rear wheel drive
Layout	Front engine
Wheelbase	98.43 inches
Engine	5.0 liter V 8
Transmission	4 speed automatic
Horsepower	320 hp
Torque	317 lb ft
Weight	3,549 lbs
Power to Weight	11.1 lbs/hp
0 60 mph	6.0 seconds
Top Speed	165 mph

Four tailpipes expend exhaust from the 5.0 liter Porsche V8.

Cabriolets, and when they met up for the first time, he told him the story of how these cars came to exist.

Back in the late 1980s, Koenig Specials in Munich offered a 928 convertible, but Gemballa's customer did not like their rather overt body styling kit and was certain that Uwe could create a more elegant solution for him. Gemballa had already cooperated with Styling Garage on another 928 project, the spectacular Gullwing adorned with his widebody styling conversion. A phone call to Hamburg set the ball rolling on the design and development of a proto type folding roof system for the 928.

With the roof removed the structure needed to be beefed up, so the sills were opened and tailored steel reinforcement sections welded in place. Three box sections were welded to the floorpan to stiffen the structure between the A pillars and the rear bulkhead, and additional cross bars were integrated into the bodyshell. The result is a structure akin to a giant go kart frame whose torsional rigidity is greater than that of many mass produced convertibles.

Finally, the operation of the powered canvas roof folding mechanism and flush rear deck cover fittings was finessed, and the first production Gemballa 928 S4 Cabriolet was ready to roll. The reason for the body in white prototype is so that the TÜV (*technischer Überwachungsverein*, or Technical Inspection Association) authorities in Germany can check that the modified structure meets the safety standards required for road use certification. As the work presented for approval has to be

done by a qualified engineer, it was useful that Hahn was one himself.

The Gemballa body styling kit starts with the period Gemballa front bumper/spoiler assembly that gives the car its purposeful look. This is longer than the factory polyurethane nose cone it replaces. The replacement front fenders bolt to the factory mounting points and house the rectangular pop up headlamps that replace the round Porsche units. Between these new fenders, the leading edge of the factory hood was modified to incorporate a pair of air intakes.

Deeper side sill covers lead your eyes to the bulged rear wheel arch extensions bonded to the original metalwork on each side. This transition point is where the integrated rear spoiler begins its rearward journey towards its distinctive upswept lip. The Gemballa replacement rear bumper is wider than stock to match the wheel arch extensions and features a long cutout for the caricature quad exhaust outlets. These were a real hoot back in the '80s and still raise eyebrows today.

The 1989 model year 928 S4 wore 8.0J and 9.0J x 16 inch wheels shod with 225/50ZR16 and 245/45ZR16 rubber. Unusually, the period multi piece Gemballa wheels that fill out the arches are not staggered like the factory ones, and are the same deep offset 9.0J x 18 inch size all round, wrapped in 235/40ZR18 Bridgestone RE050 rubber.

I am not a big fan of aftermarket drop top cars, as I have had my fill of poor conversions over the years. A particularly bad

one was even approved by a major manufacturer and sold through their official dealer network! However, I have known Chris Hahn since 1984, and his tendency to over engineer the reinforcement aspect of his convertible conversions has never left a question mark hanging in the air, even on less than smooth country roads. The 928 S4 Cabriolet is no exception to this philosophy.

Where I had simply driven the original car three miles from the Gemballa workshop to the Schloss Solitude on perfectly surfaced tarmac back in 1989, Klaus Öhrlich and I went for a proper blast, really leaning on the 32 year old Porsche through some of the bends. You forget how small 1980s cars of all types are by today's standards. Back then we considered the 928 and the Ferrari 512BB to be quite chunky for top rank sports cars. Today they look quite diminutive alongside their modern counterparts.

Running al fresco with no B and C pillars to obstruct your view and no low roof to make you feel claustrophobic, the 928 Cabriolet feels even nimble than usual on the open road. During our cross country dash, it even occurred to me that if this was a current Porsche model, its modest size, guttural V8 soundtrack, and more than adequate performance would likely win many friends and customers.

They say you should never meet your heroes, but there is nothing in the Good Book about meeting a hero twice. And certainly nothing about meeting his twin brother. This was a day well spent. 🍷

