

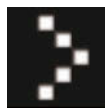


# Balance of power

BMW'S M DIVISION IS UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT, AND EX-AUDI MAN FRANK VAN MEEL IS AT THE HELM. **MARC NOORDELOOS** MET WITH HIM TO DISCUSS EVERYTHING FROM DRIVEN WHEELS TO SOME NEW hardcore MODELS







From 1978 until 2010, BMW offered a maximum of three M models at any time. Today that figure has doubled to six, with the M3, M4, M5, M6, X5 M and X6 M. Add in derivatives (convertible versions, etc) and there are now nine BMW M models, not including the seven less-extreme BMW M Performance models such as the M550d xDrive and M235i. That's some serious growth in only five years.

During this progression at BMW, Franciscus (Frank) van Meel was at Audi, where he started in 1996 and became managing director of the company's sporting division, quattro GmbH, in 2012. Van Meel joined BMW in October of 2014 and was appointed chairman of the board of management at BMW M GmbH on January 1, 2015. Less than two weeks into his new job, we met up with van Meel at the 2015 North American International Auto Show (NAIAS) in Detroit.

All-wheel drive is a core component of Audi's performance brand. The traction-aiding technology is referenced in the division's name (quattro GmbH) and the division has never produced a front or rear-wheel-drive road car. Meanwhile, BMW M stays loyal

to rear-wheel drive with its core range of performance cars (not counting the X5 M and X6 M). "Our philosophy is to make performance cars that are very agile, perform very well on race tracks and have a high degree of precision," says van Meel. "For that, rear-wheel drive is important. That is also what has made BMW M so successful over the past 40 years and built the M image. That is something that will continue in the future and we will even enhance those properties. That is our main differentiator from the other high-performance cars in the segment, especially German ones – the driving feel."

#### Push, or pull?

We pressed van Meel on the subject of driven wheels, especially given the growth of all-wheel-drive Mercedes-Benz AMG models. "If we were to make a four-wheel-drive car," notes van Meel, "it would have a rear-wheel-drive feel but with added traction. It would need to drive like an M car. If it was possible to get those vehicle dynamics with four-wheel drive, then it would be suitable for us."

With BMW moving to front-wheel drive on models such as the 2-Series Active Tourer, we naturally asked for

van Meel's thoughts on that driveline setup for BMW M. "I think a pure M with front-wheel drive is impossible to make. We cannot put so much torque and horsepower through the front axle. We wouldn't fulfill the M philosophy with that."

As the BMW M brand has grown, certain customers and journalists have complained about the cars getting softer and losing focus. "You don't think the new M3/M4 is a purists' car?" asks van Meel. "Last year I was looking at the BMW stand with another focus [while working at Audi] and I saw the M3/M4 and I was really impressed. For me, the M3/M4 is a very pure, very precise car, and it's very edgy. The M5 and M6 are set at a higher price and we have to take into account that there are some different expectations from those customers."

Some of the complaints about BMW M are due to the brand's recent commitment to turbocharging and automatic transmissions. Historically BMW M meant naturally aspirated engines and manual transmissions. "Regarding emissions and performance, turbocharging is the way to go, especially if you look toward downsizing," says van Meel. "Lighter engines with more performance – that's what we want."



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We want to have the best power-to-weight ratio, so there is no way around turbocharged engines."

He then adds his thoughts on manual transmission. "The technical answer is that you're slower with a manual gearbox and you have higher fuel consumption. The emotional part is that if there is a market for it, we will stick with the manual gearbox. Currently we see a decreasing market for manual. It's already quite small and it's falling."

Mercedes has done an excellent job keeping the hardcore enthusiast buyer happy with its extreme Black Series models. These cars have very limited production runs and a focus on maximum performance, with understandable sacrifices in the area of on-road comfort and refinement. Should BMW M build cars to compete directly? "I think it's a good idea to do something like that, to do limited edition models like the Black Series, but in a BMW M way," says van Meel. "We are actively looking into that."

BMW M executives told *Vehicle Dynamics International* the same thing at the 2013 NAIAS, but now van Meel quickly responds, "Let's just say you won't have to wait another two years to see something."

### The future

Speaking of higher-end models, BMW's top-spec halo car is the i8 hybrid. Van Meel feels it would be too crowded to have a BMW M halo car at the same time as the i8. But what about an electric BMW M model? "The BMW i team uses the carbon fiber technology from BMW M. And of course, we are looking into what BMW i does regarding drivetrain technology, vehicle dynamics control systems and enhanced lightweight technology. Without trying to make an 'M i' model, maybe there could be a BMW M inspired by BMW i, or a BMW i inspired by BMW M."

He adds that BMW M is more inspired by the race track than



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the laboratory, but is impressed that "BMW i is conquering new boundaries in technology and mobility".

"The good thing is that we are one company, so we can use each other's technologies across boundaries. However, I don't think combining BMW M and BMW i would work."

Diesel is also off the table for a pure BMW M model. "It works for the M Performance models. The diesel market is still Europe, not the USA and not China. That doesn't matter if it's M Performance or pure M. If we look only at the pure BMW M market, the biggest sales are in the USA, so we always have to take that market into account when we look into new technologies or ideas. Last year 40% of BMW M cars were sold in the USA."

Developing all the technology to the highest level is a key focus for van Meel. "An interesting part is our engine development setup, with all the features, test benches, design department and testing department," says van Meel. "It's very impressive. What's also impressive is that at the BMW headquarters we have the ability to show customers individual models, as well as the personalization of cars. That way people can see what is already possible today."

"Also, at the 2015 Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas,

we showed our organic LED (OLED) technology, which we will bring into a BMW M in the near future. For testing our cars, the Nürburgring (Nordschleife) is still a key place. We now have two test centers there. The one in the center of Nürburg was getting too small for us, so we opened a second in the industrial park outside town last year. Every car we develop has to perform at the Nürburgring for 1,000km (620 miles) for the final sign-off."

What about the future of BMW M? "Potential for growth is already there in the segment," says van Meel. "If you look at the sales numbers from last year compared with two years ago, we've had an increase of 44%. We're currently at 45,000 in sales for BMW M and M Performance automobiles. For the future, we are looking into other segments; there's a possibility for more BMW M automobiles. But, as always, if we bring such a car to the market it must be the best in its segment. With that perspective, we see more possibilities for the future, which we are currently working on. We see more possibilities and more segments where we can go for M Performance. That is what our future looks like and it seems very strong and growing."

**BMW'S RANGE OF M CARS IS NOW PRETTY ECLECTIC. THE I8 (INSET LEFT) HOWEVER, IS SOMETHING THAT WILL NOT WEAR THE M BADGE**

