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July 2006



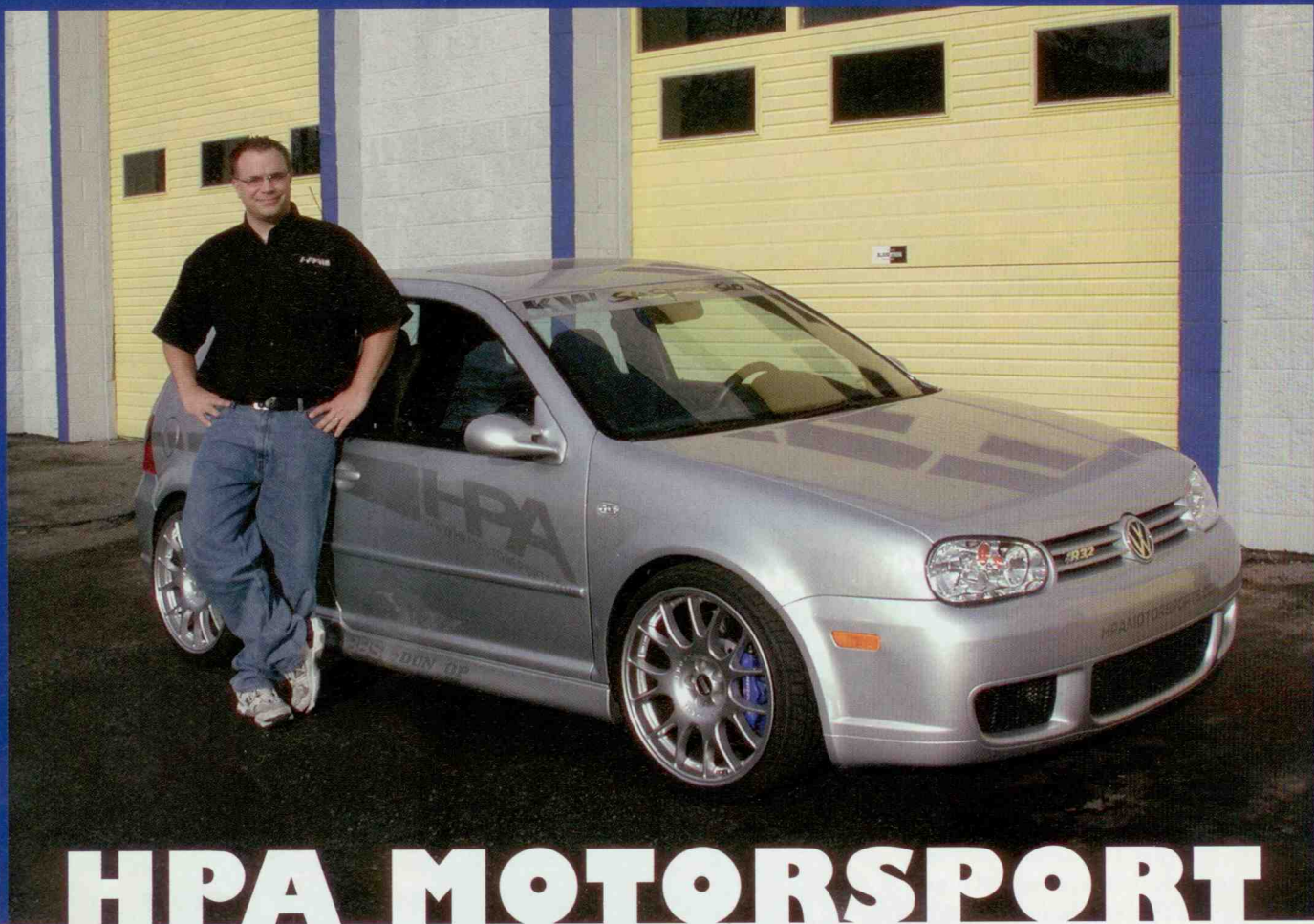
# OFF ROAD

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# HPA MOTORSPORT

*An Efficient Pursuit of Performance*

By KRISTIAN WIEBER

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF HPA MOTORSPORT

*“Ultimately, the pursuit of performance is tied to the pursuit of efficiency, and this can be measured in a multitude of ways.”*

— Marcel Horn

**F**rom the covers of consumer magazines worldwide to a cameo on the video game *Gran Turismo*, the efficiency and performance of HPA Motorsport’s cars has been well documented. Not so well known are the views, vision and passion of the man behind the cars, Marcel Horn.

By utilizing his enthusiasm, foresight and knack for efficiency in the business and marketing aspects of HPA as well as its design and production departments, Horn has accomplished feats few other performance shops can rival.

This is the story of how he did it.

## Automotive Aptitude

When Marcel Horn’s parents sent him off to kindergarten, they most likely expected to hear from the teacher about their bright son’s intellectual potential and polite manners. After all, the Horns were teachers themselves, and they had firsthand knowledge of such matters.

Instead, they received a note informing them that their young son was the only student who tried to repair all of his classmates’ Hot Wheels cars. With most people, many years pass by before an aptitude for anything in particular becomes evident. Obviously, this wasn’t the case for Horn.

Born with motorsports passion, that interest in cars only intensified as Horn traveled up through his youth, making go-karts and then purchasing his first car [a carbureted Rabbit] at just 15. He wanted time to work on the Volkswagen so it would be ready to drive when he turned 16 and could obtain his driver’s license.

Little did he know at the time that he would one day build some of the world’s fastest versions of that car.

## A Volkswagen Love Affair

Though he had been a motorsport enthusiast since his first breath, Horn had not yet developed an affinity for any specific make or model. As he searched for the best platform for his first vehicle, that soon changed.

“If you look at the history of Volkswagen, they call it the peoples’ car. I never understood what that meant. But,



<<Horn leans up against an HPA Volkswagen. His love affair with the make goes back to his first car, a 1976 Rabbit. Today, this R32 puts out 575 horsepower.

when I was 15 and looking for a car that I could both afford to buy and then outfit, I found gems in the Volkswagen lineup,” remembers Horn.

One of those gems was the inexpensive price of Volkswagens. Another was the fact that everything interchanged, backward and forward, for 20 years on both the water-cooled and air-cooled platforms.

“For a budding enthusiast, it was the best platform to get involved with. A 1976 Rabbit, which is what I owned, had no peers. There was no Honda like that. There was nothing that carried the pull backwards and the pull forwards of parts. You could put in big motors, suspension, brakes, wheels, etc. Anything from the 1990s to the 80s and back to the 70s—all bolted in,” says Horn.

It allowed him the ability to work with nominal resources and achieve unimaginable goals for the time. And, Horn says that friendly cost and vast potential is still true of Volkswagen to this day.

“You take an underdog, the Beetle, and you can make it into a world-class supercar that will knock the doors off of a Hennessey Viper,” says Horn.

## The Start

Horn officially formed what would become HPA Motorsport in March of 1991, signing his first five-year lease on a corporate facility at just 18.

Young though he may have been, uneducated and unprepared he was not. Growing up in a house full of teachers, Horn wasn't allowed to sit in the back of the class and learn nothing.

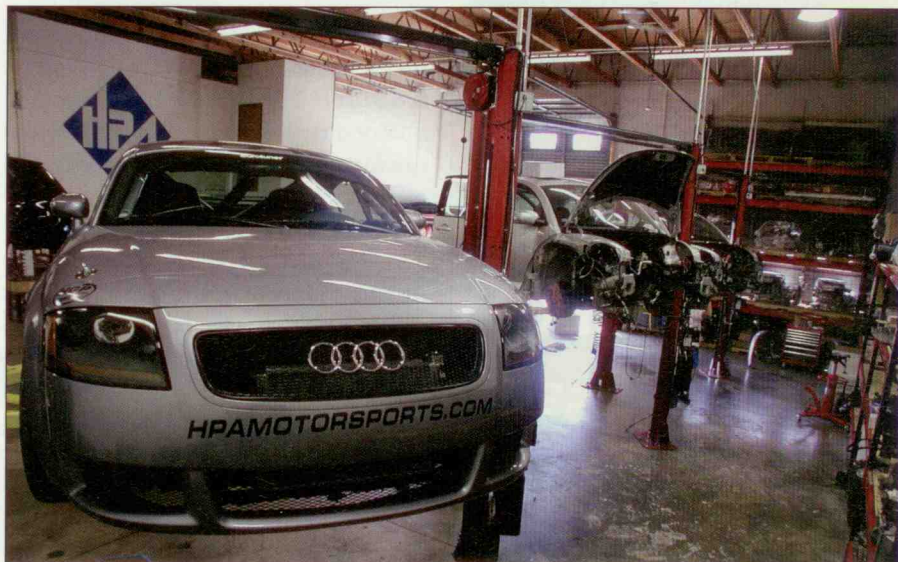
Running HPA during the day and attending class four nights a week, Horn was exceptionally busy in the early years of his business. Fluent in both German and French, Horn studied mechanical engineering, languages and psychology in college. He then finished up with a business diploma for accounting and marketing. Along the way, he passed a government exam to become a certified technician.

The foundation for HPA's future was laid.

*continued*



Since HPA first emerged onto the worldwide scene, they have received a great deal of coverage in consumer magazines. Many of them have set up photo shoots at HPA's shop.



Volkswagens aren't the only German car Horn has an affinity for. Audis are another favorite of the German-speaking entrepreneur.



There is no "I" in team, and no one knows this better than Horn. He credits his HPA team with much of the success his company has achieved.



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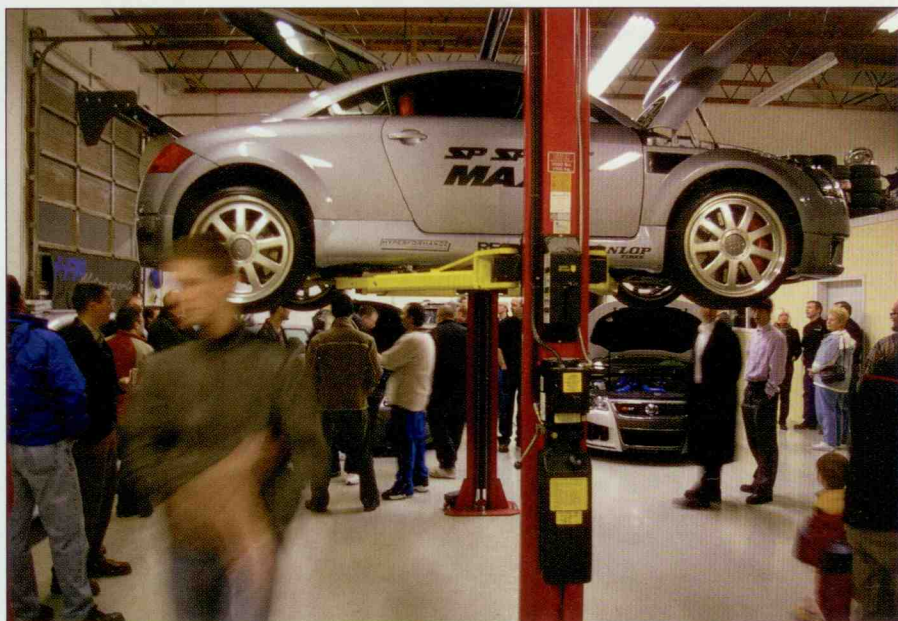
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Receiving the type of recognition that HPA has garnered will gather a crowd.

### A Golden Opportunity

The first five-year business plan was to work in the regional economy and marketplace. HPA was a tuner shop catering to dealerships and outfitting cars. That was pre-Internet. As Horn saw the Internet on the horizon, he shifted gears and decided to go out and study the global market.

"I traveled around the world to all of the different automotive trade shows: Japan, Germany, the U.S., etc. By the late 1990s, I had assembled an arsenal of global manufacturers of parts," says Horn.

In 1997, HPA got its golden opportunity. Volkswagen announced that for the first time in their history, they would launch a new model [the Beetle] in North America *prior* to releasing it in Germany.

The significance was that North American tuners had the first chance to set the trends for a brand new car rather than follow trends set in Europe, where they usually get new models two years before North America.

Horn immediately recognized the opportunity to set trends with a new model incorporating new technology.

"Right then, I said that would be our breakout project," recalls Horn.

From the start, he had every intention of using the vehicle to showcase his company's potential. The idea was to drop a big monster motor in and hope that it would draw attention to the car.

"I dialed up the rolodex of everyone I met around the world, and I had my expert team here work with me. We put the big Volkswagen V6 motor into it," says Horn.

The response was better than he could have imagined. From *Road & Track* to another 20 publications worldwide, it was published that HPA Motorsport was the first tuner to put a Volkswagen V6 in the new Beetle. America already had a love affair with the new Beetle, and so word spread like wildfire as sales took off.

However, there was another surprise for HPA that Horn hadn't anticipated. "All of a sudden, these tuner nuts turned up out of the woodwork wanting these V6 motors put into these brand new cars."

After doing 40-plus conversions in 1998 alone, Horn decided to create a conversion kit.

After the initial push, the media continued to call HPA, wondering what would come next, and they're still calling to this day.

"It grew on its own," says Horn.

Horn has since made a habit of recognizing opportunity's knock.

### The RGT Jetta

When asked, Horn says that every one of the cars built by HPA is his favorite, because each one is built with heart and soul.

However, if Horn *had* to pick one, it would be the RGT Jetta, for many



## HPA MOTORSPORT

People don't typically take their Ferrari out on this kind of terrain.

reasons. It was the first time in the 80-year history of Volkswagen that they had worked publicly with an out-of-house tuner to develop a corporate show car. It was also the first time that Volkswagen had involved itself with the North American aftermarket.

"It was the first time on so many levels, and we were entrenched from the conceptual level. We wrote the first proposal on what we thought the Jetta should mean and worked with the design team on what the car should look like," says Horn.

Horn believes that the net impact of the RGT Jetta build will rattle through the corporate structure of Volkswagen and the entire aftermarket.

"My hope is that this will inspire small tuner shops to keep driving forward and realize the dream of working with an OEM at some time," says Horn.



### Customers

Horn's wife once asked him, "Who would spend \$100,000 on a Volkswagen Beetle?"

The answer:

"Anyone who's secure in their wealth and accomplishments and doesn't need a Porsche or Ferrari emblem as a cuff link to display their success will love our vehicle because we offer the equivalent, if not better, performance of an Enzo Ferrari, with the understated skin of a Volkswagen. There are no badges to steal,

no stone chips to devalue by \$15,000, and if they ever got into trouble, they can go down to their local parts store and buy a \$50 fender from Mexico. They don't have to wait five months while they bring in a vacuum-formed, carbon fiber front end that will get scratched."

"How many people are really going to go out on a back country road and wring out a million-dollar Enzo Ferrari, for fear that million bucks will get totaled? That's versus a guy that's going to take a \$100,000 Volkswagen—that has the

*continued*

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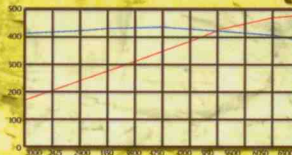
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When Volkswagen released the new Beetle to North America, it represented a golden opportunity for HPA Motorsport. [above]

Horn likes to keep things nice and tidy. [right]



## The HPA Staff

As much as Horn does, and as good as he does it, he still needs help. He may be the driving force behind HPA, but the company's success is also the result of a lot of hard work done by a dedicated team.

"I promise you, in life, you learn really quickly that there is no I in team. That means that you have to let control out of your hands. I just talked in front of a lot of students today, and I told them I've been retired, and now I'm just coming up with the concepts.

I have a dedicated team with

strengths in administration, engineering, mechanics and fabrication that realize my dreams," says Horn.

How did he find a dedicated team?

"I think you find good people by inspiring them, and you inspire people by coming up with innovative means of communicating or solving problems. It just seemed to be a draw. You have one good person that draws another. I've been very fortunate. People seem to react well to a fresh approach, and HPA is all about an unexpected approach to tuning and an unexpected choice of vehicles. It's been that way with employees. It hasn't been easy to find the right person in a pinch, but when you're not looking and you don't know you need them, they show up," says Horn.

"I think that's where we're at. We've showcased enough of our philosophy and our commitment to our ethics and our morals that we attract the desirable type of applicant," says Horn.

It seems that one good thing leads to another.



The cars of HPA Motorsport are built to be driven, and this pair are ready to go.



## Communication

In speaking about his business within this article, Horn has touched on many practices and could comment on many more. However, when asked what the single most important key to success was, he answered:

"Communication. If you don't follow up on leads, if you don't follow up with customers, if you do not communicate with your staff on the wins and the losses and the stresses and the hardships—if you don't communicate—if you try to internalize it, if you try to hide it, if you try to defer it, you will lose."

However, if you communicate openly and honestly, Horn says people will understand.

"It doesn't matter how tight the timeline is, how expensive the bill is, how difficult the obstacle is, if you communicate, you will be surprised at the resources that come to your doorstep to help you out," says Horn.

With customers, vendors and employees alike, communication is a vital ingredient to building a successful business.


## Dreams Realized

On magazine covers and in video games, at car shows, trade shows and racetracks, HPA Motorsport has received unprecedented acclaim. Rather than shying away from the work, the benefit of being in this business for Horn and the team at his shop is that there seems to be a steady supply of these types of projects.

It's what keeps them coming in every morning.

Every car enthusiast, says Horn, lays in bed at night and dreams of the kind of performance vehicle they would build if they had the means.

"Now imagine you get to build every one of your dream cars, and as you're building them and realizing a dream for someone else, you're also realizing your own dream. Then you get to take it further and help cultivate the next dream. You don't have to own it to realize it," says Horn.

It's been said that dreams are what make life worth living. At HPA Motorsport, dreams are how they make a living. 

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