

Five Men And a Baby

Developers of the Golf Cabriolet Remember

Osnabrück, Germany (ca. 2011)

Five chairs, two tables, 73 cars. Five witnesses on the chairs; on the table, a basket full of juicy red strawberry fruit. Ooh, tempting. At the meeting amongst the car collection of Volkswagen Osnabrück: design studies, prototypes, milestones. Today, the five gentlemen around the table remember 35 years of the convertible Golf. In the beginning, it was about the future. To the employees of the company Karmann - and the future of the open Volkswagen.

In early 1976, Wilhelm Karmann, senior director of the company, initiated thoughts of the Beetle convertible's limited time remaining. The end of the classic seemed within reach, although the Wolfsburg factory still said nothing official. "But the numbers of the Beetle convertible fell markedly," says Hubert Hehmann, former project engineer at Karmann, thoughtfully, while tapping a Golf Cabriolet on the flank. Which we will get to in a moment. First, however, we wonder about this strange specimen. It has all the makings of a Golf Cabriolet. Only, one thing is missing: a rollbar!



It is about nothing less than the successor to a legend.

The year 1976 began the palpable farewell to the Beetle convertible; the future of the 80% of Volkswagen's orders entrusted to Karmann, whose continued existence without a follow-up project would have been uncertain. All of this led to a memorable presentation of a "holy" prototype by Karmann. Arriving from Wolfsburg was Professor Ernst Fiala, Chief of Research and Development at Volkswagen, who stood before the unusual creation: A Golf I sedan, but so cleverly covered with black film that the viewer imagined a closed convertible. Fiala's reaction? "At first he was relatively muted," says Joachim Nagel, 36 years experience in management positions at Karmann. He kept looking forward to the air, as Wilhelm Karmann personally explained the concept of a completely new Golf Cabriolet. At the end, Fiala agrees: Karmann was to build a drivable prototype! All are aware of the importance of this order: it is about nothing less than building the successor to a legend.

The whole thing takes place at a time when the classic four-seat convertible was nearly extinct. On the market at the time were just two classics: The Beetle Cabriolet from Volkswagen and the Rolls-Royce Corniche convertible – a curious pair.

"Not without a bow!"

In Osnabrück, Karmann set to work: A Golf without a roof between B- and C-pillars. The Golf is now a "sissy" because it is robbed of about 80% of its body stiffness. What about a rollbar? "At the beginning, we had never given any thought to it," says William Schwebe, now 84 years old and one of the best connoisseurs of the Golf Cabriolet, frankly admits. A mixture of tradition and aesthetics lend themselves to the first roof-free appearance of the planned Golf convertible. "There is no significant stability in a convertible; something like this takes maybe ten percent more rigidity," says Schwebe, which is just as Hubert Hehmann remembers of the extensive body modifications on the convertible. Stabilized below a frame made of massive T-beams, the body, in combination with cross members between the front and rear wheel wells, added to the vehicle's rigidity. "Of course, first of all for the mere attempt," warns Hehmann with a wagging finger. Building by hand, he stabilized the long sides of the prototype. "Because you had to be careful as hell, that everything came back into shape," he recalls, laughing and waving softly: "blood, tears and sleepless nights ...", he leaves the sentence unfinished. And then the story is with Prof. Dr. Ulrich Seiffert.

At the beginning of 1977, Karmann presented the first prototype to Volkswagen's Department of Vehicle Safety. "Not without a bow!" Seiffert expressed immediately; after all, he is aware of the expected U.S.A. safety regulations, which affect export-oriented companies such as Volkswagen considerably. Karmann responded promptly and constructed a rollover protective "handle", which also improved roof and side window guidance – and this helps give the Golf Cabriolet its legendary nickname, Erdbeerkörbchen, or strawberry basket (named for the handle found on many strawberry baskets). The Karmann veterans happily chuckle: "This is something you'll never live down, even as a car ..."



"The number one convertible went off like hotcakes!" says William Schwebe (right).



Know each other from the outset, the 1976 prototype and Hermann Hehemann, 1950-1991 top specialist at Karmann.

"Golf Cabrio - No thanks!"

Today the term is said with a loving tone. "But that was not always so," recalls coachbuilder Hermann Hehemann, active at Karmann from 1950 to 1991. "Golf Cabrio - No thanks!" was emblazoned on the cars of the VW Beetle Club, who wanted to hold honking protest caravans in Wolfsburg to stop its production. It was in vain. The Golf prototype would approach the same degree of mass production as the legendary Beetle Convertible reached its inevitable end of production. Ultimately, the Karmann assembly lines reconciled the open version of the Beetle and Golf (the last Beetle convertible was completed in January 1980, during the time when the Golf convertible had long been in production). Today, the Golf, especially its fresh air variant, is a long-recognized classic. This was unthinkable to the popular belief at the time.



The size of the trunk was subject to strategic requirements, "had to fit in a case of beer" remembers Siegfried Licher, William Schwebe and Joachim Nagel (left).

"A beer box had to fit in"

"A particular challenge was the volume and accessibility of the trunk," recalled Hehemann. Of course, if four people are to comfortably find a place in the Golf cabriolet, there needs to be a space for your luggage. "A beer box had to fit in," Hehemann says dryly – and smiles. Several alternatives were played through, and the sticking point was eventually favored for the production-based sedan rear, rear lights and license plate cover. Not to mention the high-lying state of the folded roof. "Of course, we would have gone deeper in the tail area, but that would affect the silhouette of the car and the storage capacity of the trunk." Volkswagen also insisted on a heated glass rear window.

"An incredible difference to the Beetles!"

Siegfried Licher will not forget the first test with a near-Golf I Cabriolet. "It was an incredible difference to the Beetle!" Licher was a Karmann engineer from 1969 to 2009 and is still impressed with the car today. "Handling, power delivery. A great car. And then the reduction of wind noise – the Golf Cabriolet is extremely quiet," says the former head of development at Karmann. No wonder: It was possible with the result of several decades' worth of convertible expertise. After three years of development, the time has come: In March 1979, the new Golf I Cabriolet was officially presented [to the public]. And in principle, the international automotive journalists wrote exactly about the car, say its developers even after 35 years of "their" Golf I Convertible: That it is quiet, stiff, comfortable, solid. It is lively and economical to drive. The multi-layered canopy is vinyl; the later special models have a canvas top, which could also be optionally ordered by customers. The new Golf I Cabriolet is almost a best seller from the start of production.

This is the reason why there would never be an official Golf II Cabriolet. However, there was one, built in 1985. Painted in elegant brown metallic with a cream-colored top and fitted with stylish alloy wheels, this was not a roadworthy prototype. With the extended rear of the Jetta II, it is presented in the same year (1985) to Volkswagen... and scrapped. "It would not have been profitable," says Willi Schwebe. "The number one convertible went away like hotcakes, and we also had the Golf II, which had thinner sheet-metal and larger body volume – we would have to have done a lot of research," added Joachim Nagel.

"Finger exercises on a scale of 1:1"

That same year, Karmann experimented with various convertible versions, such as the Roadster: A Golf I convertible with targa roof halves over the front seats, and a modified rear bracket with a more massive and solid top compartment. To these were added the bumper and square headlights from the U.S.A. Golf (the "Rabbit"); the latter were finally exchanged for the traditional round lights, but the Roadster, too, never saw production. "It was a mind game, a finger exercise on a scale of 1:1 - we wanted to keep talking with VW," says Hubert Hehemann.

The continuation of a classic: the Golf III Cabriolet

While all good things must come to an end, the Golf convertible would step up again soon after the end of the Golf I Cabriolet – and the convertible team were called upon again in the shape of the all-new Golf III Cabriolet. This one, in turn, had the burden of following a classic because of the success of the Golf I Convertible approached during its lifetime.

The new Golf is noticeably bulkier, to design specifications – rollbar, glass rear window, technically and optically based on the hatchback - also changes nothing for the next generation. The year 1993 sees the new Golf III Cabriolet; it's one of the most solid fresh-air cars on the convertible market – which has, incidentally, recovered remarkably and gives the new open-air Golf many new competitors. But the Golf III Cabriolet is a rock on a successful path. It is at its launch equipped with standard side-impact protection, dual airbags, ABS, and, available in 1995, as the first convertible with an economical and high-torque TDI engine.



218 years cumulative experience in the automotive conversation: the "makers" of the Golf Cabriolet remember.

"The Golf III Cabriolet for us was particularly remarkable because it was the last project before the final withdrawal of CAD technology by Karmann," says Licher. He also says that Karmann produced 120 Golf III convertible prototypes for testing the rigidity of the body. "The Golf III Cabriolet was a wanderer between two worlds. The computational capabilities were not given so that we had real prototype tests for real results. But we had, retrospectively, the CAD computer results which were compared with the results of our own vehicle tests. With the Golf III Cabriolet findings, we could make, from this point on, key aspects of the developments on the computer chassis."

In 1998 Karmann freshened the front and rear of the Golf III Cabrio in the style of the new Golf IV. Volkswagen contributes the blue-red cockpit lighting and modified surfaces in the interior. The so-configured Golf IV convertible remained in production until 2002.

Currently a new chapter in the success story of the fresh-air Golf is opened again at Osnabrück, [the factory now being owned by Volkswagen]. The brand new Golf VI Cabrio stands in the wings to emerge in the historic halls of its predecessors. And this time, as the delicious strawberries rest on the table across from the Karmann troupe, the new Golf appears as it was originally constructed: with no rollbar. Time to break loose of the handle. Unusual? "Back to the roots!" cries Willi Schwebe as he grabs a strawberry.



Shoo, shoo the cup: All the official sketches (pictured: Italdesign / Giugiaro) already include the rollbar.



"Blood, tears and sleepless nights" describe the laborious work on the prototype for Hubert Hehmann (left).



"Back to school": On the way back to the series, there were many creative drive-bys.



The "makers" of the Golf I Cabriolet in their hoop-less prototype; subsequently-attached handle seen in the background.



William Schwebe

Born in 1927 and began working at Karmann in 1942. It is set in the design office is located, but until 1945 most of the time in the shelter. After the war he built up again with the operation. Schwebe was actively involved in all post-war Karmann developments until his retirement in 1992: the Beetle Convertible, Karmann Ghia, as well as the Type 14, Type 34 and many others. In the meantime, Schwebe became chief designer of Karmann do Brasil in 1969, where he developed the Karmann-Ghia TC 145. He then returned to Osnabrück to oversee the development of the Scirocco I and II.



Joachim Nagel

Born in 1938; worked at Karmann from 1965 to 2001. Has a degree in mechanical engineering and is initially responsible for the complete shell by Karmann, before he became acting head of Karmann vehicle manufacturing and finally to the Scirocco I Project. After seeing the Scirocco I project through, in the following years he also takes over the project management of Golf I and III Cabriolet, Scirocco II and Corrado. Due to his fast and sure-response in a crisis of his employees with respect, he is called "emergency nail".



Siegfried Licher

Born in 1946; began working at Karmann in 1968 and remains there until 2009. Worked as a designer in the company, and later as a design and development manager and member of the Board, he accompanied projects from Scirocco I, Scirocco II, and on up to the Corrado. Licher's experience and commitment went into shaping the transition of prototype construction from the drawing board through to Computer Animated Design (CAD).



Hubert Hehmann

Born in 1940; worked at Karmann from 1955 to 2005. One of the specially-trained body builders working next to the site, and in Osnabrück Karmann-Rheine. Most recently, he was director of project planning throughout the company. For the Karmann Ghia Convertible 1200 he developed a hardtop version that never went into production. Managed 33 projects at Karmann Technical Development (TE) from the start. His strongest memories he has next to the Golf I Cabriolet and the Cabriolet Beetle to his work on the prototype for a large Karmann Cabriolet the Type 34 and TC 145 and the Scirocco I.



Hermann Hehemann

Born in 1929 and employed by Karmann from 1950 to 1991. One of the body builders working in the experimental workshop in Osnabrück, and is a specialist in the design of convertible tops. Among his "items" were, among others, the Porsche chase car, the convertible prototype of the "Great Karmann", the VW Type 3 (1500) and Type 4 hand-built with Hehmann along with the first Porsche 911 body in the Karmann test workshop.

Images and text (translated) are from the original magazine article located at <http://www.volkswagen-classic.de> .