

Twice around the clock

Le Mans 100th anniversary
collectors' edition
1923-2023

A SPECIAL EDITION FROM THE EDITORS OF

MOTORSPORT

IN ASSOCIATION WITH

RICHARD MILLE

Running race: the traditional Le Mans start in 1965, as drivers sprint to their cars. The #2 Ford GT40 MkII at the sharp end is that of Chris Amon and Phil Hill, but the challenge from the American cars was soon blunted as Ferrari scored what is still its final win, courtesy of the NART-entered 250 LM of Jochen Rindt and Masten Gregory



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INTRODUCTION

Over the last 100 years, and 90 editions, the Le Mans 24 Hours has grown to become one of, if not *the* world's most recognisable motor racing event.

The challenge of pushing the limits of both human and mechanical endurance to the very edge and beyond across both public road and race track has been just one of many allures for teams, manufacturers and drivers. A win at Le Mans arguably means more than a win in any other event, both in terms of prestige and honour, but also quite often, marketing clout.

This is a test that all car manufacturers dream of passing while flying their colours. So far, Porsche has done it more than any, but with the turn of a new century of competition upon us, new challenges are mounting: the dawn of the Hypercar era promises to usher in a golden age of top-flight racing.

To truly understand where Le Mans is headed, though, we must remember its past. In this special collectors' edition, created using *Motor Sport's* unique archive of race reports and with the support of our partner Richard Mille, we celebrate the best moments and rich history of the world's greatest race.

CONTENTS

ONE 1920s	4	SIX 1970s	62
The days of dust, dirt and gritty drivers		The Hollywood age, in more ways than one	
TWO 1930s & 40s	16	SEVEN 1980s	76
A rapid advance, before the world stood still		Porsche leads the age of the beasts	
THREE 1950s	28	EIGHT 1990s	90
Jaguars and prancing horses amid tragedy		GTs and LMPs rise from the ashes of Group C	
FOUR 1960s	42	NINE 2000s	104
Ford to the fore, as Ferrari backs out		Audi's reign begins with Tom Kristensen	
FIVE Richard Mille	56	TEN 2010s & 20s	116
Meet the racing fan behind the watch brand		Hybrids to Hypercars: the future is here	



CHAPTER ONE 1920s

THE DAYS OF DUST, DIRT AND GRITTY DRIVERS

A day-long test of speed and reliability for standard-equipment production sports cars, the *Grand Prix d'Endurance* organised by the Automobile Club de l'Ouest was not the first 24-hour car race - Columbus in Ohio hosted one as early as 1905 - but swiftly it became the benchmark, due mainly to 'Bentley Boys' who raced even harder than they partied.

The British invasion of what was to become France's most famous race had a rapid start: China-born Canadian John Duff was the first to enter (much against W.O. Bentley's better judgment) the inaugural edition of 1923 and, co-driven by Bentley's only pro, Frank Clement, won in 1924. Local resistance, however, was strong in speed and number. Initially, Chenard

et Walcker scored a 1-2 in 1923 and Lorraine-Dietrich registered consecutive wins from 1925. The former claimed the Triennial and Biennial cups of 1925 and the latter finished 1-2-3 on distance in 1926. Yet both then faded into racing obscurity.

These were trying financial times for myriad small-volume manufacturers, with mergers and takeovers abounding as bankruptcies beckoned. Bentley likely would have folded, too, but for diamond heir Woolf Barnato's regular injections of cash. British names Alvis, Aston Martin and Lagonda joined Bentley and American makes Chrysler and Stutz, plus Itala of Italy - to outnumber the French by 1928.

Le Mans was receiving widespread interest in part because of its pile-up of the previous year, at the notorious blind corner of Maison Blanche which eliminated several contenders,



The first Le Mans 24 Hours, 1923. The Chenard & Walcker of André Lagache and René Leonard at the Pontleue Hairpin, which was a defining part of the track until its removal in 1929

including the leading Bentley and chasing sister car. The team's remaining entry survived repairs by drivers-under-instruction using only tools and spares carried in the car. Yet it won by 20 laps - a record 215 miles - after the late failure of a leader under increasing pressure. Victors Dudley Benjafield and Sammy Davis were lauded national heroes: the best of British.

Except that they hadn't won. Not until 1928 was the car covering the greatest distance officially honoured. The original idea had been to declare victory after three years based on a rolling aggregate within capacity classes. Deemed too convoluted - and awarded only once - it was replaced from 1924 by a two-year competition. Further complexity and confusion arrived in 1926 in the form of the Index of Performance: basically, distance covered divided by target set according to engine size.

It was clear by 1929, however, where the main interest lay - for the foreigners at least: Bentley dominated, Barnato putting his talent where his money was with a second straight win, this time at the head of a marque 1-2-3-4.

The foundations were in place. The Circuit de la Sarthe's surface was by 1928 sealed throughout - mud and ruts or dust depending on the weather having been unwelcome factors - and in 1929 a short linking section constructed at residents' behest undercut the hairpin in Pontleue. Pits and grandstands - at their current site after a year starting/finishing on the Mulsanne Straight owing to a dispute with landowners - plus cafés, a boxing ring (!), chapel, car park and toilet facilities had also been built. And by the end of the decade those run-and-jump starts had become famous the world over.

1920s

CAR TO REMEMBER

Bentley 4½

"I think the whole thing is crazy. Cars aren't designed to stand that sort of thing for 24 hours." That was W.O. Bentley's reaction when John Duff planned to enter his 3-litre Bentley into the very first Le Mans. By 1924, when Duff's Bentley came home first, W.O. had changed his view and the ACO's endurance trial became a prime goal. After two disastrous Le Mans races it came right in spectacular style for 1927 when the battered 3-litre Old No 7 limped away from a spectacular pile-up to snatch an improbable victory. But it was clear that the experimental 4½-litre car, sidelined by the crash, had the speed Bentley needed for next year.

By 1928 Bentley had a guardian angel. Diamond millionaire Woolf Barnato baled out the sinking company and would prove a track hero, too. Race plans centred around boring out the four to 4½ litres, rather than the parallel six-cylinder range. The new 4½ produced 130bhp - and despite Bugatti's comparing Bentleys to lorries, the race cars for the 1928 Le Mans only weighed around 1.7 tons.

The 16-valve overhead-cam engine apart, the 4½ was relatively conventional, but thanks to W.O.'s railway apprenticeship it was built like a locomotive. Andrew Frankel, *Motor Sport's* chief test driver, has raced many of them: "They're so wonderfully engineered - you could race and then drive home in." And Bentley had an extra weapon: its cars were raced by wealthy sportsmen who brought to the



marque a seductive image of carefree, debonair style: Bentley Boys were kings of the road.

In that 1928 race the strongest opposition came from the US, Barnato and Bernard Rubín tussling with the fastest Stutz and setting a new lap record. By Sunday afternoon the Bentley was leading - but overheating so badly that on the last lap Barnato coasted on the downhills. But he made it, first of a hat trick for the British marque. The following year a race version of the 6½ would win, but a trio of 4½s rounded out a Bentley 1-2-3-4, confirming it as the archetypal Le Mans Bentley, an image later fixed for thousands of small boys by Airfix and Scalextric. "Drivers preferred the 4½ - it was lighter on the nose, handled better and had a beautiful gearbox," says Frankel. "Bentley winning five out of seven Le Mans put Britain on the racing map."

Tim Birkin tried to keep the big four competitive with his supercharged 'Blowers', which in 1930 proved fast - but also fragile. That year would bring the last of Bentley's five pre-war wins, and though it was another 6½ that triumphed, it's the 'bloody thump' of the four that echoes loudest.

THE WINNERS

1923

CHENARD & WALCKER

André Lagache/René Léonard

2210km

Original 17.3km circuit runs through Pontlieue, used until 1928

1924

BENTLEY 3 LITRE SPORT

John Duff/Frank Clement

2077km

New rule stipulates that cars must cover 20 laps with hoods up

1925

LORRAINE DIETRICH B3-6

Gérard de Courcelles/

André Rossignol

2234km

Famous Le Mans start first used

1926

LORRAINE DIETRICH B3-6

Robert Bloch/André Rossignol

2552km

First grandstands built and 100kph average achieved. Mulsanne Straight asphalted

1927

BENTLEY 3 LITRE SUPER SPORT

Dudley Benjafield/Sammy Davis

2370km

1928

BENTLEY 4½ LITRE

Woolf Barnato/Bernard Rubín

2670km

1929

BENTLEY SPEED SIX

Woolf Barnato/Henry Birkin

2843km

STARS OF THE DECADE



John Duff

War veteran, Hollywood stuntman, racer... Duff lived an extraordinary life. The first British Le Mans entrant in 1923, he won the next year for Bentley and is still the only Canadian victor.



André Rossignol

First driver to take back-to-back victories, in 1925 and '26, and first (with Robert Bloch) to break a 100kph winning average. But Lorraine-Dietrich pulled out in 1927, leaving Rossignol high and dry.



Woolf Barnato

The most successful of the 'Bentley Boys', W.O. calling him "the best driver we ever had and the best British driver of his day. He never made a mistake." He drove at Le Mans in 1928-30, winning all three.



Henry 'Tim' Birkin

Versatile and courageous, Birkin won Le Mans in 1929 with Bentley and in '32 with Alfa. Mechanical failures robbed him of more success as he developed his supercharged Bentley.

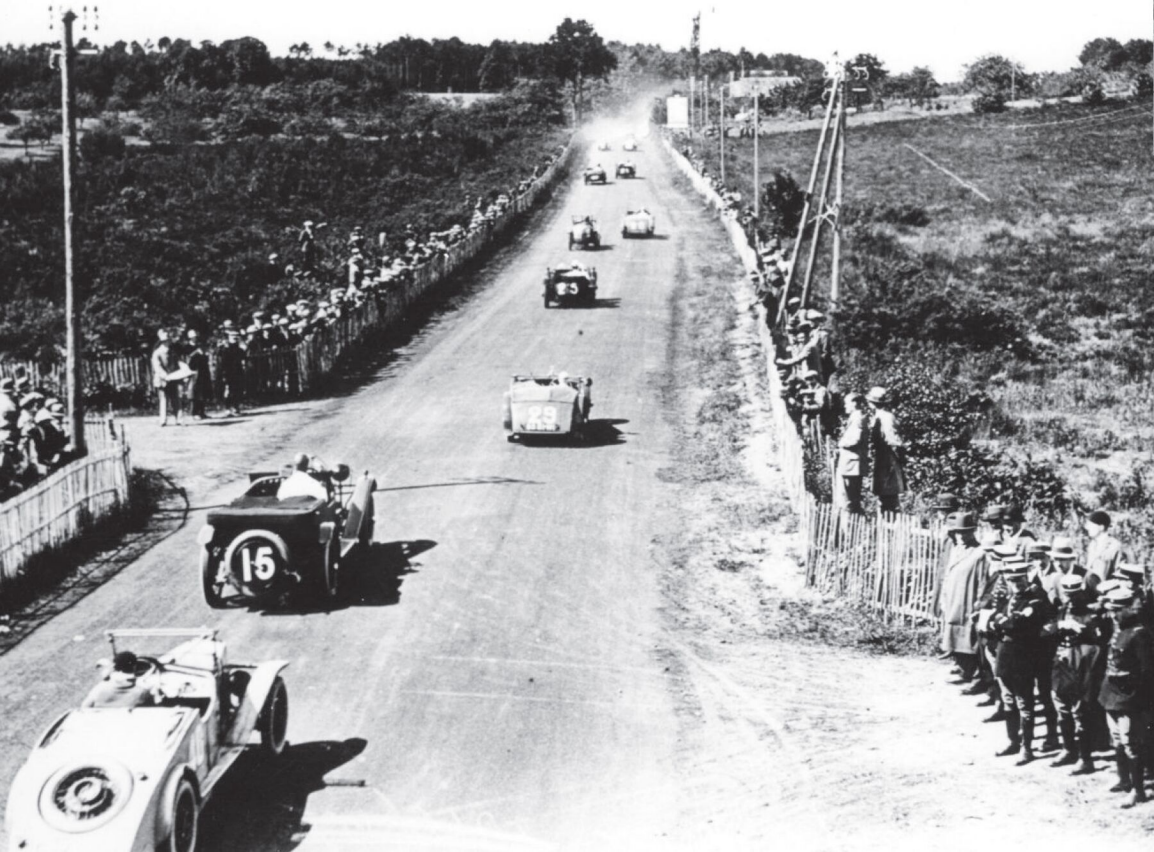
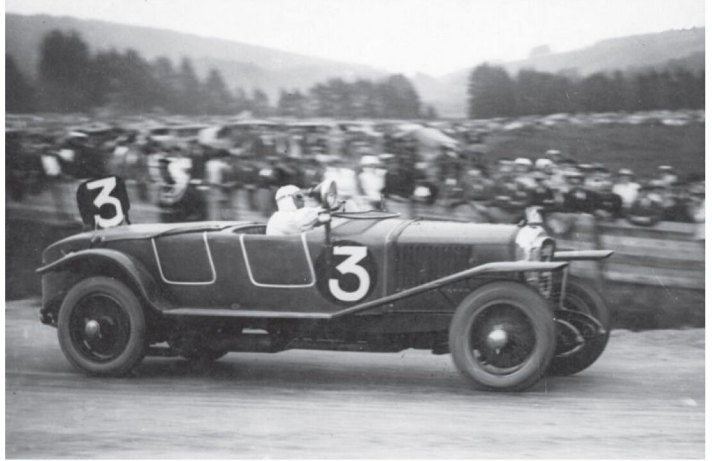


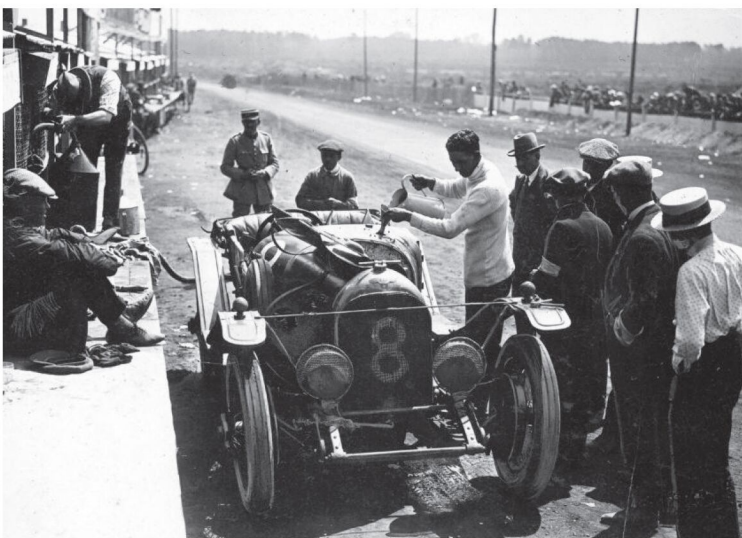
Eat my dust: The French Tracta Spéciale of Roger Bourcier and the singularly-named 'Tribaudot' leads Frank Clement/ Jean Chassagne's Bentley in 1929

1920s

Right: The first appearance of a Peugeot works team came in 1926, with a 174S for Louis Wagner/Christian Dauvergne. It lasted 76 laps

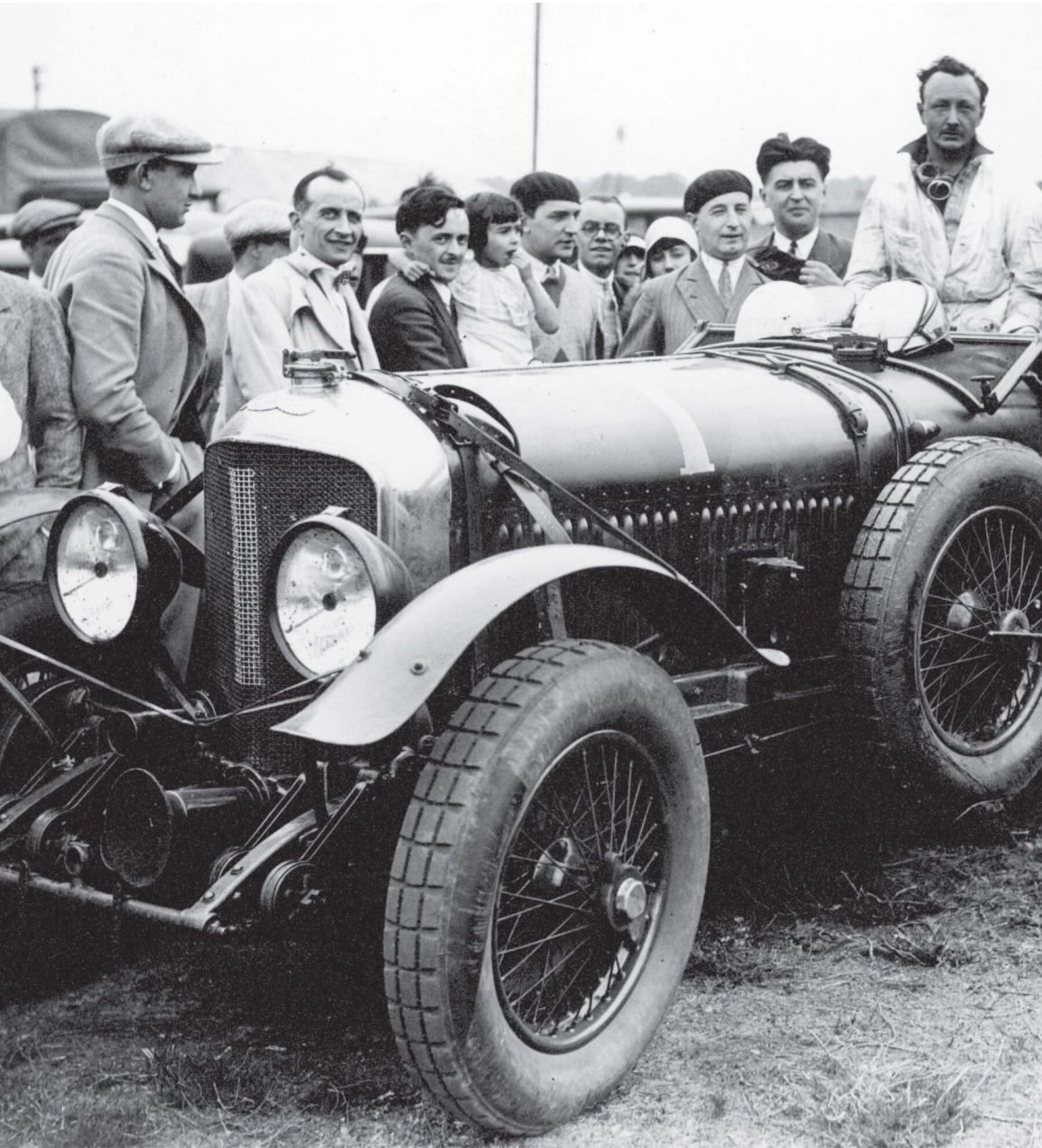
Below: The race start in 1928; safe to say the crowds are a fair bit bigger now. Barnato and Ruben would secure the victory for Bentley





Above: Jean-Albert Gregoire and Lucien Lemesle dragged their Tracta to seventh place in the 1927 edition

Left: Frank Clement and John Duff's winning Bentley receives some attention in the pits in 1924. Bentley supported their efforts far more during this second attempt





Barnato and Birkin pose after winning the 1929 Le Mans 24 Hours, with Barnato battling overheating to take the flag



Top: The 4.5-litre Bentley of Henry Birkin and Jean Chassagne passes the abandoned Lagonda 2-litre of Francis Samuelson and F King, which had crashed on lap 14 in 1928. Birkin/Chassagne went on to finish fifth

Middle: Woolf Barnato and Birkin's Bentley at Le Mans in 1929. By this point the cars were being compared to lorries due to their immense proportions

FROM THE ARCHIVE

Le Mans was an entirely different challenge in the 1920s. J. D. Benjafield was a part of the Bentley team. This is his account of the 1925 event, two years before the Bentley factory squad broke through

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN *MOTOR SPORT*, AUGUST 1925

This, the greatest race for cars in touring trim, took place at Le Mans on June 20th, 1925, finishing 24 hours later. Arriving at the circuit six days before the race, one was immediately impressed by the forward state of the preparations, and, although the course was never officially closed, practice was proceeding more or less continuously night and day; one fears that the people whose houses abutted on the circuit enjoyed little sleep during this period, as most of the cars engaged had open exhausts, silencing regulations being noticeable by their absence.

Each lap of the circuit measures approximately 10 miles, and it is composed of a four-mile more-or-less straight leg with a slight down grade and good tarred surface, followed by a right-angled turn, and then winding road, including a severe S-bend, after which it straightens out and runs down to the famous Pontlieue hairpin, where it joins up with the straight leg once more.

Apart from the straight leg, the surface was poor, full of pot-holes, untarred, and, following the long spell of dry weather, easily torn up by the wheels, with the result that, when following another car at all closely, one did so under a hail of stones of all sorts and sizes. The day before the race all this section of the course was treated liberally with a solution of calcium chloride, which helped bind it together, and somewhat, at least, alleviated the dust.

The substantial grandstand was situated about halfway down the straight, and opposite it was the score board, admirably worked, where one could see at a glance the relative positions of the cars in the race. The pits were next to the score board.

The fact that the course was not closed did not appear to worry many of the continental drivers at all; they still proceeded down the straight with their foot gummed to the floor boards, and relied on their skill in steering to avoid the numerous obstacles. It was obviously only a question of time before somebody would endure a crash. One of the big Chenards was the first; hitting a stationary lorry, fortunately only the car was seriously hurt in the incident. However, on the Friday night preceding the 24-hours race, one of the Ravels was less lucky, hitting a lorry head on at some considerable speed, with the result being that three people were seriously injured.

The six days before the race were devoted to tuning, minor adjustments, and practice, and one's time was fully occupied, the learning of a circuit of this type being no small task. We did it partly by driving, partly by walking, and the remainder by taxi. At last the great day arrived, and the few hectic finishing touches were made. Immediately after lunch we proceeded to the course, well armed with food, a lorry full of spares, and the two racing cars.

At 15:00hrs the order was passed along to line up for the start; the cars were placed on the right of the road opposite the grandstand in order of their size, the largest having the first place. They were staggered so that any individual could take the road as soon as ready. The drivers were all summoned to receive final instructions from the president of the A.C. de l'Ouest. Sharp to time the flag fell, and the loud speakers bellowed "*Partez*" when the drivers made a dash for their cars, feverishly erected the hood (20 laps having to be driven with the hood up), leapt in, pressed the starter, and away they went in a cloud of dust. John Duff was first away in his Bentley No.9, and the agility he showed in tucking his long limbs under the dash would have done credit to an acrobat. He was closely followed by Bertie Kensington-Moir in the other Bentley, No.10, and, needless to say, the cheers from the Bentley pits were long and loud, the omens being most favourable. They were closely followed by the Sizaire-Berwicke, a couple of OMs, Henry Segrave's Sunbeam, and then a steady procession of cars, the last appearing in no hurry to get away, being nearly five minutes behind Duff.

Nearly 10 minutes had elapsed before Segrave came roaring past, closely followed by Kensington-Moir, with Duff not far away in third. Hot on their heels were one each of the big Lorraine-Dietrichs and Chenard & Walkers. In these early stages the most notable feature was the Bentley-Sunbeam duel, both cars being admirably handled by their respective drivers, Moir and Segrave. Judging by the power of acceleration, the Bentley had a considerable reserve of power. Segrave retained the lead until the 11th lap was completed, but on the 12th circuit Moir had passed him, and was leading by a narrow margin, only to be repassed once more by Segrave on the next lap. On the 14th circuit Moir had once more recovered the lead, only to retain it for a short period, as on the next round he came into the pits to work on the oil filter cap, which had become detached and through which he was losing his



3^{me} GRAND PRIX D'ENDURANCE DE
24 HEURES
(COUPES RUDGE-WHITWORTH)
ORGANISÉ
PAR L'AUTOMOBILE-CLUB DE L'OUEST SUR
LE CIRCUIT DE LA SARTHE LES 20-21 JUIN 1925

Right: Never have the Le Mans pits looked so different to what we know now...

Below right: Rough roads and constant dust made conditions tough

Far right: the winning Lorraine-Dietrich of André Rossignol and Gérard de Courcelles, which was four laps clear at the finish

supply of oil. Segrave's Sunbeam had also suffered from a stuck throttle, and Jean Chassagne's Sunbeam, which had been nursed with care, always within striking distance of the leaders, came in with similar trouble. Thus, the leadership, which had dwelt in British hands for the first 15 laps, passed into French hands, René Leonard's Chenard-Walcker, closely followed by Henri Stalter's Lorraine-Dietrich, with Duff's Bentley third.

Moir and Segrave were soon going again, and rapidly commenced to overhaul the leaders. The relief drivers now began to get busy and don their war paint in the shape of overalls, goggles, etc, ready to take over their charges so soon as the first drivers should have completed the first 20 laps.

Clement and I, thus sitting in the Bentley pit, seeing No.9 disappear down the straight on its 20th lap, closely followed by No.10 on its 18th lap, watched with anxious eyes on the stopwatch awaiting their return. After 12 minutes, the last two of which seemed like hours, we were compelled to realise that something serious had stopped them. A further five, 10, 15 and 30 minutes, and then Duff suddenly appeared from the forest dusty, travel-stained and panting after a four-mile run across country from the opposite side of the track. His petrol pump had broken, and he had run across for spares. He once more disappeared into the forest. Shortly afterwards Moir arrived at the pits on foot; No.10 Bentley had run out of petrol within a mile of completing its 19th lap, and was therefore disqualified, being 12 miles short of the distance required before replenishments are allowed. Thus, through a miscalculation over the extra amount of fuel required to pull the car at speed with the hood up, the fastest car in the race, after putting up a remarkable show for 18 laps, was disqualified. After a considerable further interval, Duff reappeared in No.9, having lost 1.5 hours, and Clement leapt up, wasted little time in refilling, and thundered away into the dusk.

In the meantime, the strenuous conditions of the contest had taken a heavy toll on the competing cars, some being stopped by breakdowns, and others by crashes. The most notable in the latter class were the Amilcar, driven by poor Marius Mestivier, which overturned on the straight for some unexplained reason, killing its driver instantly, and one of the Lorraine-Dietrichs, which was overturned without serious injury to its driver. George Duller, who had taken over Sunbeam No.15 from Segrave, was compelled to retire after 30 laps with



a seized clutch, and so at midnight only two of the British contingent remained, the Chassagne and Sammy Davis Sunbeam and the Duff and Clement Bentley. The latter proceeded to put in much good work, first in Clement's hands and then in Duff's, gradually reducing the long lead held by the large French cars. At 05:00hrs Duff once more handed over to Clement, and just as the position was becoming very hopeful, and No.9 was almost within striking distance of the leaders, the float-chamber of one of the carburettors snapped off, and the near side of the engine caught fire. Clement managed to extinguish this with the help of a cushion before much damage was done, but it was quite useless to attempt a repair owing to his distance from the pits. Thus the essential feature, 'Luck', without which all one's efforts may be rendered futile, had deserted us and we were out of the race through two trivial details, and still in perfect mechanical condition.

And now in the early morning, chilly and misty, the race had resolved itself into a contest between the two large Lorraines, the Chassagne-Davis Sunbeam, and the two little Chenard-Walckers. Was it possible for the larger cars to cover the greater distance required by the handicap than these two Heath-



Robinson, beetle-backed affairs with one thousand million bees under their bonnet, that appeared to be screaming round the circuit with extreme regularity and phenomenal speed? No, they must crack, no engine could stand these revs indefinitely; one listened in vain for any faltering in their exhaust note. The Diattos, too, were running with extreme regularity, although not quite fast enough to be up with the leaders. The one and only American car, the Chrysler, was also, although rather slow, putting in some very steady work.

As the closing stages approached, it appeared obvious that, apart from accidents, the little Chenards must win the formula prizes, the only question being whether the Sunbeam could wrest first place for the greatest distance from the Lorraine, driven by Gérard de Courcelles and André Rossignol, and also keep ahead of the other Lorraine, which was less than a lap behind. At 16:00hrs the position was unchanged, and the Sunbeam had to acknowledge defeat, only the Lorraine-Dietrich, by approximately 45 miles, beating the other Lorraine into third by about eight miles.

And so the end of a very fine contest, amongst much hand-shakings, embracings and bouquets, all weary, spectators, drivers and mechanics alike, some happy and some not, but with a grim determination to try again, and with, perhaps, more success in captivating that fickle jade, "Good Luck."

Before leaving the subject, let us tender our sincere thanks to the organisers and officials of the race for their courtesy, assistance and fairness, and our heartiest congratulations for the admirable way in which the whole affair was run. Also, from the spectators' point of view, everything was admirable; food and drink of all varieties being available in quantities, counter-attractions in the shape of dancing and boxing bouts throughout the night for those who should temporarily weary of the race.

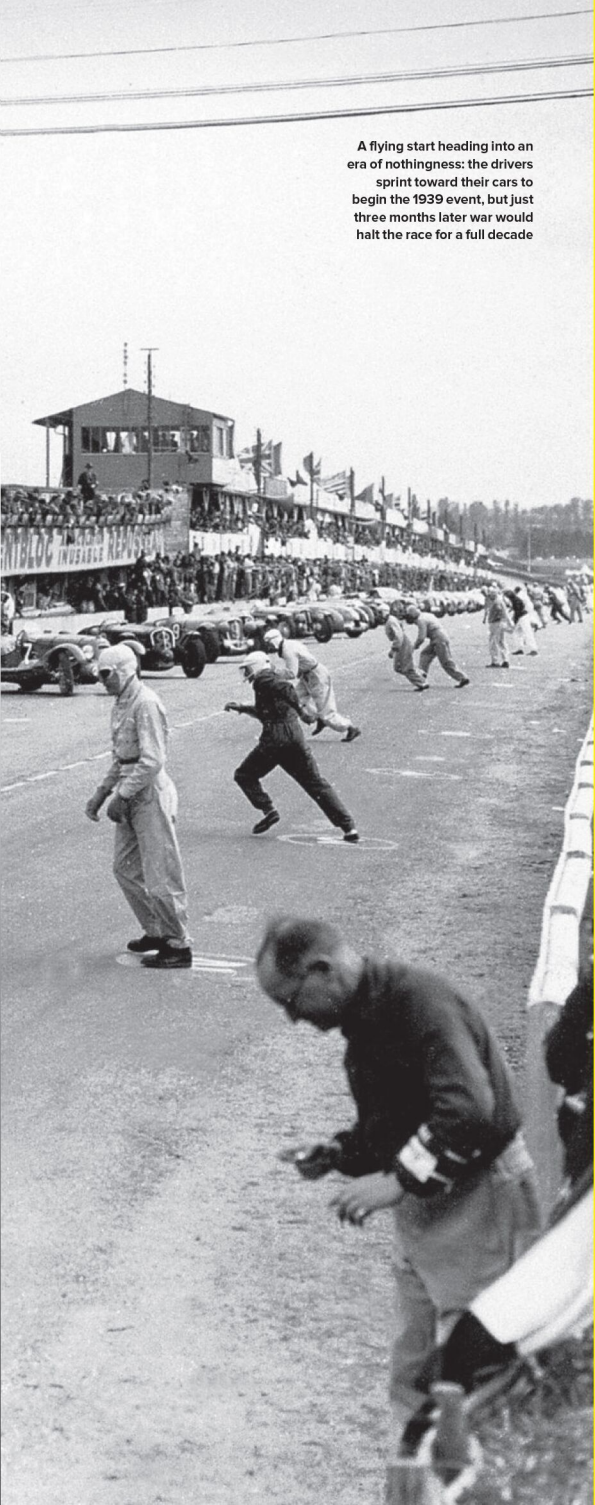
The moral for the next time is that we require a compromise between the tortoise and the hare for a race of this character, it being useless to save 10 seconds a lap, if by doing so one is going to lose an hour after 30 or 40 laps for mechanical repairs. Last, we owe thanks to the weather, for not a single spot of rain fell during the whole period occupied by practice or the race.



CHAPTER TWO

1930s & '40s

*A RAPID ADVANCE,
BEFORE THE WORLD
STOOD STILL*



A flying start heading into an era of nothingness: the drivers sprint toward their cars to begin the 1939 event, but just three months later war would halt the race for a full decade

The Wall Street Crash of 1929 loosened the British grip. Bentley won again in 1930 - beating a small field of 17, including a hugely powerful Mercedes-Benz driven by Rudi Caracciola - but Barnato announced his retirement after this incredible third from three, and the company found itself in receivership by 1931. British drivers continued to be a force at Sarthe, and British cars flooded the smaller-capacity ranks, but now it was the turn of Alfa males and groundbreaking women to star.

Odetta Siko had stolen much of the Bentley Boys' last rumble of thunder by finishing seventh in a Bugatti shared with Marguerite Mareuse - and her class-winning fourth overall of 1932 in an Alfa remains the best for a female driver. Although she would never return following an injurious crash in 1933, a record 10 women started in 1935; and a record seven finished.

Lagonda's surprise victory that year ended Alfa Romeo's sequence. Earl Howe and "Tim" Birkin had gained the first of four for the Italian marque's fabulous supercharged 8C model - fast and efficient - and received telegrams of congrats from Mussolini. Local hero Raymond Sommer notched its second and third wins - the latter alongside the great Tazio Nuvolari - and Paris-based Italian Luigi Chinetti its second and fourth, having come within 400 metres and some chewing gum (used to stem his rival's leaking fuel tank) of denying Nuvolari upon his only visit. Alfa Romeo likely would have made it five from five but for the erroneous pit signal that led Pierre Louis-Dreyfus to believe that he had taken the lead in the closing stages when in fact he had unslapped himself. Handed this reprieve, Luis Fontés, a 22-year-old British son of a Brazilian businessman, coaxed home a seizing Lagonda.

Le Mans had fallen victim to but survived a national strike of 1936 - only for the second world war to close its gates three months after Jean-Pierre Wimille had confirmed a French Renaissance with a second win for a Bugatti streamliner in three years. Tired of German domination of the single-seater scene, the Automobile Club de France had in 1936 rewritten the rules of sports car-cum-grand prix racing to suit homegrown machinery: two-seaters (without doors if so wished) powered by naturally aspirated engines of up to four litres. The ACO followed suit. Thus Le Mans and the Grand Prix de l'ACF of 1937, held just a fortnight apart, ran to the same regulations: Bugatti - breaking the 2000-mile barrier in the process - and Talbot shared the wins. Delahaye was another beneficiary from home advantage, scoring a 1-2-4 in 1938.

War's outbreak drew a veil over a circuit that had in 1932 adopted the 8.4-mile layout - a section comprising Dunlop Curve, The Esses and Tertre Rouge bypassing the suburb of Pontlieue in its entirety - that would see out the century. And the vast concrete pits and restaurant adjacent to enlarged grandstands built in 1934 would be damaged during hostilities but prove sufficiently sturdy as to be salvageable. The race returned in 1949 when a 47-year-old Chinetti drove for more than 22 hours to give Ferrari the first of its nine wins in 16 years. It assured the firm's long-term existence.

1930s & '40s

CAR TO REMEMBER

Alfa Romeo 8C 2300

Some cars win with slogging reliability, others through clean-sheet thinking that alters the sport's course. By winning four Le Mans races in succession, Alfa Romeo's 8C 2300 put paid to Bentley's bigger is better approach, swapping over-engineering for design economy and proving that racing really can improve the breed.

Creator Vittorio Jano infused lessons from his P2 grand prix cars into the 6C 1750, which entered the 1930s garlanded with race victories and made a perfect springboard for its thoroughbred nephew - the 8C 2300. Designed to comply with the 1931 GP regs, the 2300 boasted twin-cam supercharged power with blower and camshaft gear-driven from the middle of the crank, exotic alloys, a robust four-speed gearbox and a chassis that was slender but strong. Remember that GPs of this era could be as much as a 10-hour grind... "A jewel of an engine," says Paul Grist, racer and restorer of these eight-cylinder gems. "You'd had those heavy, long-stroke Bentleys and then Alfa builds this small, light, supercharged car - it was the way forward. The engineering is wonderful - industrial art - and the motor is totally reliable. They're a delight to drive, with lovely steering, and they won everything from Le Mans to grands prix. Jano was responsible for the entire car - an amazing designer." As well as racing, Jano led all road car, bus and truck design, plus Alfa's aero engine.



Tyre woes led to a lowly eighth for the 2.3 in the 1931 Mille Miglia, denting Jano's run of every new model winning on its debut, but Nuvolari's victories in the Targa Florio and Italian GP confirmed this was no highly-strung racehorse but a rapid, versatile base for road and track alike. It was sold to wealthy customers too, notably Earl Howe, who entered his new long-chassis example in '31. He and Birkin smashed Bentley's distance record to win. After this, win followed win, with squadrons of 2.3s collecting more than 50 victories in grands prix, endurance classics, hillclimbs and sprints of every sort.

Alfa's works team pulled out of racing for 1933, but the 8C went on winning. Nuvolari/Raymond Sommer headed an Alfa 1-2-3 at Le Mans, while Chinetti/Étancelin made it four in '34. "They were in standard spec, but ran like watches," says Grist.

In 1938 Alfa looked set to match Bentley's five Sarthe wins, until the leading 2900B coupé destroyed a tyre and dropped a valve. Its engine? A scion of Jano's remarkable 8C. No wonder Enzo Ferrari said he'd learned everything from Alfa Romeo.

STARS OF THE DECADE



Luigi Chinetti

His wins spanned 17 years, but it was in Alfias in the '30s that he made his mark. Chinetti's North American Racing Team won in 1965 with Masten Gregory and Jochen Rindt at the wheel.



Raymond Sommer

Succeeded André Rossignol as France's Le Mans hero, winning in 1932/33. In the first of those he drove for 20 hours after Chinetti was ill. Led most of his races, despite favouring privately entered cars.



Tazio Nuvolari

The Flying Mantuan won with Sommer in 1933, after one of the race's closest finishes. Their Alfa was less than 400m ahead of team-mates Chinetti and Philippe de Gunsburg.



Jean-Pierre Wimille

Yet another French winner, with Bugatti's T57 'Tank' in both 1937 and '39, just months later war broke out. During the conflict he headed to the UK and joined the Special Operations Executive.

THE WINNERS

1930

BENTLEY SPEED SIX

Woolf Barnato/Glen Kidston
2931km

First female entrants Marguerite Mareuse and Odette Siko finish seventh in a Bugatti Type 40

1931

ALFA ROMEO 8C 2300 LM

Lord Howe/Henry Birkin
3018km

1932

ALFA ROMEO 8C 2300 LM

Raymond Sommer/Luigi Chinetti
3254km

Tertre Rouge section created. Sommer drives for 20 hours

1933

ALFA ROMEO 8C 2300 LM

Raymond Sommer/Tazio Nuvolari
3144km

Won by just 400 metres from Luigi Chinetti/Philippe de Gunsburg

1934

ALFA ROMEO 8C 2300

Luigi Chinetti/Philippe Étancelin
2887km

1935

LAGONDA M45R RAPIDE

Johnny Hindmarsh/Luis Fontés
3007km

1936

Race cancelled due to strikes

1937

BUGATTI TYPE 57G TANK

Jean-Pierre Wimille/Robert Benoist
3288km

1938

DELAHAYE 135CS

Eugène Chaboud/Jean Trémoulet
3181km

1939

BUGATTI TYPE 57C TANK

Jean-Pierre Wimille/Pierre Veyron
3355km

Leading crew receives 1000-franc bonus at the end of each hour

1940-1948

No races because of WWII

1949

FERRARI 166MM

Lord Selsdon/Luigi Chinetti
3178km

Ferrari's first win. Deletréz 4.4 becomes first diesel entry

RICHARD MILLE

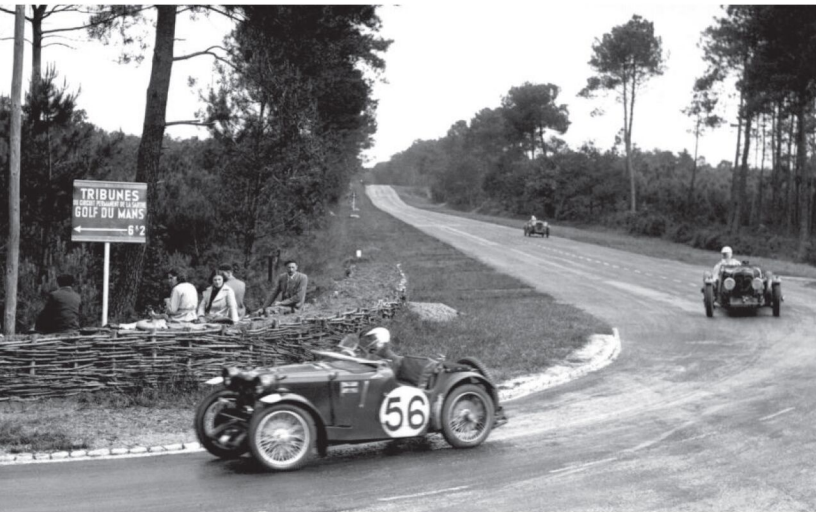


RM 65-01

Skeletonised automatic winding calibre
60-hour power reserve (±10%)
Baseplate and bridges in grade 5 titanium
50th-seconds chronograph
Function selector and rapid winding mechanism
Variable-geometry rotor
Case in 5N red gold and Carbon TPT®

A Racing Machine On The Wrist

When Bentley bowed out with crippled finances, Birkin kept winning, this time with an Alfa Romeo alongside Earl Howe in 1931



Left: Female drivers enjoyed perhaps their greatest era at Le Mans in the 1930s, with a record 10 starting the 1935 event. This is the MG Midget PA of Australian Joan Richmond and Briton Eveline Gordon-Simpson

RICHARD MILLE



RM 65-01

Skeletonised automatic winding calibre
60-hour power reserve (±10%)
Baseplate and bridges in grade 5 titanium
Split-seconds chronograph
Function selector and rapid winding mechanism
Variable-geometry rotor
Case in 5N red gold and Carbon TPT®

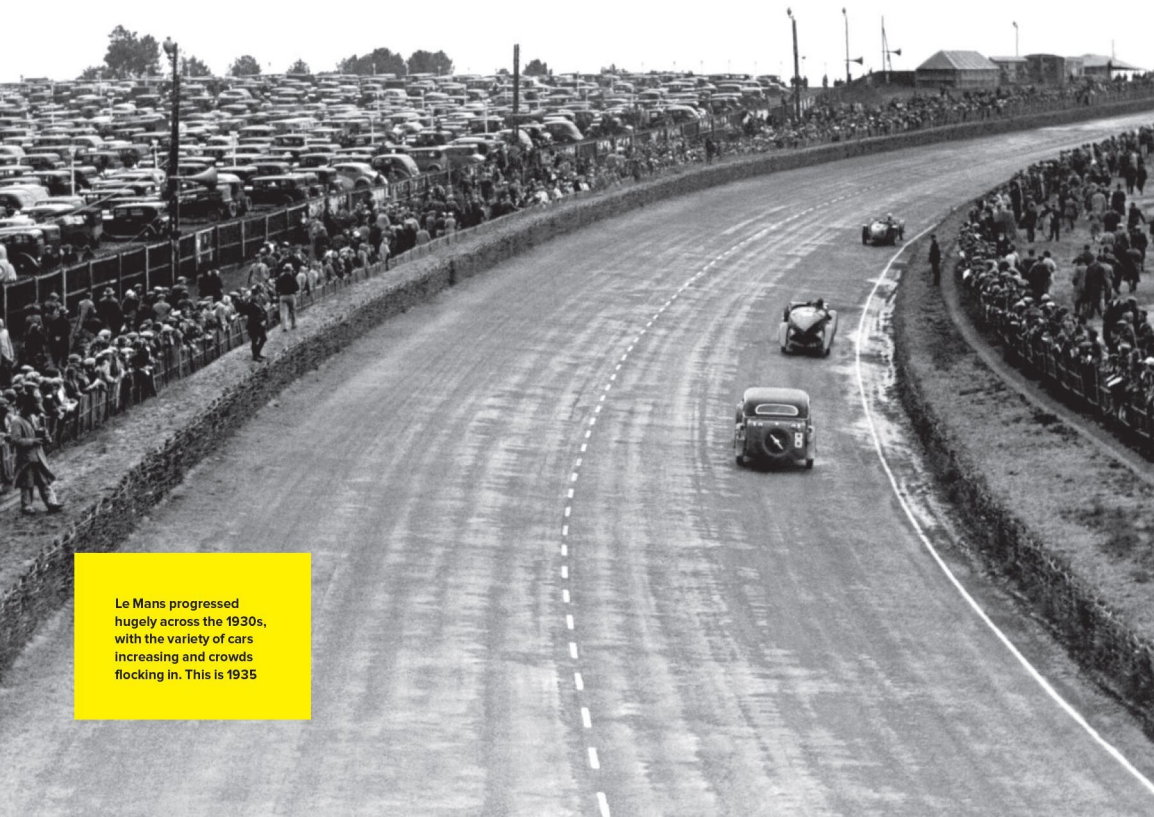
A Racing Machine On The Wrist



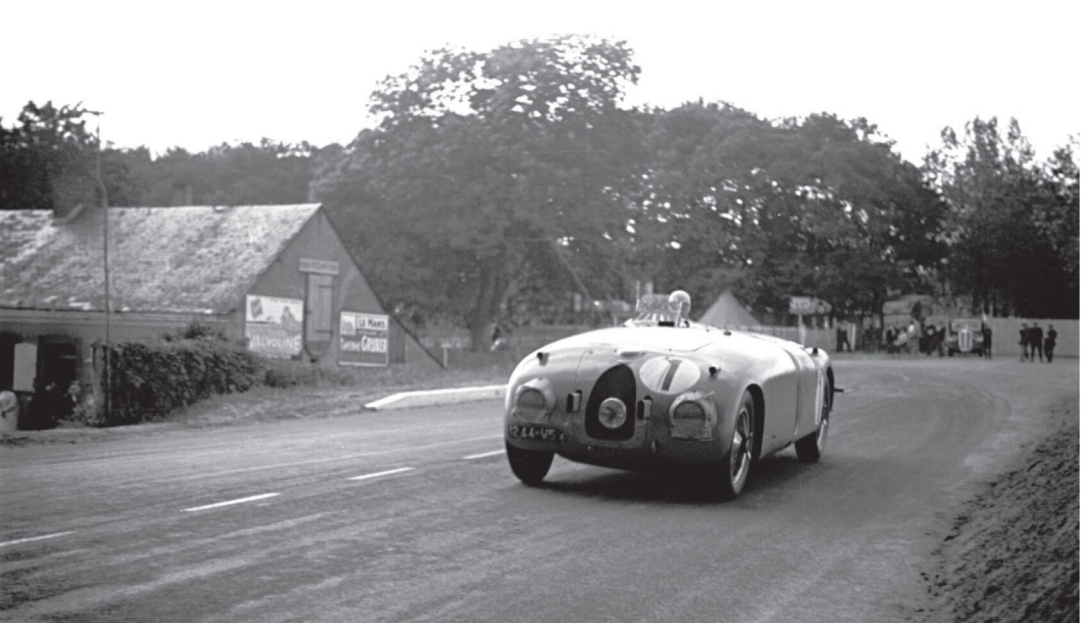
Left: Le Mans' first commentator, Edmond Dehorter, checks his notes in 1932, his second year in the job. The race has only had eight official commentators, and the current one, Bruno Vandestick, has been in service since 1993

Right: The Bugatti Type 57S 'Tank' driven by Jean-Pierre Wimille and Pierre Veyron heads out of Tertre Rouge and down Mulsanne in 1939. Little did they know theirs would be the last victory moment at Le Mans for 10 years

Bottom right: Gwenda Stewart was part of the small Derby team, sharing an L8 with Charles Worth. They dropped out after 10 hours with engine failure



Le Mans progressed hugely across the 1930s, with the variety of cars increasing and crowds flocking in. This is 1935



FROM THE ARCHIVE

It may have taken a full decade and immense manpower to get the race back on, but the return of the Le Mans 24 Hours brought plenty of incident, and we were there...

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN *MOTOR SPORT*, JULY 1949

Before the war Le Mans was a household word in British motor racing circles, as well it might be, with British cars winning this gruelling 24-hour sports car race outright on six occasions. The Germans did much damage to the famous circuit during the war and only this year has the Automobile Club de l'Ouest been able to revive this classic of sports car classics.

As soon as it was announced that the race would be held entries began to pour in, and the list closed at 52, of which 15 hailed from this country, 33 from France, one from Italy, two from Czechoslovakia, and one from Belgium. Apart from those racing to qualify for next year's event, there were three distinct races: the *Grand Prix d'Endurance*, divided into the usual capacity classes and a mere matter of going as far as possible in the 24 hours between 4pm on June 25 and 4pm on June 26; the Biennial Rudge-Whitworth Cup race, for which the entrant has to qualify the first year by his car finishing (in this case in the 1939 race), and then contests the car afresh the next year; and the Annual Cup race, decided on a formula based on mileage covered balanced against engine size.

In 1939, the last year until last month that the race was run, Wimille and Veyron's 3.3-litre Type 57SC Bugatti won outright at 86.35mph, Gordini and Scaron's FIAT taking the Biennial Cup. The lap record stood to the credit of Robert Mazaud's 3.6-litre Delahaye, at 96.7mph.

The course measures 8.68 miles (14 kilometres) and skirts the town of Le Mans. From the pits and tribunals the course runs towards the right-angle at Trete Rouge, along the main Le Mans - Tours road, curving right-handed into Mulsanne straight, past the Café de l'Hippodrome to Mulsanne corner. So drivers come to the left-handed corner at Arnage, near the aerodrome where British visitors land, and then the road twists and wriggles to the notorious White House corner and so back to the start.

As usual the races are strictly for sports cars, but this time bona fide 'prototypes' were allowed to race with the catalogued models, as the organisers did not wish to hamper post-war developments. The usual regulations that so make the atmosphere of this great race were enforced. Repairs could only be carried out with the aid of spares and tools carried in the cars and then only by one assistant besides the driver. Fuel tanks were sealed and refuelling permitted only after 25 laps had elapsed since the start or a previous refuel, calling

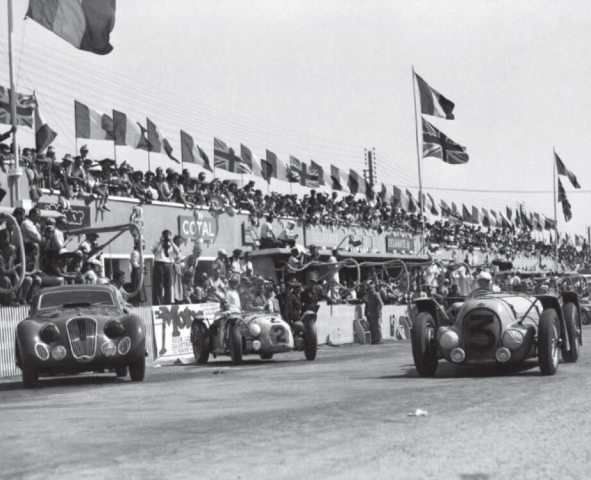
for a range of 210 miles. Proper precautions were called for to ensure that headlamps wouldn't extinguish themselves as one motored at full lick through the short (but inky) summer night. And so on and so forth - so that the atmosphere was almost that of the great days of our Bentley triumphs.

From an early hour people streamed to Le Mans, where the atmosphere is quite unique. Gay flags floated in the breeze above the roof balcony of the magnificent new concrete pits and, opposite, vast concrete stands accommodated keen and critical crowds such as only France can produce. The sun shone from a torrid sky, so that the tar became sticky on the roads and the coloured equipage vans behind the pits glistened colourfully in the strong light, while, behind, the green of the woods and fields formed a backcloth to the memorable scene. With the crowds picnicking all around the course, the loud bands, the scantily-garbed girls in the depots, and aircraft arriving at Le Mans airfield, all the ingredients of a first-class Continental motor-race were present in full measure.

Safety arrangements were excellent, with a sand-wall and fence before the tribunals and fencing and barbed-wire at the corners. The whole tribune area was well-policed and Pressmen were handsomely looked after in their lofty and extensive Press stand, where they sat at school-desks and received food boxes and wine tickets at generous intervals. Walking along the rows of competing cars we noted that Grignard's Delahaye had a headrest and cowled-in radiator, and the names of its drivers on the scuttle, while Villeneuve (Delahaye) was one of those who co-opted Robert Bosch, to see where he was, at night. Rosier's Talbot had double cushions as a back-rest, a small flat headrest and its spare wheel horizontal in the tail. The Ecurie France Talbot had a 16-coil cooler protruding from its scuttle, a power bulge along the off-side of the bonnet and small, but quick-action, fillers. The Delage cars had gin 'funnels' to facilitate pouring oil into their valve-cover oil fillers. Culpán sported an RAF roundel on his Frazer Nash, which had a fabric cover over the spare wheel. Eggen's Alvis was an all-enclosed two-seater with vast boot, and Hay's Bentley saloon had the fuel tank behind the rear seat, a filler protruding from each panel of the rear window, a thermos clipped to the rear of the front passenger's seat, and 6.50-19 Dunlop racing tyres on its spatted rear wheels. A mechanic was adjusting its tappets.

A hush fell as the drivers lined up opposite their cars and Charles Faroux instructed the timekeeper to raise the tricolour. As it swept down the line of men broke and, in what seemed





Left: A return to normality, the 1949 Le Mans 24 Hours roars away after a decade of silence

Below: Peter Mitchell-Thomson and Luigi Chinetti. Chinetti drove for 22 hours as Lord Selsdon was unwell, something many believe was self-inflicted over race week



a moment, Chaboud's Delahaye, a vicious two-seater with vast aerodynamic wings, swept off in the lead, followed by Paul Vallée's Talbot, which overtook Hay's Rolls-Bentley as it got away. Next came Rosier (Talbot), Grignard (Delahaye), Vuillet's Delage, Johnson in the 2-litre Aston-Martin, Chinetti's Ferrari, Dreyfus' Ferrari, and Leblanc's Delahaye. Slow to move off were Villeneuve's Delahaye and Walker's Delahaye driven by Tony Rolt. Hémard had to ease his Monopole out to clear Flahault's stationary Delahaye, while the Singer and Fairman's HRG were very hesitant and poor Jack Bartlett in the Healey saloon didn't get off until the car had been rocked to unglue the starter and then pushed, some three minutes being lost thereby.

After a while the pack came winding downhill to pass the tribunes at the end of lap one, and the order was: Chaboud (Delahaye), comfortably ahead of Rosier (Talbot), then a vast gap before Vallée (Talbot), Grignard (Delahaye), Johnson (2 1/2-litre Aston-Martin), Vuillet (Delage), Dreyfus (Ferrari), Chinetti (Ferrari), Louveau (Delage), Rolt (Delahaye), Villeneuve (Delahaye), Culpan (Frazer Nash) and the rest.

Another lap and Dreyfus was fourth, with Chinetti in the other Ferrari coming up to pass Vallée's Talbot. After three laps the leaders were Chaboud, Rosier and Grignard, while Dreyfus had dropped back behind Chinetti and Vallée. Then came a minor excitement, for Chaboud was seen to have damaged his off-side rear wing, which was tilted at a queer angle. Some time later Rosier had a lengthy stop, then Peter Clark passed the pits with his helmet off and the HRG did not reappear – the cooling radiator was *hors de combat*, the header-tank connection having pulled away.

— AT 6PM THE LEADERS WERE —

1st: Chaboud (Delahaye), 22 laps, 1hr 59min 59.7sec
 2nd: Flahault (Delahaye), 21 laps, 1hr 56min 32.2sec
 3rd: Chinetti (Ferrari), 21 laps, 1hr 58min 34.1sec

At 8pm the order was still Delahaye, Delahaye, Ferrari. At 8pm Grignard's Delage ran out of fuel just short of its pit and the driver was deservedly clapped as he pushed the car the remaining distance – French crowds are like that. Calmly he grabbed the chock to place beneath a rear wheel, before refuelling. Alas, 14 minutes were lost before petrol could be got through to the carburetters. No time was wasted when Pozzi relieved Chaboud of the leading Delahaye.

The situation now became dramatic, as race situations will. Chinetti lost 7.5 minutes at his pit, resuming just as the other Ferrari appeared in sight, and at the same time Flahault's Delahaye commenced a series of pitstops, the engine reluctant to restart, so that 43.5 minutes were lost, the symptoms suggesting slipped timing. And, as if that wasn't enough, Pozzi in the leading Delahaye caught fire at Mulsanne, and it must have been half-an-hour before, amid a feverish ovation, he coaxed his stricken car to the pits, in the dusk sans lights! Then Dreyfus came in to refuel, overshot his depot, jumped out, and nimbly rolled his car back.

— AT 9PM THE POSITIONS WERE —

1st: Dreyfus (Ferrari), 52 laps, 4hr 50min 27.3sec (87.4mph)
2nd: Flahault/Simon (Delahaye), 51 laps, 4hr 45min 49.0sec
3rd: Chinetti (Ferrari), 51 laps, 4hr 59min 22.3sec

The Healey had another brief stop about this time, the Chaboud/Pozzi Delahaye got going again after 11 minutes, but came in a lap later with the bonnet open on the off side, and went off again, only to disappear for an appreciable time 'out in the country.' The Flahault Delahaye was also in dire trouble, and then the loudspeakers – which were in efficient action almost without cessation throughout the 24 hours – told us that Dreyfus had overturned, without injury, at White House corner. It was just getting dark and this may have resulted in a misjudgement as he went to overtake a larger car. The whole aspect of the race naturally changed, Paul Vallée's Talbot now leading Veuillet's Delage, with Selsdon's Ferrari, Chinetti driving, pressing them hard.

— AT 10PM THE POSITIONS WERE —

1st: Vallée/Maireisse (Talbot), 61 laps, 5hr 50min 10.2sec (84.13 mph)
2nd: Selsdon (Ferrari), 61 laps, 5hr 50min 25.7sec
3rd: Veuillet/Mouche (Delage), 60 laps, 5hr 56min 57.5sec

By 3am Gérard's Delage was second to Louveau's, having caught the Frazer Nash, while Selsdon led. Louveau was being regularly signalled by a torch shining on a number board. At 4am the Ferrari had a three-lap lead and the Maréchal/Mathieson Aston-Martin was fifth, three laps behind the Frazer Nash. A 'to let' sign had now appeared before Rolt's pit, where they had packed up and gone.

The crowd on the balcony clapped – at 4.26am! – as Selsdon took over the leading Ferrari from Chinetti, who had driven the car continuously up to this point. The engine fired after the starter had spun for what seemed an age. The Bouchard Delahaye resumed its repeated pit-calls, but loud claps greeted the refuelling of the Flahault/Simon Delahaye, now fully recovered, but back to 11th place. Grignard's Delahaye was reluctant to restart and more than one man worked on it.





Left: Eugène Chaboud aboard the Delahaye he shared with Charles Pozzi. A winner in 1938, he would fail to finish any of his three post-war entries at Le Mans

Middle: Luigi Chinetti guides his Ferrari 166MM through Tertre Rouge on the way to a very important win

Bottom: The Delahaye 135CS of Jean Brault and Henry Leblanc gets a top-up in the pits



— AT 6AM THE POSITIONS WERE —

1st: Selsdon/Chinetti (Ferrari), 139 laps, 83.4mph

2nd: Louveau/lover (Delage), 137 laps

3rd: Gérard/Godia-Fales (Delage), 137 laps

Moreover, the Delage was catching the Ferrari at the rate of about 6.5sec a lap, and Louveau passed just as Selsdon had another brief stop. The Frazer Nash was now fourth and the Chaboud Delahaye fifth. Incidentally, as the sun's warmth returned again, at 6.45am, 27 cars were still running.

The Gérard Delage came in for fuel, shock-absorber adjustment and change of driver at 7.30am, but was away in 2.5 minutes. Chaboud was a visitor shortly afterwards, the spectators again clapping a very gallant drive following early adversity; the radiator tended to steam as he motored off. Next, much smoke when Bouchard's Delahaye came in with its near-side rear brake on fire. At 7am the Ferrari had done 149 laps to Louveau's 148, Gerard was also on his 148th, the Frazer Nash on its 144th, but the unlucky Chaboud Delahaye had done only 140. With the return of daylight the race average had leapt up to nearly 90mph.

So the race went on, with routine pit-stops and some having no semblance of routine. The slower cars that had not done their qualifying distance were flagged-off, Phillips' MG receiving the black flag. Momentarily, a larger car was baulked by Mahé's amazing little saloon Simca, but the latter drew away from its rival round the curve beyond the pits, and the Ferrari swerved and skidded in avoiding Morel's Talbot saloon as it drew out of the pit. The unhappy Flahault/Simon Delahaye, which had received such a brisk reception from the crowd, was pushed to the dead car park at 10.44am.

Cue drama! Louveau brought the Delage in in dire trouble, but went on. Shortly afterwards Chinetti was stationary at

his pit, with Louveau in again. On his first stop the plugs had been replaced, water added, and the rear wheels changed, so we knew, now, that something more serious was amiss. The work was good, calm, but half-an-hour was lost while extensive work was done on the engine, concluding with more new plugs – as with Gérard's Delage, too much oil seemed to be getting “upstairs”.

The Ferrari left first, but it, too, lost much time, work apparently being done on the front of the chassis, necessitating attempted removal of a headlamp. Meanwhile, the Frazer Nash motored nearer to victory. It certainly wasn't Delage's day, for soon after those intense moments involving Louveau and Chinetti, Veuillet had a short stop – for a moment no one saw him come in, in the concentration on Louveau's car – which produced much Gallic shouting!

Chinetti now began to make occasional stops at his pit, presumably because he had such an excellent lead. Louveau remained second, in spite of another stop, but the Frazer Nash, apart from slowing for a while due to a fuel vapour-lock, was going well, needing no water, although for much of the time Aldington drove, because the clutch refused to free, so that clutchless gear-changes were essential. Even this trouble finally rectified itself, and this new British car remained a splendid third.

Alas, just as we hoped to see Maréchal press for this third place, it was reported at 1.05pm that the Aston-Martin saloon had overturned at White House Corner, Pierre being seriously hurt [*he would succumb to his injuries the next day*]. His brakes had, it seems, been absent for many laps.

Claps greeted another pit departure, on the part of the Delage, but the leader's position held without change – Ferrari, Delage, Frazer Nash. Hot cars came in and were reluctant to restart, but still the order held. Grignard's Delahaye, in particular, consumed vast quantities of both time and amps, oil as well as smoke began to appear from Gérard's Delage, and Veuillet's Delage stopped frequently, while Bouchard had clouded a hazard with the off-side front of his car. Yet bravely the men struggled to keep the cars going, and the onlookers – now 200,000 strong – showed knowledgeable approval, as they pressed closer to the rails in anticipation of the arrival of the President of the Republic. He came in a fine Renault escorted by many transverse-twin motor-bicycles and a fwd Citroën, to honour the first post-war Le Mans.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, this great race ended, Chinetti victor for Italy in Lord Selsdon's 2-litre V12 Ferrari. The Louveau Delage was second, in spite of many setbacks, while Aldington and Culpan very creditably brought the 'High Speed' Frazer Nash 'Competition' two-seater home third. The Talbot saloon finished fourth, frantically waved down on its last laps and missing from the *parade d'honneur*, and Gérard's Delage struggled into fifth position. The Thompson/Fairman H.R.G. won the 1.5-litre class for Britain.





CHAPTER THREE

1950s

JAGUARS AND PRANCING HORSES AMID TRAGEDY

Jaguar boss William Lyons learned lessons in 1950 with a near-standard XK120S and the following year came up with a much lighter and tauter, moderately more powerful Competition version, wrapped in aerodynamicist Malcolm Sayer's handsome, slippery body. It won in 1951 and - by then equipped with disc brakes - finished 1-2-4 in 1953.

The French were not yet sidelined. Louis Rosier changed a rocker-shaft on his Talbot-Lago, then handed over briefly to his son so that he might devour a brace of bananas before resuming his epic victory drive of 1951. In 1952, Talbot-Lago now wearing enveloping bodywork demanded by regulation, Pierre 'Levegh' came within 70 minutes of a solo success; the 47-year-old had been unwilling to cede due to worrying engine

vibrations and a malfunctioning rev-counter. Even in the euphoria of Germany's maiden victory, Mercedes-Benz was acutely aware of the moral victory, its high ground and attendant politics.

The jewel of the new World Sports Car Championship attracted more than 20 makes in 1953 - despite Merc's absence. Fewer committed in 1954, but a thrilling showdown between science and strength - Jaguar's svelte D-type versus Ferrari's brutish 375 Plus - played out in a Wagnerian thunderstorm, and caught the public's imagination.

The enclosures would be packed in 1955, but Le Mans' greatest tragedy would strike when more than 80 were killed and twice as many injured when the Mercedes-Benz of Levegh was launched over the embankment opposite the pits.



The Le Mans pits in 1950. The privately entered Bentley of H.S.F Hay gets some attention

The race wasn't stopped as the organisers feared blocked roads would hinder rescue efforts, and Jaguar refused Mercedes-Benz's night-time offer of joint withdrawal - but in truth the sport's existence was under threat long before a drawn-and-haggard Mike Hawthorn and co-driver Ivor Bueb completed a pyrrhic victory.

Yet 100,000 crammed into new grandstands opposite new multi-storey pits in 1956. The latter were unprotected still, but the start-finish area had been widened to accommodate a deceleration lane, the pinching kink on its approach removed. The race had been saved - even if that meant running to regulations causing temporary exclusion from the world championship: a recurring theme of the organisers' future power struggles.

Edinburgh's Ecurie Ecosse saved Jaguar's bacon that year and, with more support in the absence of a works team, it registered a 1-2 in 1957 as D-types were five of the top six.

Though Ferrari emerged victorious through the heavy rain and thick fog of 1958, Aston Martin ended its long wait in 1959: 31 years after its debut, having contested every race since 1932. Winning co-driver Carroll Shelby battled dysentery throughout and raced with a nitroglycerine capsule secreted under his tongue because of a heart condition.

The Yanks were coming, chief among them being Briggs Cunningham - Yale man, America's Cup yachtsman, Olympic bobsledder, team owner/driver - and then there was the understated and intelligent Phil Hill, America's first winner as of 1958 and with two more in the tank for Ferrari.

1950s

CAR TO REMEMBER

Jaguar D-type

You can see it in the drawings: slice a D-type in half either way and you'll get an ellipse. During WWII Jaguar built bomber wings, and it's hard not to connect those streamlined, skinned-alloy structures with Malcolm Sayer's sleek D-type. If you're determined to retain your grip on Le Mans and you don't have the resources for a new engine, you have only two avenues: cut weight and slash drag. Aiming for both, Sayer's incremental 'test, refine, test again' methods steadily homed in on the taut curves we know as the greatest Fifties Le Mans car - a device that would bring another three wins to Browns Lane.

When Sayer and engineering wizard Bill Heynes discussed options in late '53 - for a 1954 entry! - they chose a folded, riveted and welded centre section. It's a semi-monocoque: a front 'subframe' carrying engine and wishbones runs back inside the tub for confidence. But the rear suspension (trailing arms and torsion bars like the C) hangs directly on the rear bulkhead while body, tank and spare wheel are cantilevered from it, too. Result - rigidity, small cross-section (vital for drag) and a smooth underbelly.

"It's a toolroom car," says David Morris, restorer and racer whose family for many years owned OKV3, one of the 1954 Le Mans team cars. "It's superbly put together and with a good driver it's virtually unbreakable. To me the original 3.4 is the sweeter engine but of course the 3.8 has the sheer power."



Dry-sumping the engine kept the front view compact and the cooling opening small, helping the D to an impressive 170mph. Using his aircraft experience Sayer added a head fairing and that famous tailfin, so drivers found the D stable as well as fast, though buffeting on the '54 cars led to the wraparound screen. David Morris's father Martin set a record with OKV3: "He was officially timed at Le Mans at 187mph, and as far as I know that's the highest for a D. And he said the fin really did work. Even at those speeds the car ran straight. It's comfortable, too, which matters over 24 hours."

And while 1954 brought a near miss at Le Mans, Hamilton and Rolt finishing less than a lap behind Ferrari's winner, and 1955 proved a hollow victory after the awful accident, there was no doubt about the next two, which fell to Ecurie Ecosse. Having withdrawn from racing at the end of '56, Jaguar still garnered benefits from cars sold to privateers. Sophisticated in conception, the D was simple to run and a delight to drive, and if not for new capacity limits kyboshing its competitiveness it might have pushed its Le Mans score up even higher. As if that voluptuous form needed mere results to glorify it.

STARS OF THE DECADE



Tony Rolt

He was never far from the front during the early 1950s, winning Le Mans in 1953. Rolt retired from racing two years later to go and work on developing four-wheel-drive technology.



Duncan Hamilton

Larger-than-life Hamilton was a familiar figure in the '50s with Jaguar's works team. He shared Rolt's win in 1953 and came close the year after too, but mechanical trouble plagued him at Le Mans.



Ivor Bueb

Twice a winner in Jaguar D-types, with Mike Hawthorn in 1955 and Ron Flockhart in '57. His very first stint in the car came right after the pitstop confusion that triggered the 1955 tragedy.



Stirling Moss

'The Boy' never won the race, but was leading with Fangio when Mercedes pulled out in '55. His speed meant he was always the hare: he recorded two second places and a clutch of DNFS.

THE WINNERS

1950

TALBOT-LAGO T26 GS

Louis Rosier/Jean-Louis Rosier
3465km

Rosier Sr allows son Jean-Louis to drive for only two laps...

1951

JAGUAR XK120C

Peter Walker/Peter Whitehead
3611km

Le Mans debuts for Stirling Moss and Porsche

1952

MERCEDES-BENZ 300SL (W194)

Hermann Lang/Fritz Riess
3734km

Pierre Levegh (Talbot-Lago) drives solo for almost 23hrs. He's leading by four laps when a missed downshift triggers a race-ending crankshaft failure

1953

JAGUAR C-TYPE

Tony Rolt/Duncan Hamilton
4088km

Jaguar wins using disc brakes

1954

FERRARI 375 PLUS

José Froilan Gonzalez/
Maurice Trintignant
4061km

1955

JAGUAR D-TYPE

Mike Hawthorn/Ivor Bueb
4135km

Forever scarred by the accident that kills Mercedes driver Pierre Levegh and more than 80 spectators. Mercedes totally withdraws from racing at the end of the season

1956

JAGUAR D-TYPE

Ninian Sanderson/Ron Flockhart
4035km

Pit straight widened following the previous year's disaster

1957

JAGUAR D-TYPE

Ron Flockhart/Ivor Bueb
4397km Jaguar takes 1-2-3-4

1958

FERRARI 250 TR58

Olivier Gendebien/Phil Hill
4102km

1959

ASTON MARTIN DBR1/300

Roy Salvadori/Carroll Shelby
4348km

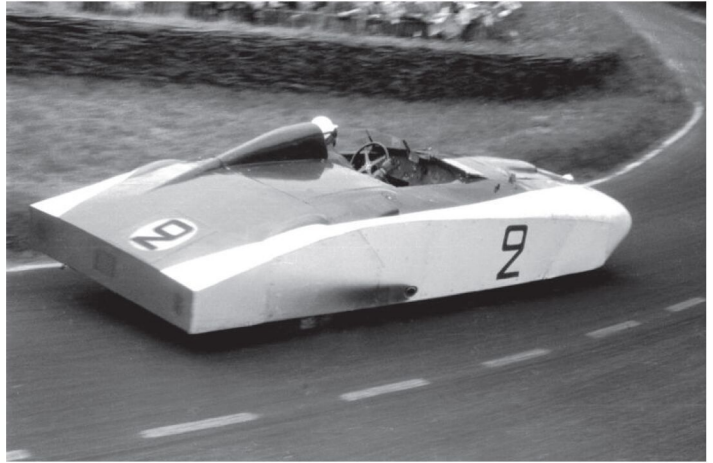


The Ferrari team lined up in the pits ahead of the 1956 race. The trio of 2.5-litre 625LMs would have an eventful race, with the #12 of Olivier Gendebien and Maurice Trintignant being the sole finisher in third

1950s

Right: Le Mans' post-war years brought a fresh influx of American cars and drivers. One of the more distinctive being 'Le Monstre', a Cadillac Spider raced by Phil Walters and Briggs Cunningham in 1950

Below: Duncan Hamilton and Tony Rolt ride aboard their Jaguar C-type after victory in 1953, the first for the Jaguar works team after the success of the privateer XK120C in 1951





Above: The Porsche team 550A Spydery before practice in 1957. On the right participating in an impromptu tug of war is Paul Frère, the Belgian driver-journalist, who would finish fourth with a Jaguar D-type

Right: Mechanics at the 1953 race, reading newspaper reports



Above: The beautiful Zagato-styled Maserati 450S driven by Stirling Moss and Harry Schell in 1957. While it looked great, it didn't perform, retiring with transmission failure after just four hours

Right: It had been a long wait, but Aston Martin finally broke its Le Mans duck in 1959. This is Reg Parnell, David Brown and Carroll Shelby in the pits near the end of that victorious drive in the DBR1



Ferrari's mechanics escort the winning 375 Plus of José Froilán González and Maurice Trintignant down the pits. This would be Ferrari's second outright Le Mans win. It would go on to notch a total of nine victories between 1949-1965



The start of the race in 1955. Leading is the Ferrari 735 LM driven by Umberto Maglioli/Phil Hill, with the Jaguar D-type of Don Beauman/Norman Dewis behind. The Ferrari's clutch failed after seven hours, while the Jag retired after a crash, leaving the #6 sister car of Mike Hawthorn/Ivor Bueb to win





The appalling wreckage of the Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR after the tragedy in 1955. Driver Pierre Levegh and upwards of 80 spectators were killed when the car crashed and debris flew into the public areas

THE TRAGIC ACCIDENT involving so many spectators which happened in the early stages of this year's Le Mans 24 Hours race at La Sarthe calls for a strong and heartfelt expression of sympathy to all those whose relatives and friends were involved. This, the worst disaster by far in the history of motor racing, has touched-off some panic and irresponsible opinions in the daily press, and it is necessary to take a calm and reasoned view. That the race was continued after the accident has been criticised, yet he who ordered it to go on was undoubtedly wise, because a sudden cessation of racing would have concentrated spectators in the crash area, led to greater alarm and despondency, and jammed local roads, apart from spelling, in all probability, the end of Le Mans.

The French Government wisely banned further road-racing until safety precautions had been investigated. That was sensible, but suggestions that all future motor racing should be banned are farcical. Racing survived the calamities of Paris-Madrid, 1903, Brooklands did not close after crashes involving spectators in 1930 and 1938, and Le Mans will outlive this unhappy and terrible affair of 1955. *The Motor* thinks that perhaps now is the time to abandon sports-car racing as at present practised, because it is becoming so fast as to be dangerous.

This is the wrong attitude, surely, because grand prix racing also involves extremely high speeds. These are now being achieved at Le Mans and the problem facing organisers is to render circuits safer for all forms of racing. Reverting to whether or not the race should have been stopped, let us remember that the 1952 Farnborough Air Display was not stopped, nor abandoned on the Sunday, following the accident there which killed 26 spectators, although on that occasion experimental aircraft were diving at

FROM *MOTOR SPORT*, JULY 1955
MATTERS OF MOMENT

The show must go on

MOTOR SPORT'S EDITORIAL ON THE DISASTER



British driver Mike Hawthorn (left) and his team-mate Ivor Bueb (right) secured the win under sombre circumstances

supersonic speeds over the heads of an unprotected crowd. That show goes on and so must motor racing.

As to the race itself, it seems possible that the Fangio/Moss 300SLR Mercedes-Benz would have won had not Mercedes-Benz withdrawn this and the Kling/Simon car after Levegh's accident, because it was well in the lead (by two laps) and running comfortably.

The victory of Hawthorn and Bueb with the latest D-type Jaguar is creditable indeed, from both technical and 'cockpit' aspects. From the technical as here is a car possessing a

decided 'under-bonnet' similarity to the Jaguar MkVII saloon and XK140 sports car, which was used by Hawthorn to break up the opposition (it did this to the big Ferraris), during which it set a phenomenal lap record of 122.39mph, yet which then ran trouble-free to win comfortably at 107.08mph over the 259.4 miles it covered, with the privately-entered D-type Jaguar of Swaters-Claes in third. From the 'cockpit' aspect on account of the magnificent adaptation by Ivor Bueb to this very fast car under highly responsible and unhappily tragic conditions, to which he graduated, with high honour, from nothing bigger than 1100cc experience.

The finest performance of all, however, was that of the three Porsche cars, which were placed fourth, fifth and sixth, behind far larger machines.

The value of Jaguar's third victory (following 1951 and 1953) was emphasised by a sticker reading "Jaguar Wins Again at Le Mans" which appeared on Coventry Jaguar adverts the Monday following the race. The efficiency and reliability of the Haynes-designed 3.5-litre twin-overhead camshaft engine has again been emphasised.

Yet, when all is said and done, Le Mans this year is a race we would prefer to forget. But the Jaguar victory was, we hope, a tiny morsel of consolation to Bill Lyons for the death of his son, J. Michael Lyons, in a crash on the way to the race. To the bereaved through the Austin-Healey/Mercedes-Benz accident go the deep feelings of motor racing followers the world over, with a special thought for the Levegh family. Levegh will be remembered always for his gallant lone attempt to beat Mercedes-Benz in the 1952 race, and it is bitterly ironic that he should have died in one of these cars this year through no fault of his.

In withdrawing its cars as a mark of respect for both the great French driver, and the spectators who perished with him, Mercedes-Benz acted correctly.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

A British breakthrough! Bentley may have ruled the 1920s, but it was Jaguar's turn to put Coventry on top of the world in 1951. The reworked XK120C (or C-type) proved too good for the French to match

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN *MOTOR SPORT*, JULY 1951

A British victory at Le Mans! Thanks to William Lyons for building the new Type "C" XK120 Jaguar, to Peter Walker and Peter Whitehead for driving one to a brilliant victory, and to Stirling Moss for taking the lap record in another of these Jaguars in the early stages of the world's most important sports-car race and thus breaking up the Talbot opposition, this came true in the year's race.

The winning Jaguar covered 2,243.9 miles in the two rounds of the clock, a speed of 93.49mph. 3.76mph faster than last year. They finished, to British cheers, nine laps ahead of a 4½-litre Talbot, driven by Meyrat and Mairesse. Moss' 105.1mph lap record beat the 1950 Talbot record by 2.26mph.

— FRIDAY —

The French cannot understand this at all. Traditionally, Le Mans' weather should be blazing sunshine, but today it is overcast and last night it was so wet that few drivers went out to practice. This evening there is a light drizzle, but as the dusk gathers the grandstand enclosure is filling up well with spectators anxious to see the night practise. Most of the cars are out, and among the fast ones, one notices, as they sweep by behind the beams of their headlamps, that the Jaguars are going very well, with a most steady and reassuring hum from the engine. The French Talbots seem to spend most of their time at the pit and there seems to be some unhappiness about their plugs. The very impressive Cunninghams, which we have viewed in their garage at Le Mans (a model of efficiency), are not out this evening. There are so many Ferraris (of various types) that they take some time to sort out, but one or two of them are going very fast.

— SATURDAY —

Noon - It is not just a light drizzle any more, but real hard rain. The course around which we have just motored, with its very smooth surface, is undoubtedly going to be slippery. Do English drivers still mind rain less than the Continentals?

2pm - Everyone in the motoring world is parading up and down in front of the pits now, including several American friends: Charles Lytle, who rather ironically wrote to us some months ago to say that he was never likely to come to

Europe: Alec Ulmann; and Peter Helch, who says it is quite easy to draw, despite the foul weather!

4pm - After all the rain relented; and when the breathless silence descended on a Le Mans start it was dry, even if the skies were grey. Charles Faroux, debonair with his tricolor in hand, gets younger every year. Intolerable silence: the flag drops, and a babel of sound. The Allards, Nos 1 and 2 are well away, then the indecipherable melée of the pack. The 19th *Grand Prix d'Endurance* is on.

4:30pm - Gonzales, in Talbot No. 7, after a brilliant start, was first past the tribunes at the end of the first lap, then Moss in Jaguar No. 22, then Cole in No. 1 Allard. The Cunninghams and the Ferraris are taking things much more steadily at the start. On the third lap, Cole is missing and later comes in with a battered right-hand back wing. Almost simultaneously, Moss goes by Gonzales just past the tribunes and at 4:20 the Jaguar leads.

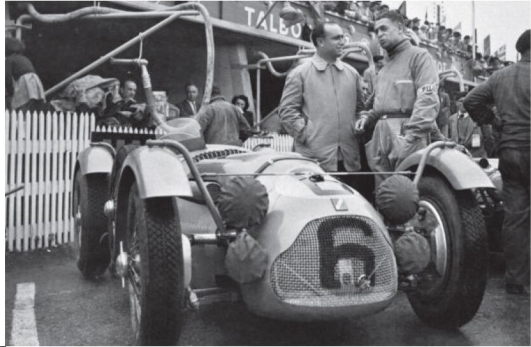
8pm - The Bentleys who put the English green on the map of Le Mans look as if they have some very worthy successors in these Jaguars. No. 23, driven by Biondetti, has got past Gonzalez in the No.7 Talbot, which has just been taken over by Marimon, and two Jaguars are in the first two places. What is more, by my watch, Stirling Moss in the leading car has gone round in 4min 50sec, which means over 104mph! The rain still holds off and the roads are drying nicely. We looked in vain for No. 23 Jaguar and alas! it does not seem to be going to reappear. Leslie Johnson, vainly trying to telephone, is a more dejected man than somewhat. The car is out with no oil pressure, he tells us, and he has not even had a ride back. Moreover, Fangio has now taken over No. 6 Talbot from Rosier, and in the gathering dusk, with a light drizzle falling, has clipped 2sec off Moss' lap record. From the Jaguar point of view, there are rather a lot of these Talbots.

The Cunninghams are going very steadily, but are hardly threatening the leaders. There seems to be a little trouble with their gearboxes, which we have heard of before with American cars. Huntoon, in Briggs Cunningham's own No. 3, comes in soon after dark with a faulty light dipper and complains that "she's sticking a bit on second." "Then leave her in high" says *le patron*. But when Huntoon tries to go off again there does not seem to be much clutch, and he cannot get any gear in. Finally the engine stalls. "Put her in gear," commands Alec Ulmann: "now start your motor." And the

Peters, Walker (middle) and Whitehead (left) seated on their Jaguar XK120C, which produced a dominant display to win by nine laps from the best of the Talbot-Lagos in 1951. The result would begin Jaguar's steamroller of Le Mans in the 1950s



Right: A grand prix car in a dress. Louis Rosier (right) and Juan Manuel Fangio (left) pose near their Talbot Lago. But even this prototype was no match for Jaguar



Below, right: Moss, then just 22, made his first Le Mans start with the Jaguar factory team and proved a star, setting the fastest lap, even though his engine failed him

Below: The joy of an eclectic field. The Renault 4 CV of Jean-Louis Rosier and Jean Estager is chased by the diminutive Cadillac-powered Allard J2 of Peter Reece and Alfred Hitchings



big car goes off on the starter, presumably "in high," till the engine fires. There are virtues as well as vices in these American cars. It has come on to rain in earnest now, and the field is thinning perceptibly.

By 10 o'clock though it was some time before we realised it (the score-board is by now very much behind the times), No. 20 Jaguar, the Peter Walker-Peter Whitehead car, was in second place behind Moss and Fairman's No. 22 and Fangio's No. 6 Talbot had got ahead of his team-mate Marimon in No. 7. Then there was drama in the Talbot pit. Fangio came in to hand over, the car was refuelled, Rosier took his place in the driving seat, pressed the starter and - nothing happened. He tried again; nothing. Tried yet again; the engine turned on and started a carburettor fire, easily blown out by the mechanic. Tried again; nothing. Rosier throws his hands up in despair. The French spectators groan. Rosier tries again; the engine starts and away goes No. 6, after a devastating delay.

The rain continues pitilessly: but a large and devoted crowd still throngs the enclosures to see every moment.

- SUNDAY -

5am - It has been a night of almost continuous rain, but while this has reduced speeds it has not saved the field from heavy casualties. Both the fast Talbots, Nos. 6 and 7, are out, but so is the leader, Moss and Fairman's Jaguar, which, it seems, lost all its oil pressure like Biondetti's and broke something before it could even get to its pit. Two of the Cunninghams have gone, including the one with the transmission trouble, which was not unexpected. Briggs Cunningham's own stopped with something more surprising - a steering column which broke at the base, fortunately at low speed, down near Arnage: but the third car is now in second place. Hall and Navone's Ferrari, after getting up into second place, has apparently used up all its electricity on its lights, and when it stops at its pit, there is none left to restart the engine. Sidney Allard's car arrives in the darkness apparently on fire in a big way, but the second car is still running. The Walker-Whitehead Jaguar still leads, and the Aston Martin team is still complete, with the cars

The Jaguar C-type of Peter Walker and Peter Whitehead passes the crashed Cunningham C-2R of George Rand and Fred Wacker Jr, which hit trouble (and something more solid) in the 11th hour. While none finished, the Cunninghams still impressed in the race



going beautifully, Macklin and Thompson's lying third. With the dawn the rain has stopped, but it is perishing cold for a midsummer morning.

9am - First there was a patch of blue sky, then a gleam of sunshine, and although there is still plenty of cloud about, it is much more like a Le Mans day. Walking down to the S bends in the early morning we saw No. 5 Cunningham abandoned just beyond the Dunlop bridge. It may have gone out with transmission trouble, but it seems to have hit the bank at the side of the road in the process. The Aston Martins are particularly impressive through the bends, but everyone is going much more slowly than yesterday, which, as the Jaguar has a lead of some seven laps, is hardly surprising from its point of view, and it is content to lap at about 95mph.

12:30pm - About an hour ago there was something like consternation in the Cunningham pit, for the one remaining car, which was looking like a certainty for second place, was seriously overdue, and finally came in short of a cylinder, by the sound of it. The driver, it seems, suspected a valve or

piston, and after a stop of nearly an hour all hope of second place has gone, and the car goes off slowly, still on less than eight cylinders, although it has already qualified. This lets Macklin and Thompson's Aston Martin up into second place, but the No. 9 Talbot, driven by Meyrat and Mairesse is coming up very fast and a terrific duel looks like developing for second place. The leading Jaguar, however, is so far ahead that, barring accidents, its position looks unassailable.

3:30pm - Jaguar is clear and celebrates a superb victory with the No.20 XK120C! No. 9 Talbot is in second place and drawing away from No. 23 Aston Martin, but the performance of these Aston Martins, which are all still running, and looking and sounding as good as ever, is perhaps the outstanding feature of the race.

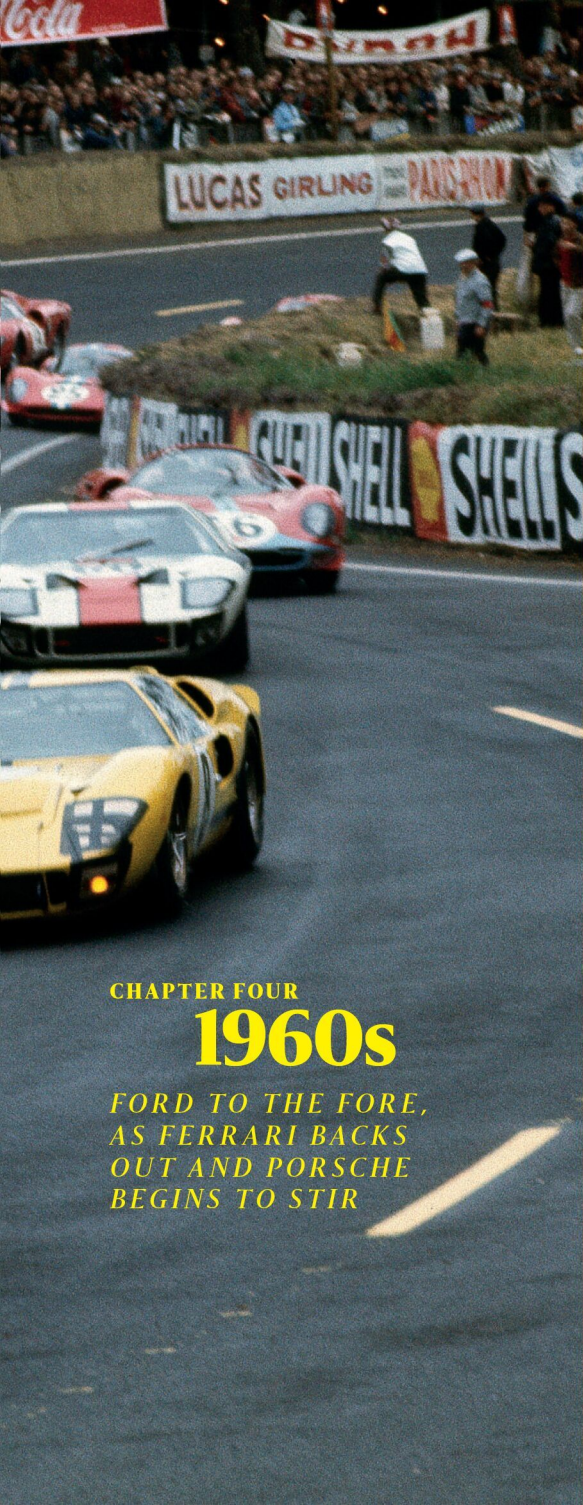
Results: G.P. d'Endurance

1st: P. Walker and P. Whitehead (Jaguar), 2,243.9 miles at 93.49mph

2nd: P. Meyrat and G. Mairesse (Talbot)

3rd: L. Macklin and E. Thompson (Aston Martin)





CHAPTER FOUR

1960s

*FORD TO THE FORE,
AS FERRARI BACKS
OUT AND PORSCHE
BEGINS TO STIR*

Aston Martin owner David Brown, disappointed at the divergence of racing sports cars from their road-going brethren, promptly pulled the plug on his championship-winning programme. Beaten rival Enzo Ferrari, meanwhile, was busy encouraging the governing body's swing towards grand touring cars, while continuing to win Le Mans with prototypes pretending by regulation to be road cars. His only threat were the sister machines of Chinetti's North American Racing Team offshoot, driven as though stolen by either or both of the Rodríguez brothers: a combined age of 39 in 1961! Scuderia Ferrari wisely brought Pedro and Ricardo in-house for 1962: the occasion of its final win for a front-engined car and a record-breaking fourth victory for Belgian superstar, Olivier Gendebien.

Another Ferrari victory came in 1963 - albeit a rear-engined one and the first all-Italian, courtesy of Lorenzo Bandini and Ludovico Scarfiotti. The FIA had lifted the 4-litre limit on GTs and the ACO, keener once more to encourage faster, more spectacular cars, did the same for prototypes. The door was left ajar for American muscle to barge through.

Jilted after takeover negotiations, Ford was determined to kick Ferrari where it would hurt most and despite embarrassing failures for its GT40s of 1964 and 1965 - plus two more Ferrari wins - finally landed a famous 1-2-3 in 1966.

Ford won again in 1967 - Dan Gurney celebrating the first and so far only all-American success by spraying the champagne alongside co-driver AJ Foyt. The MkIV, though heavier because of safety features, topped 220mph on the Mulsanne and burst the 5000km barrier. The Blue Oval closed out the decade with two more victories. Renowned British team boss John Wyer - a winner with Aston Martin - had been compensated for being stripped of the works Ford deal after 1964 with a licence to build, sell and maintain GT40s. When concerns over rising closing speeds between the fastest and slowest resulted in a 3-litre limit for prototypes, the GT40 was back in the game because it met the concurrent 5-litre limit and minimum production number for Group 4 sports cars. Enzo saw the writing on the wall, and skipped the 1968 race.

Porsche wasn't dissuaded. Having risen gradually up the capacity ranks since its 1951 debut, at last it had a prototype atop the capacity limit. Having won the Targa Florio several times and twice at Sebring, it now eyed the biggest prize. Only for a GT40 run by Wyer's well-drilled team and crewed by Rodríguez and Lucien Bianchi to keep it waiting.

Stuttgart doubled down when Group 4's homologation number was halved to 25. Ferrari still reckoned that only major manufacturers could comply. Porsche's sensational 917 of 1969 would snap him out of that.

The car was fast (240mph) but wayward. Richard Attwood's first feeling upon retiring from a big lead because of a cracked gearbox weld was relief. It would be a very different animal in 1970, tamed by Wyer's men. Jacky Ickx walked to his winning GT40 of 1969 in protest of the run-and-jump start, but would recover to beat a Porsche 908LH in a nail-biting finish.

1960s

CAR TO REMEMBER

Ford GT40

"By the time I raced a GT40, it was a well-proven car," says Jackie Oliver. He's not kidding. First came the terrifying stories of aerodynamic instability, later the debacle of Le Mans 1965. But then Ford threw the kitchen sink at it. The 7-litre cars finally broke the Ferrari stranglehold in 1966-67 - and then a rule change outlawed them. Group 4 gave the 5-litre GT40 a second wind and JW Automotive scored two more victories. The legend was complete.

Oliver had his first taste of the GT40 in 1968. "I was in a third JW car," he recalls. "Brian Muir put it in the sand at Mulsanne and lost two hours."

In 1969, sharing with Jackie Ickx, Oliver scored what he later realised would be the biggest win of his life. That closest-ever finish, with Ickx and Hans Herrmann's Porsche 908 separated by just 120 metres, followed the Belgian's safety protest of strolling to his car at the traditional sprint start. "When Jackie told me what he was going to do, I just said 'if you want'," says Oliver. "I was quicker than Jackie at night for some reason. David Yorke always said that won us the race."

With his enthusiasm for Ickx and long-distance racing in general well under control, Oliver reserves high praise for JW and the GT40. "John Wyer and



David Yorke had got Le Mans down to a fine art by the time I joined," he says. "It was unusual for the day, such a well-run team. But long-distance racing never appealed, which is why I broke my contract at the end of 1971. I wish I could have maintained it now and kept a car at the end of my time - one of the JW GT40s has just sold for £11m!

"A good, reliable old lady that wasn't fast enough to win unless others broke." That's how Oliver describes one of history's most beloved Le Mans cars. "It was easy to drive, very flexible. But we had to look after the brakes and did a lot of work with Girling on that, allowing us to increase pedal pressure as the race went on. The ZF gearbox had synchromesh, which was rare for a racer. But you could crack the casing if you changed down too soon. It had a lot of stability, like a comfy armchair. Because it was heavy it was stable at speed. When I raced one at Le Mans Classic in 2005 I was doing almost 200mph with the chicanes. Without them we used to reach 220.

"When Ford built the GT I bought one and had it for five years. I didn't like it much. The appeal was the styling, but it was a much bigger car than the GT40 and Ford put a truck engine in it."

STARS OF THE DECADE



Olivier Gendebien

An oft-forgotten genius, and the first four-time winner. The Belgian opened the 1960s with a hat trick of victories, one with Paul Frère and two with Phil Hill, all aboard some truly wonderful Ferraris.



Phil Hill

Ferrari's other ace won Le Mans three times with Gendebien before joining Ford's GT crew and then Jim Hall's ground-breaking Chaparral outfit. He was the first American-born driver to win Le Mans.



Ken Miles

One of Shelby and Ford's key drivers. Only company hubris and a rules quirk stopped him and Denny Hulme winning in 1966. He was killed while testing the 'J-car', the next evolution of the GT40.



John Surtees

Ferrari's F1 star was unlucky at Le Mans, ever suffering from mechanical failures and politics. He was in the right team at the right time - and very quick - but a victory proved elusive to him.

THE WINNERS

1960

FERRARI 250 TR59/60

Paul Frère/Olivier Gendebien
4218km

1961

FERRARI 250 TR61

Olivier Gendebien/Phil Hill
4477km

1962

FERRARI 330 LM SPYDER

Olivier Gendebien/Phil Hill
4451km

Final win for a front-engined car

1963

FERRARI 250P

Lorenzo Bandini/
Lodovico Scarfiotti
4562km

Ferrari fills top six. Rover-BRM turbine appears, but isn't eligible for classification

1964

FERRARI 275P

Jean Guichet/Nino Vaccarella
4695km

Ferrari/Ford battle commences

1965

FERRARI 250 LM

Masten Gregory/Jochen Rindt
4677km

Ferrari's most recent outright Le Mans victory

1966

FORD MKII

Chris Amon/Bruce McLaren
4843km

Ford's maiden Le Mans win. Winning race average tops 200kph for the first time

1967

FORD MKIV

Dan Gurney/AJ Foyt
5233km

1968

FORD GT40

Pedro Rodriguez/Lucien Bianchi
4453km

Chicane added before pit straight. Political unrest delays the race until September

1969

FORD GT40

Jacky Ickx/Jackie Oliver
4998km

Jacky Ickx walks across to his car, in protest against the traditional Le Mans start, then goes on to win by just 120 metres

The field of 1966 assembled ahead of action. This would prove to be Ford's golden year as it finally humbled Ferrari with its troublesome GT40. After this, the Fords would go on to dominate for the next four years, until rule changes and the arrival of Porsche changed the game





Top, left: The still primitive refuelling of 1962. Looks so odd when compared to the pressurised rigs of today

Above: A view of the exit of Tetre Rouge as a Bizzarini heads onto the Mulsanne

Right: An historic moment for both Ferrari and Belgian star Olivier Gendebien. The Belgian became the first four-time winner aboard this Ferrari 330TR/LM, co-driven by Phil Hill, in 1962

Left: Dan Gurney and A.J. Foyt celebrate their Le Mans win in 1967. Gurney's celebration of spraying the champagne in the general direction of Henry Ford II (and his new wife!) has endured and spread across motor sport

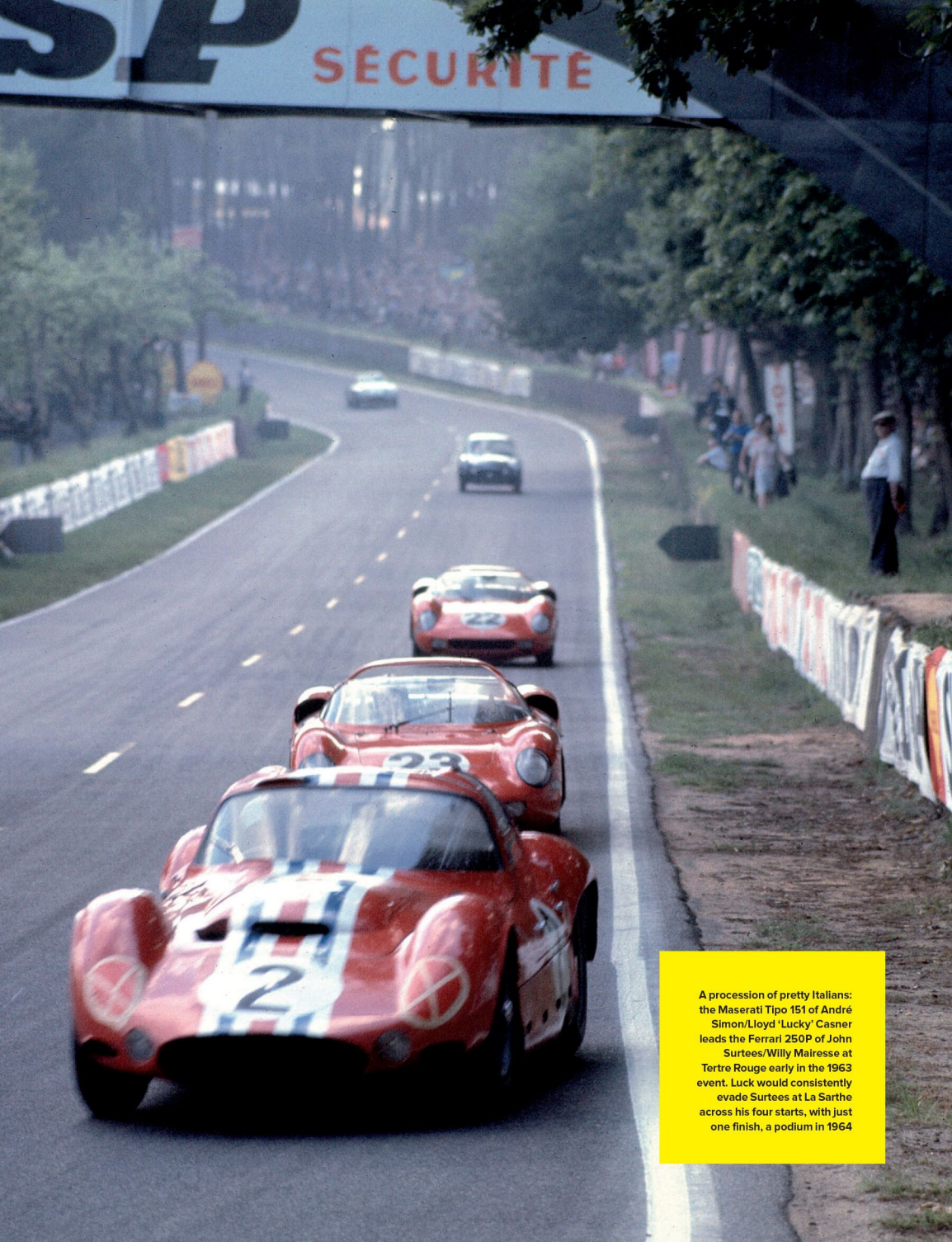




Top: Perhaps the most undeserving Le Mans loser? Ken Miles should have won in 1966, but for questionable rules and a contrived marketing strategy. He's pictured with Carroll Shelby here

Above: Henry Ford II is all smiles at Le Mans in 1966. After some early disappointments, Ford's kitchen sink approach to the GT40 programme had finally paid off





SP SÉCURITÉ

A procession of pretty Italians: the Maserati Tipo 151 of André Simon/Lloyd 'Lucky' Casner leads the Ferrari 250P of John Surtees/Willy Mairesse at Tertre Rouge early in the 1963 event. Luck would consistently evade Surtees at La Sarthe across his four starts, with just one finish, a podium in 1964



Left: Ferrari 330 P4s being stripped down at Le Mans, 1967

Right: And they're off... sort of! Jacky Ickx nonchalantly walks toward his Ford GT40 at the start in 1969 in protest at the traditional Le Mans starting procedure, which he deemed dangerous

Below, right: One of the closest finishes ever in 1969 as the Ickx/Jackie Oliver Ford beats the Porsche 908 of Hans Herrmann/G rard Larrousse by a matter of metres

Below: Three 1960 Ferrari 250TRs exit from Mulsanne. Leading is Wolfgang von Trips, who would run out of fuel and retire; following is Richie Ginther, whose gearbox would eventually break; and then the NART car of Ricardo Rodr guez, who would finish second alongside Andr  Pilette





Few at the time would have imagined that 1965 would still stand, 58 years on, as Ferrari's final outright Le Mans victory. But it wasn't the factory that took it, as Maranello's privateers came to the rescue

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN *MOTOR SPORT*, JULY 1965

There were 51 starters in the Le Mans race, but to all intents and purposes it was a straight fight between Ferrari and Ford, with an equal number of cars on each side, for the Americans really put in a lot of material this year. Ferrari relied on his works team, his agents and private owners, while Ford shared out its entries between Shelby, Ford-France, Ford Advanced Vehicles of Slough and Alan Mann, and loaned cars to people who had entries but no car, such as Rob Walker, whose Serenissima VS Prototypes did not turn up. After scrutineering, the score stood at 11-a-side, with Ford running a mixture of 7- and 4.7-litre GT40s, plus powering some Cobras, and Ferrari having P1s, P2s and a few 250 LMs.

Among the rest were an Iso-Grifo, with fibreglass body, a brand new 'birdcage' Maserati with a 5-litre V8 in the back, two 8-cylinder Porsche coupés, a 6-cylinder Porsche in a 904, the Dino 166 Ferrari, the Rover-BRM turbine car, a trio of works Alfa Romeo GTZ, Austin Healey Sprite, an MG-B, and numerous Triumph Spitfires and Renault-Alpines.

For the first time in history the first evening of practice had to be abandoned, because of a tornado that swept across La Sarthe, but the next evening was fine and dry, and the works Ferraris set the pace, with Surtees putting in a lap at 3min 38.1sec. However, the Ford coupés were not far behind, though the 7-litres were not handling too well. The abandoned practice session was replaced by an additional one on Friday evening, but being the night before the race a lot of people did not bother, being content with Thursday's times, and these included Surtees, so that Ford was able to take the honours and finally get the 7-litre mid-engine coupés to handle properly. Phil Hill shattered everyone with a lap of 3min 33sec - 227.509kph (approx. 141.5mph).

- THE RACE START -

The weather for the race was perfect, and in the opening hour the two 7-litre Ford coupés, driven by McLaren and Amon, ran away from everyone, the two 4-litre Ferraris of Surtees and Guichet being unable to keep them in sight, though they could cope with the 4.7-litre Fords quite easily. The lone Ferrari GTB was no match for the Cobra Daytona Coupés, especially that of Dan Gurney, who was up among the Prototypes. The speed of the 7-litre Ford V8 Prototypes had

to be paid for by fuel consumption and they both stopped to refuel after a little over an hour. Although they regained their lead when the Ferraris stopped to refuel, from this point onwards the Ford challenge fell apart and by the third hour the Ferraris were going strongly in the first five places, followed by the Ford 7-litre of Miles/McLaren that was in trouble with its Dearborn-built gearbox. By this time numbers 6, 7 and 5 had retired with mechanical troubles, either engines or gearboxes, and the second 7-litre had been delayed by a deranged gear-selector mechanism. As the Fords fell by the wayside the Cobras moved up and Gurney was in fifth position as darkness began to fall, behind the two 4-litre works Ferraris, Surtees/Scarfiotti leading, then the Bonnier/Piper 4.4-litre, followed by the works 3.3-litre P2. By quarter-distance, 10pm Saturday, there was only one Ford left, the 7-litre of Hill/Amon and it was a long way down the list, but going fast, and Hill set a whole row of record laps, ending with a 3min 37.5sec (222.803kph). Ferraris were now in the first six places, as Gurney's Cobra lost a lot of time when its oil pressure dropped dangerously low. By 11pm it was all over and the last Ford Prototype had gone out with clutch trouble, but all the Cobras were still running and the score was Ferrari 11, Cobra 5.

- COME THE NIGHT -

Before midnight the Ferrari confidence was shattered when Surtees had a long pit-stop to replace a broken front coil-spring, the English 4.4-litre was delayed by a broken exhaust manifold, and its 275LM had its gearbox burst asunder. As the works Ferraris ran into trouble, the agents' cars moved up, and as they went out the private owners took over. By 1am there was panic in the Ferrari pits for the P1 and P2 models were running into trouble with cracked brake discs, as they were using a new type of disc with radial ventilation slots. One by one they hit issues, until Dumay/Gosselin in the private 275LM found themselves in the lead. Meanwhile, the Cobras were falling apart, and the score at 2am on Sunday was Ferrari 9, Cobra 1, but both sides had sick cars. Ronnie Hoare had now lost both of his cars, their exhaust manifolds breaking, while the three works P2 cars and the Chinetti P1 were all in brake disc trouble and the pits were trying to sort out enough non-perforated discs to get at least one car going. Number 12 Cobra went out with a broken crankshaft damper, and 59 with a loss of oil pressure, while the Gurney/Grant car was still running

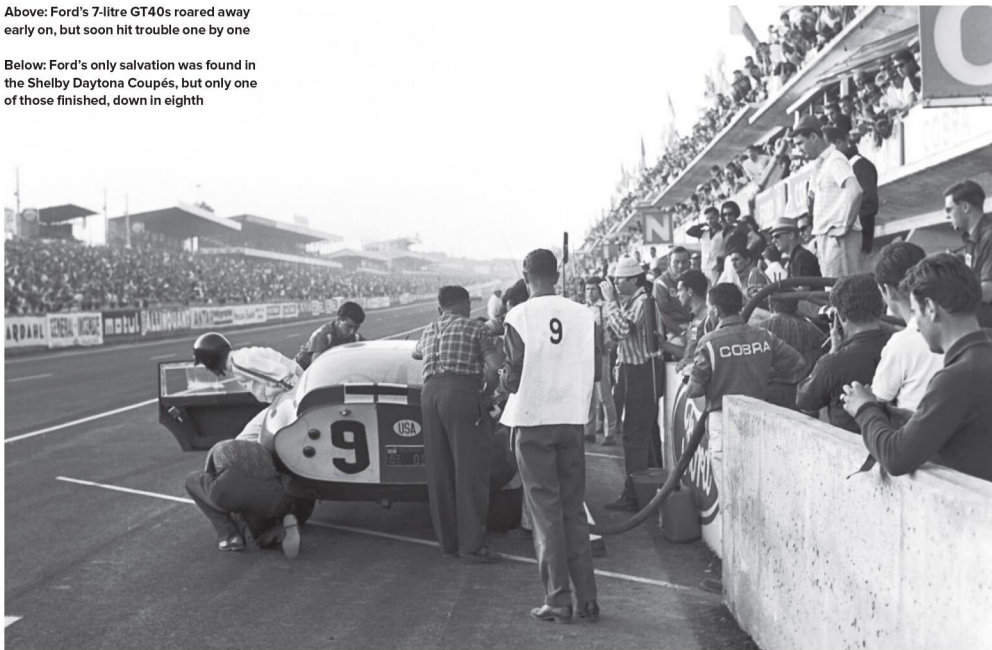


The winning crew of 1965. Or are they? We know for sure Jochen Rindt (right) and Masten Gregory won, but Ed Hugus (front, in hat) later claimed that he drove too. This still stands as Ferrari's last outright win



Above: Ford's 7-litre GT40s roared away early on, but soon hit trouble one by one

Below: Ford's only salvation was found in the Shelby Daytona Coupés, but only one of those finished, down in eighth



with low oil pressure and Sears had an accident with number, 11 which smashed the radiator. A new one was fitted at the pits and he rejoined. As the Ferraris and Cobras ran into trouble, the Porsches moved up into the picture, and at 4am, just before dawn, the order was Ferraris in the first four places and then two Porsches, the 906 of Klass/Glensner and the 908 of Linge/Nöcker. This was half-distance and the yellow 275LM of Dumay/Gosselin was two laps ahead of the red 275LM of Gregory/Rindt, with the yellow GTB of Maitresse/'Beurlys' in third and leading the GT category. All three works Ferraris were back in the race, but a long way behind, and running on a miscellaneous collection of solid and perforated discs. Of the original 51 starters, 26 were still running, but not all of them too healthy. The Rover-BRM driven by G. Hill/J. Stewart had shown signs of running too hot and its performance had been cut down to that of an Alpine-Renault in order to try and finish. Slotemaker crashed one of the Triumphs, another went out with engine trouble, and Zeccoli put an Alfa Romeo GTZ in the sand at Mulsanne where it was abandoned; Baghetti had hardly driven the Dino 166 before the engine broke, and Siffert hit the bank at Tertre Rouge and broke the radiator on the V8 Maserati. The score for the giants: Ferrari 8, Cobra 2.

– TO THE FINISH –

With clear skies and a warm sun rising, the situation was that Ferrari drivers who would not normally be in the running were in the first three places, with the three factory cars charging along in pursuit, trying to make up the time lost due to the brake trouble. Their hopes were in vain, for the 3.3-litre went out with engine trouble and the 4-litre of Surtees/Scarfiotti had a gearbox bearing break and leaked oil onto the external clutch at the back of the 'box. A very long pit stop meant the bearing was replaced and the clutch renewed, and Surtees joined the race again, to do hardly any laps at all before a gearbox shaft broke, and that was that. The weary mechanics had barely finished the Surtees car when the NART 4.4-litre came in with the same trouble and they had to start all over again. Amongst this, the Parkes/Guichet 4-litre was in trouble with its gearbox breaking up and they were driving without some of the lower gears, and the engine had an internal water leak. The Belgian car driven by Demay/Gosselin was still leading, chased by Gregory/Rindt, both in 275LM Ferraris, while the GTB Ferrari was still third, but overheating.

By Sam Ferrari was reduced to a very dodgy eight cars and Cobra one, as the Gurney/Grant car had gone out with engine trouble caused by the crankshaft damper breaking up, as on Cobra number 12, for when these big V8 engines run unbalanced they shake themselves to bits.

By mid-morning the score was down to 7-1, with some sick cars amongst the seven and the lone Cobra in a pretty dilapidated state. The lone works Ferrari was limping along in third place, behind the two LM Ferraris, so that Maranello was still in a position to win, through the private owners. The Porsche ranks were also diminishing as cars went out with engine breakages and oil leaks, so that by mid-day on Sunday there were only 17 cars left running and four hours still to go, with the giants score at 6 to 1.

At lunch-time the battle between the private LM Ferraris was getting close and held more than passing interest for it was the focal point of the great tyre battle that has been raging all this season. The Belgian Ferrari was on Dunlop and the American one on Goodyear, so there was quite a stir when the yellow car struck a hard object and burst its right-rear Dunlop while going down the straight. By the time it had limped round on the rim, had a new wheel and tyre fitted and straightened out the bodywork damage, the Goodyear-shod car was well in the lead, having changed tyres to play safe. With two hours to go to the end of another *Grand Prix d'Endurance*, Ferrari cars were still in the first three places, thanks to the American and Belgian teams, and the sick works car had dropped back. The little British cars had outlived their French rivals, all the Alpine-Renaults having retired, but now one of the Austin Healeys went out. 3pm came and still they fell, the heat of the afternoon being great, and the last works Ferrari succumbed. Score 5 to 1. Slowly the last hour passed and the Ferrari of Masten Gregory and Jochen Rindt headed to victory, followed by the 13 other survivors, all of whom can be proud of the achievement to finish the 24 hours.

– RESULTS –

1st: M. Gregory/J. Rindt (Ferrari 275LM) (Chinetti NART) 4,677.11km – 194.880kph
 2nd: P. Dumay/G. Gosselin (Ferrari 275LM) (Marquet-Dumay) 4,602.60km – 191.773kph
 3rd: W. Maitresse/'Beurlys' (Ferrari 275GTB) (Ecurie Franchorchamps) 4,562.95km – 190.085kph.





Watching the wheels

The man behind watch brand Richard Mille is a true 'car guy' and a racing aficionado. As *Simon de Burton* discovers, Le Mans wouldn't be the same without him

Helping an event to run like clockwork: Richard Mille and the Le Mans Classic are synonymous. Here a wonderful field of Ford GT40s and Shelby Daytona Coupes roars away in 2020



There probably isn't a reader out there whose love of cars and racing wasn't ignited as a youngster after they first whiffed exhaust fumes, hot oil and burnt rubber. And Richard Mille - the man behind the eponymous, high-end watch brand that creates unapologetically expensive 'racing machines for the wrist' - is no exception.

He was first seduced by the thrill of motor sport as a teenager back in 1966 when his father took him to the Monaco Grand Prix and he saw Bruce McLaren driving the M2B, the very first McLaren Formula 1 car.

"I shall never forget the terrifying noise from the Ford engine, which was actually designed for use in the Indianapolis 500 rather than F1," Mille recalls.

The occasion made such an impression on the 15-year-old Mille that he hunted down that very car in 2011 to add to his stable of competition McLarens, which now numbers close to a dozen and includes F1 and Can-Am cars - among them the M7A which was driven by Denny Hulme, in 1968 and '69.

Other cars he keeps at his home in Brittany include legendary F1 racers from the 1960s and '70, such as the Matra MS11, BRM P160 and Lotus 78. One of his favourites however is the Alitalia-liveried Lancia Stratos in which Björn Waldegård won the Sanremo Rally in 1975 and 1976.

"It's the one with which I started the collection and I still absolutely love it," he says.

The fact that the aforementioned rarities represent just the tip of the very large iceberg that is Mille's extensive collection makes one thing quite apparent: he is a dyed-in-the-wool car guy. So it should come as no surprise that Richard Mille - the man and the brand - has been synonymous with the Le Mans Classic since its inauguration in 2002.

In fact, Richard Mille and the biennial celebration of what some still regard as being the best days of La Sarthe are inextricably and unequivocally bound together.

"For many years, Richard has been a close friend of Patrick Peter [founder of historic motor sport events firm Peter Auto]," explains Tim Malachard, the brand's marketing director of



the past 13 years. “In 2001 Patrick asked Richard to introduce him to a few watch companies that might be interested in backing a new event he was planning, the Le Mans Classic.

“The Richard Mille brand was only a matter of months old at the time and had made just a tiny number of watches – but Richard said, ‘What about my brand? Why don’t you have that as the official timing partner and main sponsor?’

“It was quite an ambitious suggestion, considering how little known the company was – but Patrick had faith in Richard, so they ended up establishing the Le Mans Classic together. And it and the Richard Mille brand have steadily developed and grown in parallel. There’s not been one without the other.”

Indeed, such is Mille’s love of motor sport – and endurance racing in particular – that these days he devotes much of his time to his role as chairman of the FIA Endurance Commission and has been instrumental in the development of the new Le Mans Hypercar category.

“Richard has been very heavily involved in getting that off the ground for the past four or five years,” says Malachard.

Top: Richard Mille’s timepieces have spread beyond just motor racing. Here pop star Pharrell Williams poses on the Le Mans Classic grid with a future generation racer

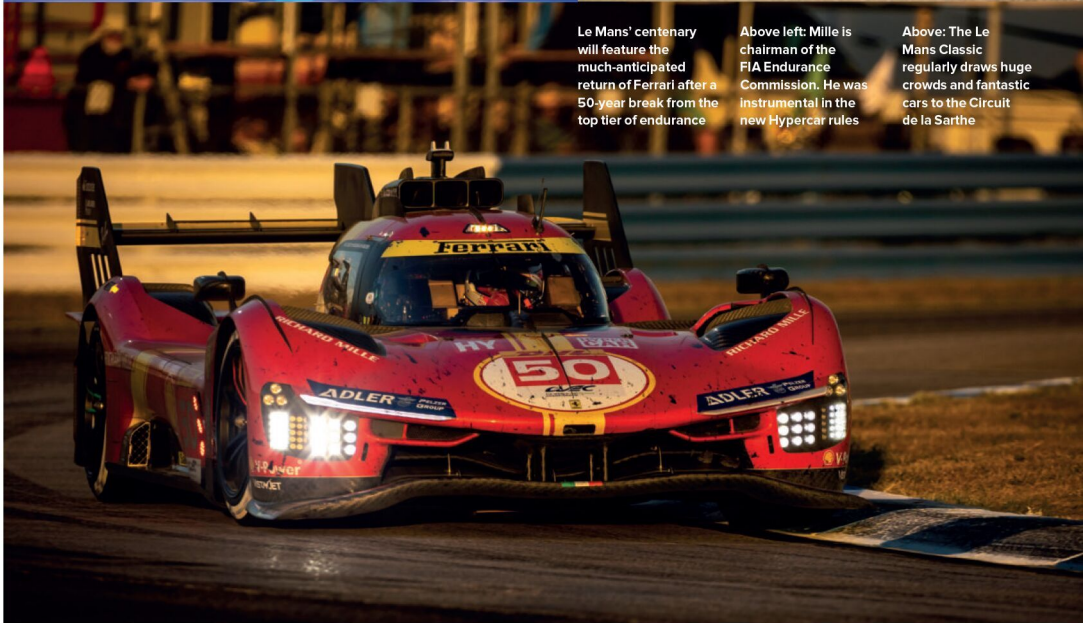
Above: Mille’s personal Lola T70, which he and his son have campaigned. Here he is in action in 2018, sharing with Stellantis (PSA Group) chairman Carlos Tavares



Le Mans' centenary will feature the much-anticipated return of Ferrari after a 50-year break from the top tier of endurance

Above left: Mille is chairman of the FIA Endurance Commission. He was instrumental in the new Hypercar rules

Above: The Le Mans Classic regularly draws huge crowds and fantastic cars to the Circuit de la Sarthe



"As an independent voice, he has been able to use much of the experience he has gained as a businessman and entrepreneur to create a racing format that is both viable and fun for the fans. He has also been very proactive in getting teams to use their design departments to create specific identities for the cars rather than allowing aerodynamics to dictate that they all look very similar - that way people can recognise the different makes more readily on the circuit."

Although Richard Mille (the brand) has a partnership with Ferrari that will give it a presence at the 'modern' Le Mans now that the marque has returned to top level endurance racing after half a century with the 499P, it is at the Classic where the prominence of the name stands out as principal partner.

"This year's Classic is clearly going to be very special because of the centenary, and it really is going to be a celebration of motor racing since 1923," says Malachard.

"There's an aim to have more than 80 Le Mans-winning cars of the past gathered together to help tell the story of 100 years of endurance racing and, as a brand, Richard Mille will invite more than 400 guests to enjoy what promises to be a fabulous weekend.

"That's an aspect of the Classic that we particularly enjoy, because it really is one of the world's great four-wheel festivals and one at which people can get really close to cars that are otherwise rarely available to see."

Among those cars will certainly be Mille's own Lola T70 that he has raced at the Le Mans Classic on many occasions.

Having recently celebrated his 72nd birthday, Mille's youngest son, 24-year-old Armand, now campaigns the car. Armand has been competing since he was 19 and has racked up a highly respectable five wins and 14 podium finishes from 53 races thus far. The same holds true for Maxime, the son of his business partner, Dominique Guenat. The 30-year-old has participated in the Le Mans Classic since 2016 at the wheel of cars like the Lola T286 and Ford GT40 (with his father). Between 2019 and 2022 he won no less than 19 races. But perhaps the most telling indication of just how wedded to the Classic the Richard Mille brand really is can be seen in the fact that it is more or less the only event in the world for which it regularly produces a limited-edition watch.

Details of the 2023 centenary model were due to be released shortly after this issue hits the newsstands. Until then they will be kept tightly under wraps. However, Malachard hints that the watch - just 150 examples of which will be available - will feature a case made from milled quartz in the celebrated green and white colours of the Le Mans Classic (and seen in the 2021 LMC limited edition, the RM 029).

It should certainly make a worthy addition to the existing line-up of Richard Mille watches produced to mark past editions of the Le Mans Classic (see panel, right). And it seems a perfectly appropriate timepiece for a man who is a Lancia Stratos devotee.

Six of the finest Classic editions

RICHARD MILLE HAS PRODUCED A SPECIAL TIMEPIECE FOR EACH OF THE LE MANS CLASSICS



2012 RM 008 LMC & RM 011 LMC

For the sixth Le Mans Classic, not one Richard Mille special edition, but two. The first is one of the most complex ever created. Featuring a micro-blasted and DLC-treated titanium-case, the watch contained a tourbillon regulator that indicated the minutes and seconds as they were being counted by the chronograph function. The 'torque' and 'function' displays, meanwhile, echoed the blue and yellow rumble strips found on the Le Mans circuit and the bezel carried the 'double stripes' synonymous with the race. Just TWO pieces were produced - making the RM 011 LMC automatic chronograph also unveiled that year seem positively common with a run of 150 examples. It had a skeletonised automatic movement that incorporated flyback chronograph and annual calendar functions, together with a 24-hour counter at six o'clock. It, too, carried the rumble strip colours on its chronograph counters, hands and date window.



2014 RM 030 LMC

For 2014, Richard Mille created this, its fourth piece to bear the event's name. Based on the 'standard' RM 030 - the first watch with a de-clutchable winding rotor to ensure optimum torque and power delivery - the LMC also featured a 24 hours display and a '16' indication to reference the traditional race start time. It also had a ceramic case with its movement decorated with green and white; 100 pieces were made.



2016 RM 11-02 LMC

The 50x42mm RM 11-02 LMC combined a self-winding movement made from grade five titanium with a caseband made from white ATZ ceramic and a rubber-collared crown. The mechanism featured a variable-geometry winding rotor and offered both annual calendar and dual timezone functions, while the grooved pushpieces were inspired by the control pedals of classic race cars. The watch was limited to 150 examples.



2018 RM 11-03 LMC

The ninth running of the Le Mans Classic gave Richard Mille the chance to invite its motor sport partners, F1 legend Felipe Massa and nine-time world rally champion Sebastian Loeb, to the event at which it also unveiled a special version of the RM 11-03 flyback chronograph with a case made from white ceramic, a white rubber strap and a dial highlighted with racing green details. Just 150 examples were made.



2021 RM 029 LMC Automatic

With a case band milled from a solid block of white Quartz TPT® and front and back bezels in green Quartz TPT®, this watch was one of the most eye-catching Le Mans Classic creations yet. Just 150 examples were made and the watch is technically excellent. Its movement is made from grade five titanium and powered by twin winding barrels that, in addition to normal time keeping, drove a dedicated 24-hour counter.



CHAPTER SIX

1970s

THE HOLLYWOOD AGE, IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

Steve McQueen's character Michael Delaney falls just short of victory in the film *Le Mans*. The Hollywood star had dreamt of making a drama-doc of his contesting the 1970 race in a 917 co-driven by F1 world champion Jackie Stewart. His insurers decreed otherwise. Fellow A-lister Paul Newman, however, fell just short for real in 1979, the 935 he was co-driving losing several laps to a stuck wheel nut. Both races suffered monsoons - 1979 was the slowest since 1958 - in stark contrast to cool, dry 1971: the fastest until 2010.

Porsche was victorious in all three and, having striven for almost 20 years for its breakthrough, would win five from 10. The first two were secured by 917s: Herrmann, co-driven by Attwood, gaining revenge for his near miss of 1969 - and

promptly retiring; and Gijs van Lennep and Helmut Marko, unaware of their one-off lightweight mag-alloy chassis, covering a 'transatlantic' 3313 miles at 138mph.

The latter race introduced the two-by-two rolling start - at last allowing barrier to separate pit from track - and bade farewell to Maison Blanche. The insertion of a sweeping section of track funded by Porsche lopped 18mph from the lap's speed while increasing its challenge. Ironically Porsche domination was then put on hold while Matra ended France's 21-year drought - with a hat-trick of wins. The first - Graham Hill's completion of his unique Triple Crown - and third - Henri Pescarolo's hat-trick - were aided by late withdrawals of the likely main rivals: Ferrari in 1972 and Alfa Romeo in 1974. But the middle win was a tooth-and-claw affair, from which



Porsche first, finally:
Hans Herrmann and
Richard Attwood scored
victory in the 917K during
a soaked 1970 race

Scuderia Ferrari, valiant in defeat, only now is set to return. These home successes went some way to disguising the fact that 3-litre 'two-seater F1' prototypes had since 1972 failed to capture the imagination in the manner of its 'big banger' forebears. Matra's withdrawal - combined with the oil crisis - forced the ACO to get creative. The first idea was a run at a 7mpg limit - forerunner to Group C of the 1980s - and resulted in victory for Mirage: the first British win since 1959 and the last for Wyer. It was also the first for the Cosworth DFV engine - dominant in F1 but a taskmaster over longer distances because of harsh inherent vibrations - and the first of three for Ickx's partnership with Derek Bell: 11 wins between them.

Ickx enhanced his reputation as endurance racing's best by winning for Porsche in 1976 and 1977. The former was a

relatively straightforward affair - the first for a turbocharged car - but the second was a tour de force. Switched to a second 936 after his first had suffered engine failure, Ickx spent 11 of the next 13 hours at lap record speed through the night recovering from near last. Aided by a spate of piston failures for their Alpine-Renault rivals, original pairing Hurley Haywood and Jürgen Barth then coaxed this hard-pressed car home.

Porsche then stumbled in 1978, allowing Renault the victory that enabled it to concentrate on F1. Therein lay a problem. F1's growth via TV was putting the squeeze on all others. Le Mans wasn't an easy sell - Porsche was the only works team of 1979 - but the USP of racing's longest day remained: narratives given time to ebb and flow. It's why McQueen had been so hot on a screenplay.

1970s

CAR TO REMEMBER

Matra MS670

More than 20 years had passed since the previous all-French victory at Le Mans, that of Jean-Louis Rosier and (mostly) father Louis in a Talbot-Lago, but Matra was on a mission. It had built a number of sports-prototypes since the late 1960s, but the MS670 would be the series' apotheosis.

"No effort was spared," says Henri Pescarolo, who shared the winning MS670 with Graham Hill in 1972, then its successful B derivative with Gérard Larrousse in 1973-74. "Matra was determined to secure a French win and put its very best engineers on the project, which is probably why its F1 results weren't as good as they might otherwise have been."

Reporting the 1972 race in *Motor Sport*, Denis Jenkinson wrote: "Matra entered four cars and backed its chances every possible way, with variations of body shape, engine power, fuel consumption, tyre sizes, gearbox variations and so on. The arrangement of variables was such that whatever conditions prevailed for the race, one of the four cars would be at an advantage." And talking of the weather, he added: "An insidious small wind blew in before the start, in the form of an FIA official being appointed to decide whether the race should be abandoned should the rain become extreme. This is part of the mental sickness that is going to kill motor racing within the next 10 years..."

Pescarolo relished his time at the Matra's helm. "It was a fantastic car," he says. "It was quick, reliable



and easy to drive. Prior to the 1972 race we'd done ample endurance testing at Paul Ricard, without any trouble at all, so we were feeling pretty confident.

"The hardest of the three wins was the second, when we fought Ferrari almost all the way. In the others, we were effectively racing only ourselves."

The Ferraris led into the night during that 1973 race, but a blown engine stopped Carlos Reutemann/Tim Schenken and a broken exhaust slowed Jacky Ickx/Brian Redman. The Matra moved ahead when the Ferrari stopped for repairs - and neither a split brake pipe nor an overheating starter motor (which had to be rebuilt on Sunday morning, at the cost of 25 minutes) were enough to dislodge the local favourites. Pescarolo and Larrousse were able to breathe the more easily when engine failures scuppered Ickx/Redman and they finally finished six laps clear of the surviving Ferrari, driven by Arturo Merzario/Carlos Pace.

The MS670 had two distinguishing features: its patriotic hue and the sumptuous wail that followed any period Matra V12. "It sounded absolutely fantastic," says Pescarolo, "but it's the reason all Matra drivers are nowadays deaf."

THE WINNERS

1970

PORSCHE 917K

Hans Hermann/Richard Attwood
4608km

New start procedure introduced, with drivers already in cars

1971

PORSCHE 917K

Helmut Marko/Gijs van Lennep
5335km

Rolling start adopted

1972

MATRA-SIMCA MS670

Henri Pescarolo/Graham Hill
4691km

Graham Hill completes racing's triple crown - F1 title, Indy 500 and Le Mans

1973

MATRA-SIMCA MS670B

Henri Pescarolo/Gérard Larrousse
4854km

1974

MATRA-SIMCA MS670B

Henri Pescarolo/Gérard Larrousse
4607km

1975

MIRAGE GR8

Derek Bell/Jacky Ickx
4596km

1976

PORSCHE 936

Jacky Ickx/Gijs van Lennep
4770km

First victory for a turbocharged car

1977

PORSCHE 936/77

Jürgen Barth/Hurley Haywood/Jacky Ickx
4672km

1978

RENAULT ALPINE A442B

Didier Pironi/Jean-Pierre Jaussaud
5045km

1979

PORSCHE 935 K3

Klaus Ludwig/Don Whittington/Bill Whittington
4174km

STARS OF THE DECADE



Vic Eford

The all-rounder never won Le Mans, but always put on a show in Porsche's 917. He set pole position in 1970, but car failures robbed him of all but a GT class victory, at the wheel of a privateer Ferrari in 1973.



Gérard Larrousse

Always a factor at Le Mans, Larrousse finished second in 1969 and 1970 for Porsche before winning in '73 and '74 with Matra. After stepping behind the scenes, he played a key part in Renault's '78 win.



Henri Pescarolo

Although his Le Mans career spans decades, the 1970s brought him the most success as a driver, with three wins for Matra, from 1972-74, and a GTP class victory with Jean Rondeau's Inaltera in 1976.



Jacky Ickx

It's hard to pick a decade in which Ickx most excelled. He won with Mirage in '75 and Porsche in 1976 and '77, but Renault ended his bid to be the first driver to take four straight wins.

Hollywood star Paul Newman was a true racer, and even he wouldn't have been able to write the bizarre script of 1979 where he came so close to winning aboard Dick Barbour's Porsche 935. But for a stuck wheel nut, he, Barbour and Rolf Stommelen could have triumphed. Incidentally, that year's race also featured Pink Floyd drummer Nick Mason in a Lola T297



1970s

Right: Alain de Cadenet was a true Le Mans privateer, running a string of self-styled (and often self-funded) efforts. This is the Lola-based De Cadenet LM78 he shared with Chris Craft in 1978

Below: The withdrawal of Ferrari may have given Matra a bit of an open goal for 1972, but the GT classes were fraught with factory efforts. Here Porsche and De Tomaso Pantera line up ready for action





Above: Mirage became one of just two independently owned manufacturers to win Le Mans outright post-war. Derek Bell and Jacky Ickx drove its Gulf GR8 Ford to victory in 1975, scoring the first win for an all-British car since Aston Martin's in 1959

Right: Four years earlier, Bell shared a John Wye-run Gulf Porsche 917 with Jo Siffert. Rear-end repairs delayed them on Saturday night, but they were back up to sixth by Sunday morning before transmission trouble spelt retirement



The Circuit de la Sarthe underwent even more change across the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Ford Chicane was introduced in 1968, followed by the Porsche Curves in 1972, which made the old Maison Blanche section redundant





Above: The wonderful BMW 3.0 CSL of Jean-Claude Aubriet and 'Dépinc' (Jean-Claude Depince) rounds Arnage in 1974. It would go on to claim a class win

Right: Jean-Pierre Jarier fiddles with a mirror on his Matra in 1974. The Frenchman made 15 starts at Le Mans between 1972 and '99, in cars ranging from a Ferrari Daytona on his debut to a Porsche 911 GT2 in his swansong appearance





Top: It may have taken a few years to bed in, and a further one to recover from that crushing failure of 1977, but Alpine-Renault finally took the laurels in 1978. Here Jean-Pierre Jaussaud and Didier Pironi drive the A442B through the streets of Paris in celebration

Left: Quite the line-up. Martini Racing Porsche drivers pose between the open-topped 936s and the coupé 935 at scrutineering in Le Mans town centre in 1978

Right: Henri Pescarolo marked himself out as a true Le Mans legend during the decade, scoring four wins, including an outright hat-trick with Matra (1972-74). He then joined Jean Rondeau's team, winning the GTP class in the Inaltera in 1976. He is seen here in the team's pit in 1979



FROM THE ARCHIVE

It had been a long 22-year wait for the local crowd, desperate to celebrate another home-grown success at La Sarthe. Matra duly delivered it on a weekend that made history in many ways.

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN MOTOR SPORT, JULY 1972

The 1972 Le Mans 24 Hours will not go down as one of the more exciting events, but it will have its place in history for featuring the first victory by a French car since 1950, when Louis Rosier and his son won with a Lago-Talbot.

This year it was Matra that won, success coming at last after a number of tries. It was very much a 'typical' Le Mans, about the only thing missing being the stifling Sunday morning heat. This year the weather fluctuated from heavy rain to brief sunny periods, but never became stable. As so often happens, Saturday afternoon opened with a 'sprint', then things settled down, then troubles began with continuous retirements through the night. Inevitably when 55 cars set out to race for 24 hours some of them crash, and equally inevitably when racing cars crash someone gets hurt, or worse, and this year's event was overshadowed by the tragic death of Joakim Bonnier. The bearded Swedish driver who had been racing since 1954, was 42 years old and had probably raced in a greater variety of events and cars than most people. His Lola T280-Cosworth V8 was in collision with a GTB Ferrari at 150mph and was projected into the air, over the guard-rails and into a wood, where the car literally burst asunder. Vic Elford, who was following in an Alfa Romeo said he thought Bonnier made a slight error of judgement, other people reckoned that the inexperienced Swiss Ferrari driver moved over to let the Lola through, and got in difficulties on the loose edge of the track and skidded back into its path. Whatever happened, it was an accident, unfortunate and unforeseen. It all happened shortly after 8am on Sunday on the flat-out right-hand bend before Indianapolis, and at the time the Lola was in eighth position having been delayed the previous afternoon by gearbox trouble after leading early on.

During the months preceding the race it looked as though it was going to be one of the classic events, for the Matra team was putting all its efforts into it, even to the point of foregoing all other sports car races. It entered four cars, and backed its chances every possible way with variations of body shape, engine power, known engine reliability, fuel consumption, tyre sizes, gearbox variations and so on, the arrangement of the variables meaning that whatever conditions prevailed for the race, one of the four cars would be at an advantage for one reason or another. The eight drivers selected also seemed to cover every contingency, being Amon/Beltoise in car number

12, Cevert/Ganley in car #14, Hill/Pescarolo in #15, and Hobbs/Jabouille in #16, and it was such a complete team effort that all prize money was to be pooled and shared eight ways, so that anyone who felt they had the wrong car for the conditions could not grumble about the pay. As far as the glory was concerned there was no discussion, it was to be for Matra and France. The pre-race testing was remarkably thorough and no expense was spared in the workshops, the laboratories, or the test-track and the Paul Ricard circuit near Marseilles was used for 24-hour test runs.

— MATRA GUNS FOR GLORY —

Without any question Matra was out to win and the reason it chose 1972 for this onslaught was because at last the FIA rules were on its side, with a 3-litre limit on all sports and prototype cars. It will be recalled that a limit of 3-litres was brought in for 1968 by a certain amount of jiggery-pokery in order to help Matra win Le Mans, but an oversight on the sports car regulations, as distinct from the prototype regulations, allowed Porsche and Ferrari to build 5-litre 'production' sports cars, which soon became 5-litre 'works' cars and the 3-litre prototypes could not hope to beat the Porsche 917 or Ferrari 512, and as it took two years to re-write and implement new rules to get rid of the 5-litre cars, this year was the first one where 3-litre prototypes could be certain of winning. As always Ferrari was not slow off the mark and its 3-litre prototypes have swept the board all this season, so that its entry of three cars for Le Mans - for his own factory team, plus an extra one for Luigi Chinetti's North American Racing Team - introduced a big factor into Matra's plans, but even though they did not participate in any earlier races against Ferrari, they were very confident, especially on the reliability score. The first little skirmish of this interesting confrontation took place back in March at the Le Mans test weekend and Ferrari was fractionally faster than Matra, but clearly more fragile. It was hoped they would enter a car apiece in the 4-hour race that weekend, but they both withdrew saying they could not spare the time.

Added to the Matra versus Ferrari battle was the entry of four Alfa Romeos by Autodelta, two cars from the Gulf-Mirage team and two Lola T280 cars from the Bonnier team. It all fell very flat though when Ferrari withdrew its cars a week before the event, for a number of reasons; among them were





Pescarolo out front in the pretty Matra. He and Hill would end France's long wait for a Le Mans winner

the facts that its flimsy F1-style cars were not built for 24-hour races, the flat-12-cylinder engines failed to stand up to long flat-out tests. Ferrari had won the 1972 Manufacturers' Championship anyway, so a failure at Le Mans would do more harm than good, and by withdrawing it left Matra with a hollow victory—if it failed to win Matra would have been the laughing stock of racing. Added to all that Enzo Ferrari is still a law unto himself and always will be. As the race drew nearer it became very obvious that Alfa Romeo was not going to provide much opposition, and it reduced its entry to three, and at the last moment the Gulf-Mirage pair were withdrawn as John Wyer did not reckon the Cosworth V8 to be suitable for Le Mans, and the new Weslake-Ford V12 was not ready.

By 4pm on Saturday the prospects for any sort of race were very thin and it looked as though all the Matra team had to do was to arrange the order of its four cars and put on a 24-hour demo in front of the large crowd. There was no shortage of enthusiasm for the event, for the maximum of 55 cars was easily reached, but the quality of driving experience among the 110 or so drivers was rather alarming. Fortunately the 55-car limit got rid of some really slow stuff during practice.

In addition to the eight Matra drivers the Alfa Romeo drivers comprised Elford/Marko, Vaccarella/de Adamich and Galli/Stommelen, while Bonnier's team of fast but fragile Lolas were driven by himself and Van Lennep, Larrousse/de Fierlant, Cabral/de Bagration. The rest of the entry of sports cars was

made up of private owners, the long-tailed Porsche 908 of Joest/Weber/Casoni having full factory support. A last-minute entry was a British Standard Special designed and built by a small group in a London mews garage under the direction of Alain de Cadenet. Taking a standard F1 Cosworth V8/Hewland gearbox they attached it to a conventional monocoque, added F1-type suspension and brakes, with Brabham hubs and wheels, covered it with a fibreglass body like a Chevron or Lola and had a car ready to race, but without a name. As the Duckhams Oil Company had given some financial support to the project it was called a Duckhams-Ford. Their first satisfaction was to get through practice and de Cadenet and his co-driver Craft approached the whole thing in the true spirit of Le Mans, to keep going, handle the engine and gearbox with care and delicacy, avoid any heroics and still be running on Sunday morning, and with a bit of luck on Sunday afternoon as well.

While the outright winner is expected to come from the sports car ranks, there are equally serious class races going on at the same time. The GT category was full with Ferrari GTB4s from agents in America, Britain, France, Belgium and Switzerland opposing four De Tomaso Panteras and a row of 911 Porsches as well as four thundering 7-litre Chevrolet-Corvettes, while the Group 2 saloon class comprised three factory Ford Capri RS2600 models with fuel-injected 3-litre V6 Weslake modified engines, and a similar privately owned one, as well as a lone BMW 3000 CS.



The moment of history. Prior to the race Henri Pescarolo (right) wasn't keen on sharing with Graham Hill, but was proven wrong when Hill produced a fine display

An insidious small wind blew in before the start in the form of an FIA official being appointed to decide whether the race should be abandoned at any time should rain conditions become extreme. With the new safe, open and clinical stretch of track replacing the dangerous, blind brow and deceptive ess-bend at White House, the lap distance is altered so all records were waiting to be rewritten. The classic Le Mans start was abandoned in 1970 and replaced by a ridiculous rolling start in which the cars straggle round behind a pace car before starting. The President of France, Monsieur Pompidou, was not only guest of honour but actually gave the signal for the field to set off on their pace lap.

Fortunately, Le Mans is still big enough to withstand small nibblings of its former grand self, for 55 cars attempting to race for 24 hours must provide enough excitement and drama to over-rule the changes that keep being made, but how long this balance will remain is open to doubt. As the 55 cars straggled away to start their first serious lap, everyone settled down to watch the Matra demo run, the only speculation being as to what average speed they would settle for and what the team order would be. As the field finished the first lap it was Matra, Matra, Matra, Lola, Matra, Alfa Romeo and down the field a Chevrolet-Corvette was leading all the GTB Ferraris. Waiting for the fourth Matra to get into position on lap two and for the team to then get with the right order, there was suddenly consternation in the packed grandstand for Matra

#12 did not accelerate away from the Ford chicane with the shrill scream expected. Instead it crept past the pits going slower and slower. It staggered up the slope towards the top of the Dunlop Curve and expired in a cloud of smoke. It was Jean-Pierre Beltoise and his V12 had lasted a mere two laps. That was bad enough, but when the leaders reappeared at the end of the third lap there was worse, for a yellow Lola was leading, driven by Bonnier, and the whole scene had gone to pot. It got even worse before it got better for de Fierlant then took his Lola into the lead and Cevert, Pescarolo and Jabouille began to wonder what had gone wrong, especially when it started to rain and the Lola went even further ahead. Such an absurd state of affairs could not last and fortunately for the French, Bonnier's car pitted after 53 minutes when he could no longer select all five gears, and three minutes later de Fierlant joined him for his first routine stop for fuel as the consumption of the Cosworth V8 was a rather unknown factor. As the first hour passed all was in order with the three Matras leading the three Alfa Romeos, while further back order had been restored when the Ferrari GTB4 of Rouveyran/Migault took the GT lead from the unruly Chevrolet-Corvette of Cudini/Darniche and Fitzpatrick was leading all the Porsches in the Kremer car.

From this point onwards the excitement for the lead was over, for one or other of the Matras led for the next 23 hours, but for the rest of the runners it was nothing like so cut and



dried. Results are published at every hour, and on paper Matra #14, the car of Cevert/Ganley, dominated just ahead of Matra #15, the car of Hill/Pescarolo, and rain or shine, darkness or daylight, these two blue cars hummed round, the V12s turning at 10,500rpm. The third Matra, car #16, of Jabouille/Hobbs caused a panic early on Saturday evening when it stopped out on the circuit, out of petrol, but it turned up at the pits five laps late. The reserve fuel tap had been knocked partially 'on' before it was due to be used, by the passenger seat moving forward, and the fuel system had become confused and had dried up. Jabouille had rocked and tipped the car until the remaining fuel had sorted itself out and the pumps primed and he was able to get going again, but the delay had dropped the car down to 12th place. Once refuelled it steadily climbed back up to reach third place by 4am Sunday. The three Alfa Romeos were never really in the picture, being quite unable to match the speed of the Matras, and all they could do was to run reliably and hope everyone else would break down. As things turned out they broke down themselves, clutches and gearboxes giving trouble in the early hours of Sunday morning so that at 6.30am all three were in the pits. The Elford/Marko car had been taken apart and a new clutch fitted, and went back into the race after losing just over half an hour, and the Vaccarella/de Adamich car was having similar things done. Later the Galli/Stommelen car was taken apart to replace the clutch but it was then discovered that the gearbox had broken so it was screwed together again and pushed round the back of the pits.

The two yellow Lola T280s of Ecurie Bonnier made their mark in the first hour and then fizzled out, the pit work on refuelling being slow compared to the works teams, so that #7, which de Fierlant started off driving, dropped back even though Larrousse took over in place of Cabral and de Bagration. As van Lennep was sharing #8 with Bonnier, the two 'paying customers' were very bitter about the Swede's handling of the arrangements. Soon after dark on Saturday evening while lying in fifth place de Fierlant had a spin on the wet surface and stalled the engine. When he came to restart he found the clutch had gone solid and would not free, so he abandoned the car and returned to the pits. Larrousse, who is more mechanically minded, went out to the abandoned car, put it in second gear and drove off on the starter motor until the engine fired and he returned with a perfectly healthy car, but unable to continue as driver changes are only permitted at the pits. The second Lola kept going through the night until the dreadful accident just after 8am on Sunday, when Bonnier lost his life.

– LIFE IN THE OLD DOG –

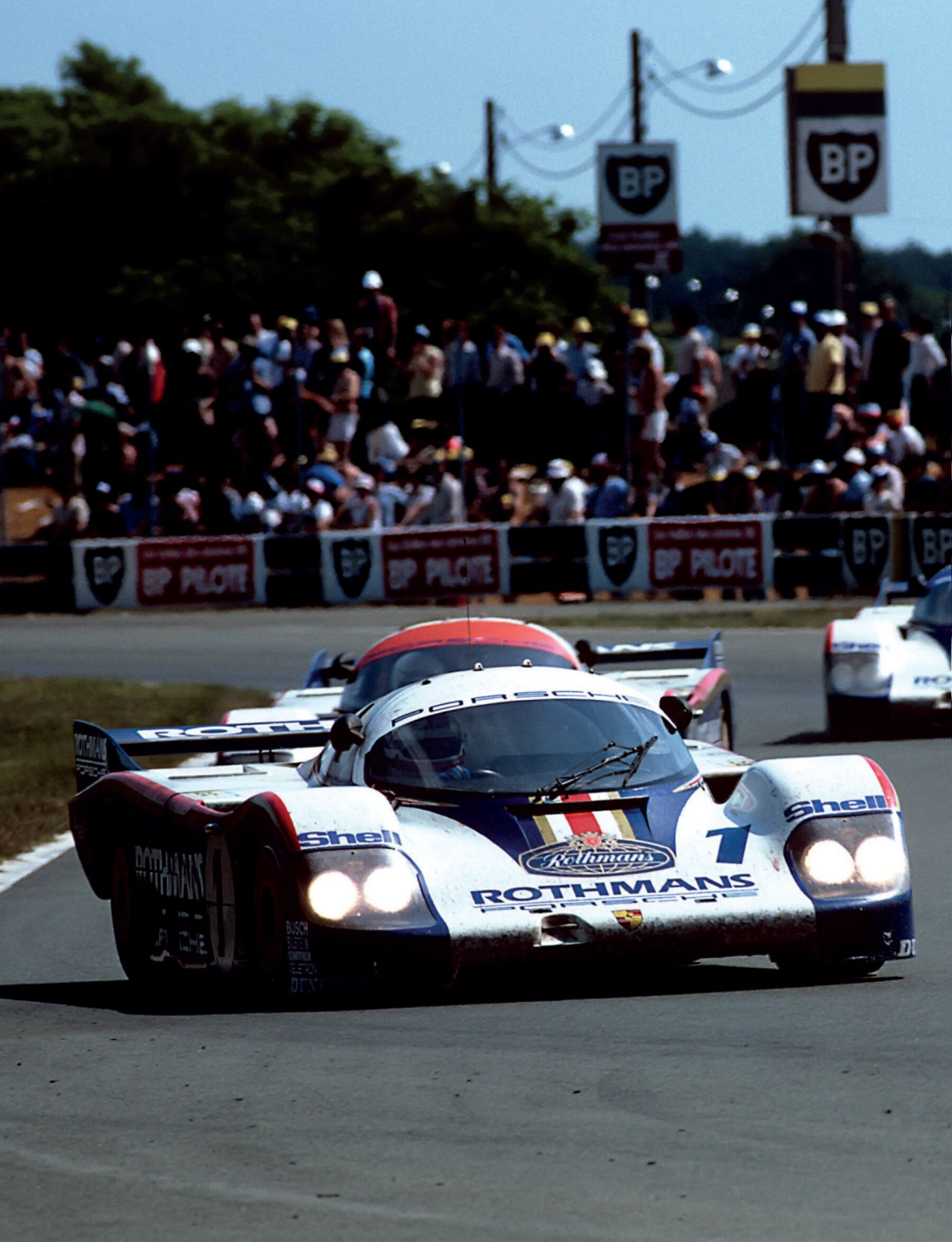
Behind all the works cars and running reliably was the old long-tailed 908 Porsche coupé that had been borrowed by Reinhold Joest and prepared at the Porsche factory. It was running like a Swiss watch and moving up steadily as the works cars ran into trouble. The only anxiety being an excess

of oil mist coming out of the breathers and a tendency for the tail to come adrift at high speed, so pit stops involved a lot of cleaning of the perspex panels in the tail and meticulous sealing of the body joints with masking tape. It climbed steadily from ninth at the end of the first hour to third at the end, and was as fast as anyone, even the Matras. Another car running incredibly well, the drivers setting out to be running at the finish come what may, was the Duckhams-Ford, which started off in 10th, albeit a lap behind the leader at the end of the first hour. But by running regularly and not wasting time at refuelling it climbed to fifth overall by Sunday morning, though now 31 laps behind the leading Matra. But Le Mans is that sort of event, and keeping going pays off.

Throughout the closing hours intermittent rain showers caught out many drivers who were now getting tired, and at midday on Sunday it rained heavily and Ganley was driving the leading Matra. Without rain tyres he was going relatively slowly, not taking any chances, when French driver Marie-Claude Beaumont in a great Chevrolet-Corvette ran slap into the back of the Matra! Unbelievably, but with justice, the Corvette came off second best and had to retire, while the Matra suffered a smashed rear wheel and tyre, suspension derangement and shattered bodywork, but Ganley was able to limp to the pits. Things were sorted out, another fibreglass tail fitted and Cevert rejoined the race, now in second and victory seemed assured for the Graham Hill/Henri Pescarolo car, especially as Cevert was soon back in the pits with a misfiring engine due to water getting in the electrics during the slow journey back by Ganley. All this lost them nine laps on the leading Matra, but so poor was the opposition that even that distance did not lose them second place.

In those damp closing stages Craft had an excursion before Tertre Rouge and damaged the front suspension of the Duckhams Ford, but he managed to creep back to the pits. The car had been fifth at this point but all they could hope to do was to patch up the front end, where the wishbone mounting points had been wrenched from the monocoque and make the car just drivable so that de Cadenet could drive slowly round for one lap and be classified at the finish. This last-minute disaster dropped them back to 12th, which gives no indication of how steadily the car had gone. Around the same time the last remaining Alfa Romeo spun in the wet and damaged the bodywork, but got back to have a new nose cowl fitted. As the last minutes ticked away, with Matras first, second and third, and about to form up for a triumphant ending to months of hard work and planning, the junior member of the team went missing as the ZF gearbox on Jabouille's car broke and stranded him out on the circuit.

At 4pm a French car won Le Mans for the first time since 1950, as the Matras took the flag in a formation finish, prompting jubilant scenes from the patriotic French crowd. It also marked a moment of history for Britain too, as Graham Hill achieved something no other had done before, adding a Le Mans victory to his Formula 1 World Championship and Indianapolis 500 victory, creating the triple crown of motor racing. – D. S. J.



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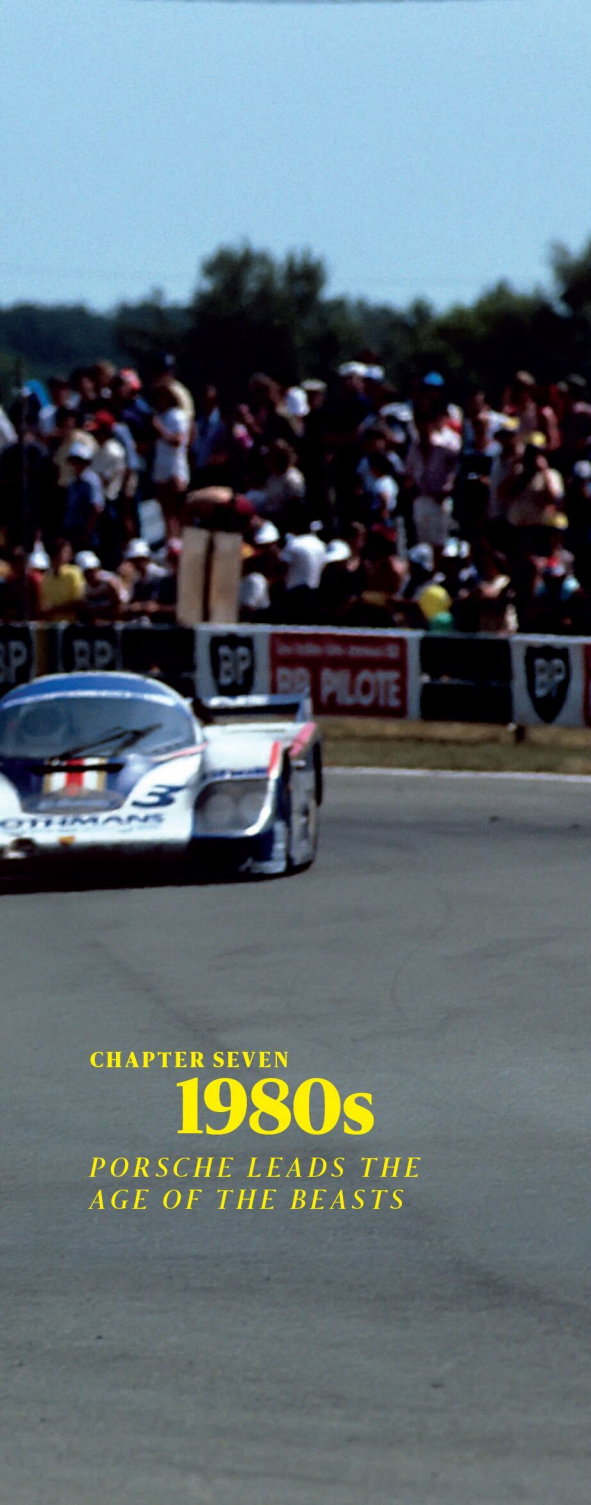
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CHAPTER SEVEN

1980s

PORSCHE LEADS THE AGE OF THE BEASTS

Sports car fans tend to get dewy-eyed when they look back to the 1980s as the decade brought Group C with its bumper fields of Porsche 956s, then 962s. Armed with equal machinery, privateer teams were able to take it to the works team. Then, as the decade came to a close, there was a glorious explosion of cars from rival manufacturers, as Mercedes, Toyota and, most notably, Jaguar went for gold.

The first race of the decade was very different, though, as the World Championship for Makes fought for traction. It was Porsche 935 versus the fragile Lancias, but the storybook gained a unique entry when Jean Rondeau won in a car bearing his own name. What changed after this was a considerable sorting out of the rulebook, with Group C being formulated in 1981 as a step towards rationalising a class structure that included no fewer than 10 categories. For 1982, there would be a reduction to six classes for Le Mans and the Group C ranks exploded from two WMs in 1981 to 28 cars in the top class. However, when the Porsche 956 broke cover at that Silverstone 6 Hours, the drivers hated it, with Derek Bell loathing the way they had to pussyfoot around to save enough fuel to finish, lapping 10sec off the pace. This simply wasn't what he thought of as racing. And yet, it was the start of something special and he and team-mate Jacky Ickx followed up their Le Mans victory in a Porsche 936 in 1981 with another in the 956, with the other works 956s second and third.

With Porsche releasing 956s to customer teams plus the introduction of Group C Junior (later C2), the ACO had so many entries in 1983 that it could slim the format down from seven classes to three. Porsche dominated, although Al Holbert's leading 956 had its engine cut out at the start of the final lap, then fire again so that he could hold off Bell to win.

The ACO's decision in 1984 to admit IMSA-spec cars and raise the weight of Group C cars by 50kg led to the works Porsches being withdrawn. Fortunately for Porsche, there were 16 privately-entered 956s and Henri Pescarolo and Klaus Ludwig outraced the works Lancias to win for the Joest team. It won again in 1985, this time beating the works team.

Porsche knew that a more serious challenge than the Lancias would be coming. A Group 44 Jaguar had won the IMSA GTP class in 1985, then in 1986 a three-car TWR-run team was Jaguar's first works offering since 1955. Porsche won again, with none of the Jaguars finishing. For 1987, though, having won the first four races of the year, Jaguar arrived at Le Mans expecting victory and left with only fifth place as Bell, Holbert and Hans Stuck won for Porsche. Then, in 1988, the thousands of Jaguar fans were rewarded, but only just, with Jan Lammers nursing the winning XJR9 through the final 40 minutes, including a pitstop, stuck in fourth gear.

A footnote was that the French WM team finally achieved its aim of exceeding 400kph on the Mulsanne, with Roger Dorchy hitting 405kph in the cool of the evening. There was to be no Jaguar follow-up. The first two cars home in 1989 were from Mercedes, its cars run by Sauber and it was a first win for the Silver Arrows since 1952.

1980s

CAR TO REMEMBER

Porsche 956/962

The Le Mans 24 Hours has become a flat-out sprint – a process that started with the arrival of arguably the greatest Le Mans racer ever, the Porsche 956. Here was a car that could be driven full pelt – fuel allocation allowing – day and night. And that was night and day compared with what had come before.

“Driving the 956 for the first time was a shock, but in a positive way,” says Hans Stuck, a two-time Le Mans winner and world champion with the car’s long-wheelbase variant, the 962. “Every time you got in a sports car before the 956, you expected something to break, fail or overheat. But you didn’t have to worry about that now. The car did what it was designed to. You just had to drive it.”

Porsche and the car’s architect, Norbert Singer, got the basics spot on, which goes a long way to explaining the car’s longevity. The 956/962 was still a Le Mans front-runner six seasons after its debut and remained in the mix for three more years after that. Brun Motorsport came within 15 minutes of second place in 1990.

And then there was the return of the car to the winner’s circle as a ‘road car’. The opportunistic Dauer Porsche 962LM GT racer claimed a seventh Le Mans victory for the design in 1994. That wasn’t

even the end of the story: there were still variants of the 956/962 on the grid as the decade closed.

The car’s record speaks for itself, and not just at Le Mans. Aside from those seven wins, it triumphed at Daytona six times and at the Sebring 12 Hours on four occasions. Its tally of World Championship victories stands at 29, while in America it collected a massive 55 wins in IMSA GTP.

The true greatness of the 956/962 is encapsulated within those statistics, and privateers played a central role in its history. Porsche decided to build a run of customer cars for 1983, kept on making them into the 1990s and was more than happy for a well-run car to show the factory the way.

That was crucial in helping to pull sports car racing in general out of the doldrums. The 956/962 kick-started Group C. Would Mazda, Jaguar, Nissan, Toyota and Mercedes have been drawn into the category had there been no Porsche? Probably not.

Porsche’s participation in Le Mans – and that flotilla of privateers – put the race back on the map and made it a destination for other manufacturers.



THE WINNERS

1980

RONDEAU M379

Jean Rondeau/Jean-Pierre Jaussaud, 4308km

Pole goes to the fastest crew, rather than swiftest individual. Rondeau becomes first winning driver-constructor

1981

PORSCHE 936

Jacky Ickx/Derek Bell, 4825km

1982

PORSCHE 956

Jacky Ickx/Derek Bell, 4899km
New regulations impose 100-litre fuel tanks and limit cars to 24 pitstops. Porsches win every class

1983

PORSCHE 956

Vern Schuppan/Hurley Haywood/Ai Holbert, 5048km
Porsche’s 956s finish 1st-8th

1984

PORSCHE 956B

Henri Pescarolo/Klaus Ludwig, 4900km

Porsche factory boycotts race due to row about fuel regulations

1985

PORSCHE 956B

Klaus Ludwig/Paolo Barilla/John Winter, 5089km

1986

PORSCHE 962C Derek Bell/Hans

Joachim Stuck/Ai Holbert, 4973km

1987

PORSCHE 962C Derek Bell/Hans

Joachim Stuck/Ai Holbert, 4792km

Increasing speeds lead to introduction of the Dunlop chicane

1988

JAGUAR XJR-9LM

Jan Lammers/Johnny Dumfries/Andy Wallace, 5333km

First Jaguar win since 1957. Roger Dorchy’s WM P87 hits 405kph (251mph) on Mulsanne

1989

SAUBER-MERCEDES C9

Jochen Mass/Manuel Reuter/Stanley Dickens, 5262km

Political spat leads to the race’s exclusion from World Sports Car Championship for the first time since the inception of the series back in 1953

STARS OF THE DECADE



Derek Bell

The popular Brit won at Le Mans five times, four in the ‘80s and three of them when partnering Jacky Ickx. Bell still managed to finish on the podium in 1995 with a McLaren F1, when well into his 50s.



Ai Holbert

A huge part of Porsche’s endeavours through the ‘70s and ‘80s, winning Le Mans three times in the Grp C era. His run might have continued were it not for his tragic death in a plane accident in 1988.



Klaus Ludwig

The German touring car ace hated every second at Le Mans, but still won in Joest’s Porsche 956B in 1984 and ‘85, bringing his total to three victories. Quite a feat for a driver that disliked it so.



Jochen Mass

He won more races than any other driver during the Grp C era, often alongside Ickx in a works Porsche. Things only came together for him once at Le Mans, with Sauber-Mercedes in 1989.



The start of the 1981 race. During this time the grid was populated by ageing prototypes and GT cars, and Porsche's 936 scored its third win. Little did the spectators know the following year would bring with it the birth of a new era. Group C would go on to become a golden age



By 1987, Porsche was well established at the head of Group C with first the 956 and then the 962, but growing opposition from Jaguar and Mercedes kept things interesting



Top left: Mario Andretti drives his Kremer Porsche 956 into the sunset in 1983. He shared the car with his son Michael and Frenchman Philippe Alliot, the trio finishing third behind a pair of works 956s

Left: Kremer Racing ran this unique 917K/81 variant in 1981 for Bob Wollek, Guy Chasseuil and Xavier Lapeyre, but the car showed its age and retired with engine failure in the seventh hour

Right: Jacky Ickx poses before the start of the 1983 race. The Belgian would kick-start the '80s with back-to-back wins in 1981/82. He would make his final Le Mans appearance as a driver in 1985





Left: Le Mans local Jean Rondeau finally achieved his dream of winning the race in a car bearing his own name in 1980 alongside Jean-Pierre Jaussaud. It still stands as a unique achievement which is unlikely to ever be matched. Just five years later he would be killed when his car was hit by a train on a level crossing

Right: The course car leading the field around ahead of the start of the 1981 race

Below right: Derek Bell enjoyed his best years as part of Porsche's works Group C effort, scoring three Le Mans wins (here is 1982). His hat-trick in Rothmans cars brought his tally to five wins

Below: Jacky Ickx in the Porsche 936 of 1981. This car was an evolution of the same design that first won Le Mans back in 1976, such was the staying power of the open-topped model







Top left: The famous Le Mans road signs depicting the start and finish of the 13.6km circuit

Above: Joest Racing's highly patriotic Porsche 956 of 1986, shared by George Follmer, John Morton, Kenper Miller. Wonder which country they're from?

Right: The scene of victory in 1989, when Team Sauber Mercedes' twin C9s finished one-two to record the Silver Arrows' first Le Mans victory since that of the 300 SL of 1952

Left: The Ferrari 512BB of French automotive dealer Charles Pozzi, driven by Claude Ballot-Léna and Jean-Claude Andruet. They would win the IMSA GTX class in a fine fifth overall in 1981



It had been quite some time coming. Jaguar hadn't topped the order at La Sarthe since its glory days with the D-type in the 1950s. But the XJR-9 changed that.

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN *MOTOR SPORT*, JULY 1988

The one nightmare shared by Jaguar's board members was the possibility of defeat at Le Mans. Last year the three entries were prepared beautifully, but lasted only 16 hours effectively, and even with five improved versions this time, no-one could confidently predict success.

If any Silk Cut Jaguar XJR-9LM was going to win, it was going to have to beat the Porsche 962C of Derek Bell, Hans Stuck and Klaus Ludwig, the Stuttgart firm's standard bearers, and both Stuck and John Watson, Jaguar's philosopher, predicted a particularly hard contest which would go the whole distance. They were so right!

A superb victory was achieved by Jan Lammers, the Dutchman who took the brunt of duties, Johnny Dumfries, who easily overcame early-season disappointments, and by Andy Wallace, Tom Walkinshaw's young protegee who had never driven around the circuit until the first qualifying session, and had to screw up the courage to take the infamous Mulsanne kink "flat".

"They tell me you can overtake slower cars at the kink without lifting, but I'll practice that when the track's clear!" said the likeable Oxford driver, who had been to Le Mans as a spectator some years ago, and must now be the envy of 50,000 or more Britons who made the pilgrimage to La Sarthe.

Wallace had probably never driven a racing car at 200mph before, certainly not for longer than a few moments, and he was awed to realise that his XJR-9 was covering the Mulsanne straight at a full 240mph, which was 10mph faster than his elders had been going 12 months ago. The Jaguars were fearsomely fast, they handled a lot better than last year's XJR-8LM models, and given the necessary reliability they were bound to equal, or exceed, the performance of the three works Porsches.

The gap between the winning Jaguar and the Bell/Stuck/Ludwig Porsche (those three drivers had accumulated a total of 10 Le Mans wins between them, and were quite formidable) was, officially, 2min36.85sec at the end, or 6.5sec for each hour of racing, but even that margin is more than it ought to be, for Lammers crossed the line into the last lap just 100 seconds ahead of Ludwig. Immediately, the jubilant crowd began to spill onto the finish-line, and when Jaguar #2

reappeared Lammers barely made it to the flag. By the time Ludwig arrived the cheering throng was so dense that the Porsche was flagged into the pit-lane to complete its race there. Although Lammers' Jaguar led the first three hourly bulletins, and from 1am Sunday to the finish, the margin was rarely more than a lap, sometimes a handful of seconds.

It wasn't all about statistics, of course. The figures can be worked out later, and are interesting, but out there on the track the duel was at times very personal between the Jaguar and Porsche drivers. Both Derek Bell and Martin Brundle recall last year's battle with relish, and although Brundle and Nielsen went out on Sunday morning with a broken head-gasket, while in third place, they had kept the Porsche nicely sandwiched all night.

In darkness it was difficult to see who was doing what to whom on the Mulsanne, but at times they shook the trees as they roared past side-by-side, or weaving to break the other's slipstream advantage. Overtaking slower cars was accomplished with merely a jink, to give no help to the rival, and if any were concerned about the dangers of the place, they kept their feelings well under control.

- THE RELIABILITY WARS -

In such a contest, the issue is decided almost inevitably by pit-stops, and here the winning Jaguar held a slight advantage. Lammers' car lost about two minutes having the rear body-panel supports changed after Jesus Pareja ran into the back of him, no time having a nose-panel changed, and two minutes having the windscreen changed, as it became lighter on Sunday morning, so stonechipped had the glass become.

In the Porsche, Ludwig lost five minutes in the fourth hour when the reserve fuel pump failed to work properly – the delay worth about a lap and a half and dropping #17 down to seventh place. The German had not tried to eke another lap out of his tank, as some people believed, but the engine spluttered and died at Indianapolis when he switched onto reserve for his last eight litres. Car #17 was driven slowly and jerkily to the pits, firing on three or four cylinders at best and needing a push from marshals on an uphill stretch towards the Maison Blanche. It was a nerve-racking time for those three drivers, but it must have lowered the stress level in the



Above: The turbocharged Porsches were dominant in qualifying, but couldn't keep pace with the V12s of Jaguar in the race

Below: The winning Jaguar XJR-9LM, which Lammers coaxed to the finish while stuck in fourth gear



neighbouring Jaguar pit. Tom Walkinshaw knew that Bell's car was the one to fear, even though at that stage Lammers had Wollek ahead and the Andretti family just behind.

Wollek's Porsche led throughout Saturday evening and was merely seconds behind until he lost two laps having the water pump replaced. The Andrettis had lost time around midnight, experiencing the same problem, and both their engines suffered as a result of overheating. The water pump itself was reliable, but the pipe connecting it to the radiator fractured where it went around a corner. Porsche's technicians were not sure whether to blame this fault for the problems which came later, but minutes before halfway Sarel van der Merwe coasted to the pits with a broken engine.

The water pump and pipe were replaced on Stuck's Porsche as a precaution, the four-minute operation being combined with a routine stop, and ensured that he and Bell could enjoy their usual quota of luck and reliability. The Andrettis slowed again at breakfast time, a fuel-rail having punctured, and the result of that was a holed piston. Porsche's usual remedy worked again, the plug lead being removed, and the Americans ran on five cylinders for seven hours, to sixth place overall.

Not all the Jaguars were perfect, though. John Watson, Raul Boesel and Henri Pescarolo were off-duty by midnight, the gearbox having failed, and the Americans Danny Sullivan, Davy Jones and Price Cobb needed two complete transmission rebuilds during the night, the first failing to cure a worrying vibration. They finished 16th, but Brundle and Nielsen were mortified to be put out of the race after 19 hours with a failure that resembled last year's, only two hours later in the race.

Derek Daly, Kevin Cogan and Larry Perkins had no particular problems, except that their car's handling was not as good as they would have liked, and they lost their race-long battle with Stanley Dickens, Frank Jelinski and "John Winter", who steered Reinhold Joest's Blaupunkt Porsche 962C to a worthy third place overall, nine laps adrift of the leaders.

Fifth were David Hobbs (celebrating his 49th birthday with an excellent drive), Didier Theys and Franz Konrad. Hobbs, incidentally, first competed at Le Mans in 1962, in a Lotus Elite, and a year later he drove Eric Broadley's Ford V8-powered, mid-engined Lola GT on its Sarthe debut. The Ford GT40 was developed from the Lola, and the 7-litre MK2s from that, which is significant only because Mario Andretti



Left, top: The Porsche 962 driven by Vern Schuppan, Bob Wollek and Sarel van der Merwe rounds Arnage Bend in the morning fog

Left, middle: Jan Lammers waves to the fans after his heroic efforts to maintain the Jag's gearbox

Left, bottom: The 1988 race ran near-faultlessly, with the winners clocking 5332.97km, at the time the second-highest mileage ever

drove the Ford in 1966 and 1967, though he finished on neither occasion. In 1966 Ford sent seven 7-litre GT40s to end Ferrari's six-year dominance of the race, and the American would have appreciated Jaguar's effort this year, which sent five 7-litre XJRs to sort Porsche out.

The two Sauber-Mercedes entries were sadly pulled out of the contest following an explosive tyre-failure during practice on Wednesday evening, although Klaus Niedzwiedz had been able to bring the C9/88 back to the pits under its own power. The cars were withdrawn for an accumulation of reasons, and if anything Peter Sauber and Mercedes were admired for making a sound, but very difficult decision.

Last year Mike Thackwell retired his Sauber from the race with a blown tyre. Earlier this year Mauro Baldi had the unusual experience of bursting two rear tyres simultaneously while testing at Monza. Then Jean-Louis Schlesser announced that he would not drive at Le Mans because the straight was too dangerous. Baldi needed heavy persuasion to appear in the 24 Hours, and Niedzwiedz's burst tyres was, if anything, just the last straw, the one occurrence nobody wanted to know about.

The background, inevitably, harks back to the dreadful accident at Le Mans in 1955, a disaster to which Mercedes' name is blamelessly attached forever. Since the tyre was destroyed on Niedzwiedz's car and Michelin's engineers could not provide an explanation for the failure, nor a convincing assurance that it would not happen again, Peter Sauber really had no alternative but to pull out.

- PORSCHE vs JAGUAR -

In the end there were only two teams which could contest the lead throughout 24 hours, those of Porsche and Jaguar, and only two cars equipped to go the distance.

Lammers did the lion's share of driving aboard the winning car, and was warmly praised by team boss Tom Walkinshaw. It was the Dutchman who started and finished the race, and applied vital pressure on Sunday morning with a lap at 3min 24.13sec, practically as fast as he had qualified on Wednesday. Dumfries was both quick and reassuring, and Andy Wallace delighted the team with his maturity and competitive speed. They covered 40 laps more than last year's winners (the 1987

event was controlled by pace-cars for three hours, after Win Percy's accident), and covered 5332.79km. Only once has that distance been exceeded – in 1971, when another Dutchman, Gijs van Lennep, covered 5335.3km in a 5-litre Porsche 917 with Helmut Marko. Lammers and Co. were merely three kilometres short of the absolute record, although today's track is significantly slower with the Porsche Curves and the much-disliked Dunlop chicane in place.

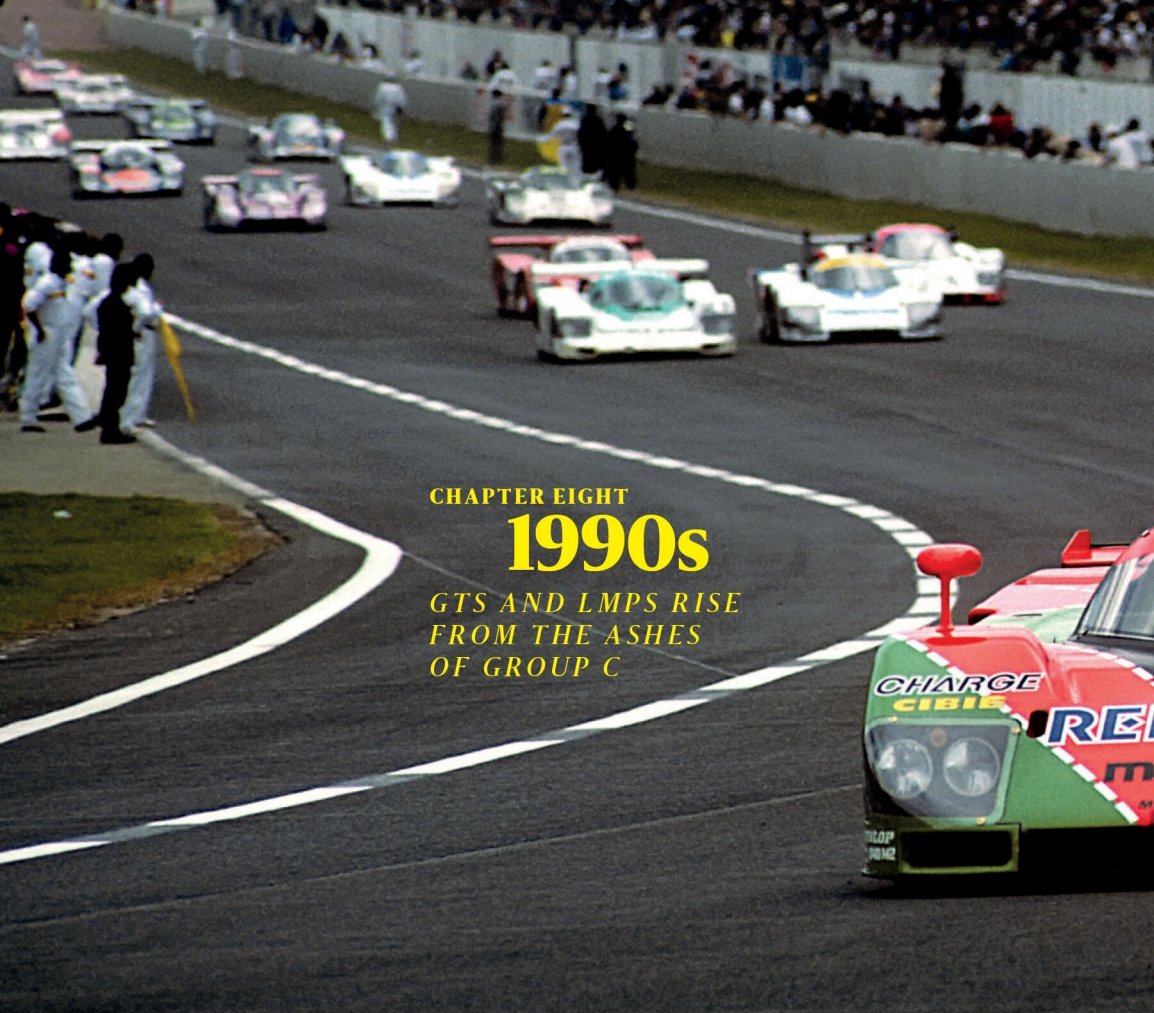
Not once during the 1988 World Sports-Prototype Championship has a pace-car been seen, and it was a relief to everyone that the only serious accident, to Ukyo Katayama at the Porsche Curves in Yves Courage's Cougar, did not cause any injury to its driver or anybody else.

The Mulsanne straight has been entirely resurfaced to a high standard, and lined with triple-layer Armco, making life considerably easier for the drivers. Roger Dorchy achieved his, and WM-Peugeot's, ambition in recording the fastest-ever speed along Mulsanne, being timed at 405kph (251.66mph) in the twin-turbo V6-powered P87. Most teams go to Le Mans to win, but there are always those with different objectives!

Gordon Spice rarely has reliable competition, to his own regret, and he strode to another C2 class championship in his Spice-Cosworth DFL with Ray Bellm and Pierre de Thoisy as co-drivers. Last year Spice, Fermin Vélez and Philippe de Henning covered 320 laps and finished in sixth place overall; this year Spice and friends covered 351 laps and finished 13th.

Since making its breakthrough in 1970, Porsche has won the Le Mans 24 Hours 12 times, and every year since 1981 without a break. The Silk Cut Jaguar team's victory was badly needed by the sport as a whole, and the emotional scenes on the ACO's balcony allowed all the tiredness to be forgotten. Jan Lammers, Johnny Dumfries and Andy Wallace were happy as never before, Sir John Egan pledged to return in 1989, and Tom Walkinshaw led the singing of the national anthem not just once, but four times altogether.

Stuck and Bell in turn threw their arms round Walkinshaw, spontaneous gestures of congratulation to a superb team-director. One day their luck had to desert them, and it transferred to a team which thoroughly deserved to win. Perhaps now that Porsche's spell has been broken for the moment, it will be Jaguar's turn to enjoy a series of successes.



CHAPTER EIGHT

1990s

GTS AND LMPS RISE FROM THE ASHES OF GROUP C

Toyota and Nissan invested a fortune in trying to become the first Japanese manufacturer to win Le Mans. They would have to beat Jaguar, which was no easy task as the Tom Walkinshaw Racing-run works team was back in front in 1990, this time claiming a 1-2, with the JXR-12 driven by Martin Brundle, Price Cobb and John Nielsen. Then, while they were having another shot in 1991, smaller Japanese rival Mazda beat them to it. As notable as that win for Bertrand Gachot, Johnny Herbert and Volker Weidler was, history also relates that the drivers had a new challenge thanks to the insertion of two chicanes on the Mulsanne Straight, breaking up the slipstreaming battles and providing opportunities both for overtaking and for spills.

Home glory has been rare at Le Mans and the French finally had something to cheer about in 1992 when Peugeot dominated to take the first win by a major French manufacturer since Matra's glory days in the 1970s. Peugeot was even more in control in 1993, taking a 1-2-3 with the rest nowhere. With the ACO pledging to stimulate GT racing rather than having fields filled entirely with prototypes, this led to a big swell in applications for entries in 1994. Yet, an anomaly meant that cars entered in the Le Mans GT1 category included a Joest-run Dauer 962LM, a Group C car by any other name that would clearly have the legs on its GT-shaped rivals.

A genuine GT car won in 1995, this time a McLaren F1, a car that designer Gordon Murray had never intended to go racing until badgered into it by road car owners including



Mazda beat both Nissan and Toyota to become the first Japanese brand to win Le Mans. The rotary 787B was never the fastest, but was incredibly reliable in 1991. It remains the only car to win Le Mans without using a conventional piston engine

Ray Bellm and Thomas Bscher. In a very wet race, JJ Lehto's pace when conditions were at their worst was enough to ensure that it finished clear of the works Courage in which Bob Wollek was denied the home win he had been seeking since 1968. He would be the bridesmaid again in 1996 and 1998.

Porsche and TWR joined forces in 1996 to enter two open-topped, Jaguar XJR-14-based machines that TWR had offered to Porsche for 1995 when a rule change left the Germans without a suitable car for its engines. The combination was good, as the TWR-Porsche WSC95 won first for Davy Jones, Manuel Reuter and Alex Wurz and then for Michele Alboreto, Stefan Johansson and a young Tom Kristensen.

There were also pure Porsches running in 1996, in GT1. These ruffled feathers, as they were mid-engined, something

not seen in the road car on which it was based, but it was Porsche's response to McLaren's win in 1995. Two road-going versions were built while it was homologated, but it took until 1998 for victory to come, with Allan McNish, Laurent Aiello and Stephane Ortelli sharing the glory. Audi, BMW, Mercedes and Toyota entered the GTP class in 1999. Mercedes' CLR's got airborne twice before the race and once during, but BMW did things better with its cars built by Williams Grand Prix Engineering and outran the less fuel-efficient Toyotas.

New pits were built under a giant grandstand in 1991 and the paddock fenced off to allow the teams more space. The public area on the inside of the run to the first corner became more corporate but remained a hub for the fans, with most staying in touch thanks to the advent of Radio Le Mans.

1990s

CAR TO REMEMBER

McLaren F1 GTR

Creator Gordon Murray never intended to adapt his McLaren F1 for racing, but the spirit of the age made such a conversion inevitable. It was the mid 1990s: Blur and Oasis squabbled for radio airtime and endurance racing was in the throes of resurrection. The BPR Global GT Series paved the way ahead - and while drivers were initially happy with Porsche 911s, Venturi 400s, Ferrari F40s and suchlike, McLaren's new BMW V12-powered F1 looked irresistible. When the 1995 Le Mans 24 Hours began, there were seven on the grid.

There wasn't a seismic shift from road to track. The GTR was 90kg lighter than its progenitor, had fractionally narrower/wider front/rear track and bigger wheels and brakes.

"It was lovely to drive," says Andy Wallace, who that year shared David Price Racing's Harrods-backed McLaren with the Bells, Derek and Justin. "I'd raced only prototypes at Le Mans, so the McLaren was very different, but I was surprised by just how good it felt. You had to be aware of the big, heavy engine behind you, because you didn't want all that weight stepping out of line, but I'd had that with the Jaguar XJR-9's 7.0 V12, too, so it wasn't too hard to get my head around it. The braking and traction were particularly impressive."



It wasn't beyond the bounds of possibility that a McLaren might win outright: there were some brisk prototypes entered - Kremer K8s, a couple of Courages and the fast, frail WRs, one of which took pole - but the GT ranks had strength and depth.

"We had a reasonable chance," says Wallace. "We knew the car was robust - the engine could have done a full season without a rebuild, never mind 24 hours. In a prototype you usually feel a slight power loss over the race, but the McLaren recorded 326kph through the first chicane at the start and 336 towards the end! There was quite a bit of rain that year and I have vivid memories of a river than ran across the circuit just beyond Tertre Rouge. In a GT you had a 170mph tankslapper... which did wonders for your concentration."

Wallace and the Bells were victory contenders for a long time, but clutch slave-cylinder failure scuppered their chances. They used only fifth and sixth gears for the last couple of hours, but still finished third.

JJ Lehto, Yannick Dalmas and Masanori Sekiya won as McLarens filled four of the top five places, the most recent Le Mans victory for a genuinely road-derived car (and also the last time a venerable disease clinic served as winning title sponsor).

STARS OF THE DECADE



Mark Blundell

The Brit saw Group C out in style. At 24 years old he became the youngest ever Le Mans pole-sitter with an incredible lap for Nissan in 1990. Two years later he won with Peugeot.



Yannick Dalmas

He won with Peugeot in 1992, in the Dauer 962 in 1994, the McLaren F1 in 1995 - beating the prototypes in a GT - and BMW in 1999. Dalmas was one of the few constants in a topsy-turvy decade.



Bob Wollek

The French star finished on the podium four times in the '90s. Often in contention, but his luck never held. Was on the verge of retiring from the sport when he lost his life in a cycling accident in 2001.



Yojiro Terada

Obscure to some, perhaps, but has made at Le Mans 29 times. Only Pescarolo and Wolkle managed more starts. Terada took two class wins in the '90s. Scored his best result - seventh - in '95.

THE WINNERS

1990

JAGUAR XJR-12

John Nielsen/Price Cobb/Martin Brundle, 4882km
Two chicanes added to the Mulsanne Straight

1991

MAZDA 787B

Volker Weider/Johnny Herbert/Bertrand Gachot, 4923km
New pit complex opens. Mazda becomes first Japanese winner. Race reinstated in WSCC

1992

PEUGEOT 905 EVO 1B

Derek Warwick/Yannick Dalmas/Mark Blundell, 4787km
Peugeot 905 Spyder becomes first single-seater to race at Le Mans. Only 28 cars start, the smallest field since the war

1993

PEUGEOT 905 EVO 1B

Eric Hélary/Christophe Bouchut/Geoff Brabham, 5100km

1994

DAUER 962 LE MANS

Yannick Dalmas/Hurley Haywood/Mauro Baldi 4686km
After 26 participations, Derek Bell announces his retirement

1995

McLAREN F1 GTR

Yannick Dalmas/Masanori Sekiya/JJ Lehto, 4056km
First win for McLaren... and also for a three-seater. Derek Bell comes out of retirement to share third-place F1 GTR with son Justin

1996

TWR PORSCHE WSC-95

Davy Jones/Alexander Wurzl/Manuel Reuter, 4814km

1997

TWR PORSCHE WSC-95

Michele Alboreto/Stefan Johansson/Tom Kristensen 4910km

1998

PORSCHE 911 GT1-98

Laurent Aiello/Allan McNish/Stéphane Ortelli, 4784km
Suzuki/Hoshino/Kageyama finish third to become the first all-Japanese crew on the podium

1999

BMW V12 LMR

Joachim Winkelhock/Pierluigi Martini/Yannick Dalmas, 4983km

Flip out! Mark Webber's Mercedes CLR gets airborne during Saturday morning warm-up in 1999. Despite front aero tweaks, this would be the second time for the Aussie, and the third – for Peter Dumbreck during the race – would lead to the team's withdrawal



1990s

Right: Group C in all but name and regulation. Dauer's 'road-going' Porsche 962 iteration was driven to Le Mans victory in 1994 by Mauro Baldi, Yannick Dalmas and Hurley Haywood. This would be the final hurrah for the 962 design

Below: While Mercedes struggled, BMW played a blinder in 1999 with its V12 LMR running like clockwork. The car, designed with the help of the Williams F1 Team, took the Munich brand to its first, and so far only, Le Mans victory with Dalmas, Pierluigi Martini and Joachim Winkelhock

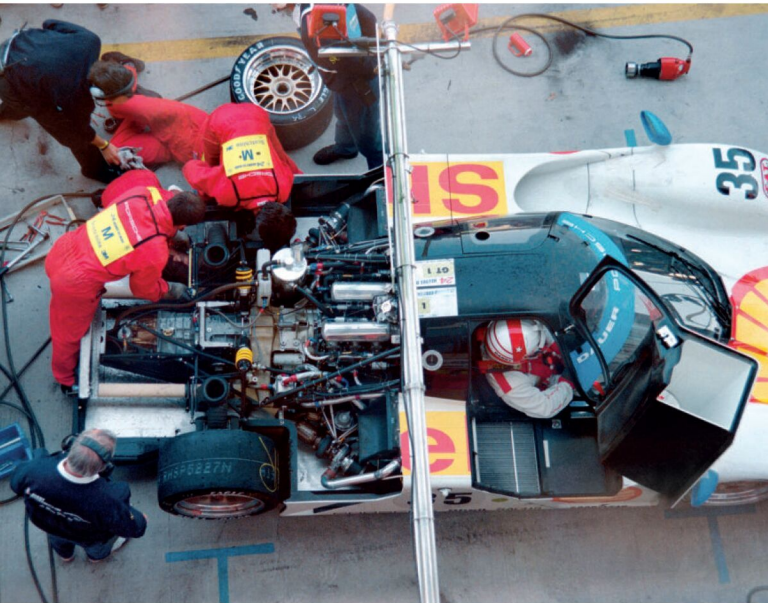




Above: With the new pits complex covered by a monster grandstand, the home straight at La Sarthe had never looked so impressive

Right: Asia's arrival: As well as Nissan and Toyota, Mazda took a shot at Le Mans glory as Japanese brands went all-out for glory. Here promotional models dressed in traditional Japanese Geisha costume stand before the Mazdaspeed 787s on the grid before the 1990 race





Above, left: Jaguar was back on top of the world by 1990, even if it needed some trickery. After his own car failed, Martin Brundle was plugged into the sister XJR-12 in place of Eliseo Salazar, and went on to win alongside Price Cobb and John Nielsen. Outraged, Salazar quit sportscar racing

Left: Le Mans 1994 was an eventful one for the Dauer Porsche that didn't win. Having battled back from the headlights failing for Thierry Boutsen at high speed approaching Tertre Rouge, the team had to change a transmission shaft. But the car still finished third. Here, Danny Sullivan waits patiently as the team goes to work

Right: Peugeot claimed honours with its 3-litre 905 Evo in both 1992 and 1993



Nissan found itself at the front of the field for the 1990 race, purely due to some heroic work from Mark Blundell, who wrestled his over-boosting R90CK to pole, six seconds faster than anybody else. He clocked 238mph on the Mulsanne, the fastest ever since the chicanes arrived.



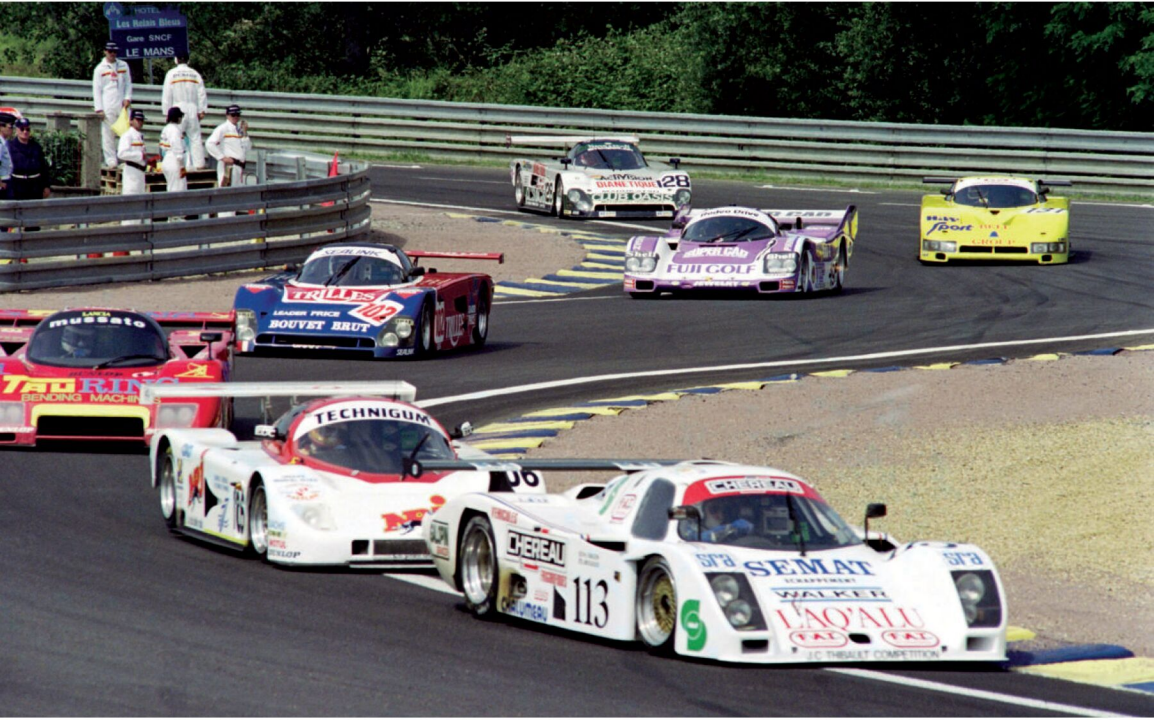


Left: Team Nissan driver Mark Blundell in 1990. Blundell would go on to win Le Mans outright with Peugeot in 1992, and finish second with Bentley in 2003

Right: Porsche has a long history of innovating its way between the rules at Le Mans. Its 911 GT1-98 was perhaps the ultimate homologation special, taking a clear one-two in 1998. Here Allan McNish, Laurent Aiello and Stephane Ortelli took glory

Below: While the big brands dominated up front, the C2 class proved very close in 1990. Here the Cougar C20S leads the cars

Below right: Swedish driver Stefan Johansson chats with his new team-mate, Dane Tom Kristensen ahead of the 1997 race. Kristensen would be a late addition to the Joest Porsche team, but would make a stellar debut to begin his incredible Le Mans record





FROM THE ARCHIVE

Not much was expected of the squadron of McLaren F1 GTRs in 1995. Having never faced a 24-hour race before, the road-derived car defied belief to pull off the most successful Le Mans debut of all time.

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN *MOTOR SPORT*, JULY 1995

Thirteen years ago Porsche's new 956 cars swept to a 1-2-3 result at Le Mans on their debut. No manufacturer has come anywhere near crowning that achievement... until now. McLaren Cars of Woking won the 1995 edition of Le Mans outright, claimed the top four positions in the Grand Touring category and, for good measure, placed four cars in the top five positions.

JJ Lehto/Yannick Dalmas/Masanori Sekiya won the race in an F1 GTR by a single lap from Bob Wollek/Mario Andretti/Éric Hélary in the WSC category Courage Porsche. Third was the Harrods McLaren driven by Andy Wallace/Derek Bell/Justin Bell, and they were followed at a distance by two more F1s, those of Ray Bellm/Maurizio Sala/Mark Blundell and Fabien Giroix/Olivier Grouillard/Jean-Denis Delétraz.

It was a race of dreams fulfilled, dashed hopes, and of nightmares too. Relentless, drizzling rain made the track treacherous for 16 hours, throughout the night, which caused a number of accidents: Andretti spun and damaged the Courage, sinking Wollek's hopes of winning the event at his 25th attempt; Hans Stuck also spun his chances away in the Kremer K8 Porsche, a car that suffered a transformation in the race that moved Thierry Boutsen to remark: "It feels as though the wing has been fitted upside down."

Some drivers have a knack of winning. Yannick Dalmas has the knack, taking the podium on all four appearances at Le Mans. He was first with Peugeot in 1992 (with Derek Warwick and Mark Blundell), and became the last World Sportscar Champion, second with Peugeot in 1993, first with Dauer Porsche in 1994, and first again with McLaren in 1995. Pedigrees don't get much better than that! The car he drove, the McLaren F1 GTR, hardly had a pedigree at all. The GTR race version first turned a wheel in February, and has never raced on a wet track. Least of all did it have any form at Le Mans, a circuit that will inevitably search out any weakness in a design.

Its new multi-plate carbon clutches were a worry certainly, and spoiled the chances of John Nielsen and Jochen Mass - the outstanding leaders at the 11-hour mark - then of the Harrods McLaren crew who looked like being the winners at the 22-hour mark. It seems rather churlish, though, to single out one weakness in an outstanding design. The McLarens took Le Mans by storm and shamed a number of seasoned rivals who should have done better.

For the time being, the days of massively funded works teams are over, and wealthy amateurs are centre stage. You'd have to go down to eighth place, the GT2-winning Honda NSX, to find a manufacturer prepared to invest a Formula 1-type budget in its team. Testing was minimal and, with some notable exceptions, it showed. A 24-hour test would have done wonders for Honda's new GT1 cars, for Ferrari, and even for Porsche with the new GT1. But, for various reasons, a number of teams went to Le Mans ill-prepared.

It was glaringly obvious when qualifying began that the ACO's desire to invite certain teams, to ensure variety on the grid, was half-baked: Lamborghini never showed up, the AIM team's efforts destroyed by Italian politics; the SARD-entered Toyotas were far from ready; Massimo Sigala's Ferrari 333 SP had not been prepared to the ACO's regulations and, like the Corvette Team USA's entry, had its engine tuned for IMSA's 104-octane brew. If variety is the spice of life, Alain Bertaut's existence as the ACO's Sporting Director is illuminated by Gerard Welter's skills as a Peugeot specialist. In the 1980s Welter built Group C WMs with the ambition of exceeding 400kph (248mph) on the Mulsanne Straight, and it was he, more than any, who fired Jean-Marie Balestre to impose two chicanes on the world's most famous stretch of race track.

Nowadays, Welter builds little 650kg single-seaters which, with enveloping Scalex bodywork and 450bhp turbocharged Peugeot M16 engines, prove to be faster and more nimble than proper two-seat sports and GT cars. William David and Patrick Gonin were able to dominate the front row of the grid in their WRs, to be the hares before the hounds as the pack lined up on Saturday afternoon. Bob Wollek was third quickest, with Franck Lagorce alongside in Yves Courage's Chevrolet powered C41, an unraced carbon machine with great potential. Eric van de Poele was not in the line-up though, his Chevrolet-powered Courage disqualified for being 20kg under weight at the final check on Thursday evening. The local team had installed a new engine for the second qualifying session, but the car was otherwise in the same trim as on Wednesday, when it was 9kg overweight at 899kg. Stuck declared on Wednesday evening that the carbon chassis Kremer C8 was "the finest Porsche I have ever driven", then went straight out and crashed it! He fell victim to the uneven nature of the carbon brakes, something that bothered a lot of drivers in the wettest part of the race. The Kremer car was repaired

The Kokusai Kaihatsu Racing McLaren F1 GTR of JJ Lehto, Yannick Dalmas, Masanori Sekiya takes the flag to make history. This was also the first-ever GTR chassis, and therefore the most tired as it had done all the development work beforehand



Right: The Harrods-backed McLaren of the Bells and Wallace could have won, but for clutch issues

Below: The sports-prototype grid suffered in the the horrendous weather, lacking grip and proving tough to drive. The Andretti/Wollek/Hélary Courage battled back from a crash to finish second

Below, right: The podium as McLarens finish first and third, not to mention fourth and fifth too...



and went fractionally quicker on Thursday evening, but its handling deteriorated dramatically at the start of the race. "I would be too frightened to lap below four minutes" said Stuck, and neither Boutsen nor Bouchut would disagree. Franz Konrad crashed the Kremer team's second K8 Porsche on Thursday evening, and twice on Saturday night, moving Jurgen Lassig to remark "good car, bad drivers" after retiring on Sunday morning. One way and another, the open-top World Sports Cars did not reach their potential. Andretti and Wollek could have celebrated their first victory, Hans Stuck his third, but success eluded them. The single Courage-Chevrolet that started soon retired with a broken battery, which had Lagorce trying to raise the fuel pressure. Failing that, he pushed the car for more than a kilometre down the Mulsanne, a fruitless and somewhat dangerous effort in the tradition of the olden days. The two WR Peugeots kept ahead of the pack in the first

hour but, as rain swept across the circuit, the unfortunate Gomin back-flipped towards the end of the Mulsanne Straight and came to rest upside down in the middle of the track. It took 31 minutes to release the Frenchman, who suffered broken ribs and concussion, and pace cars were out all the while. Drivers had now to learn how to drive the low-downforce cars on a wet track.

— MCLARENS FORGE AHEAD —

John Nielsen drove the first four hours of the race before handing the West McLaren to Jochen Mass with a healthy lead over Mario Andretti in the Courage Porsche. Likewise, Pierre-Henri Raphanel drove three hours in the GTC Motorsport Gulf McLaren before handing over to Philippe Alliot in third place. Fourth was Derek Bell in the Harrods McLaren, which

Andy Wallace had driven for three consecutive stints. Ray Bellm crashed heavily out of third in his Gulf McLaren, which was co-driven by Maurizio Sala and Mark Blundell. Bellm admitted that he was caught out by the skittishness of the McLaren in rain. "I was taking it easy, but it turned round on me" he remarked while repairs were carried out. Having started life as a road car, the McLaren had a full crash structure which took the frontal impact, and Sala was able to get back into the race, albeit seven laps down. It needed tape and rivets to keep the new bodywork in place since the mounting points were damaged, but Bellm's car didn't lose any more time throughout the race. A possible victory went down the pan, but at least it was the owner who did the damage! Two more potential winners ruined their prospects with spins resulting in damage. Stuck lost the poor-handling Kremer Porsche and knocked off a wing end-plate, and almost 10 minutes in the pits was spent checking the car over. Andretti damaged the back of the Courage when he came up to lap Lassig's Kremer in the Porsche Curves and went off line. The impact with the wall removed the rear wing and bent the right-rear suspension, which was changed in 29 minutes. This put them five laps down, and they lost the race by a single lap! Conditions steadily worsened during the evening, and the Porsche teams suffered the most.

The entire Larbre Competition team was wiped out by accidents, Pierre Yver having a solo off in the GT2/1 model which has competed regularly in the BPR series. Jesus Pareja aquaplaned off at the Porsche Curves and damaged the new RSR GT1 badly, and was joined on the walk back by fellow Spaniard Tomas Saldana, who crashed the Kremer team's Repsol Porsche. Just for once it was not the cheery Prince Alfonso d'Orleans who did the damage! Those who led GT2 in Porsches were fated, and last to go was the Stadler Motorsport entry in which Andreas Fuchs joined Enzo Calderari and Lilian Bryner. The young German had only been in the car 15 minutes when he was passed by Emmanuel Collard in the one remaining Larbre Porsche GT1, failed to brake at the next corner and took both cars out of the race. Fuchs blamed a failure of ABS, but he was far from popular when he returned to the pits.

All these incidents put quite a different complexion on the race. At midnight British-built cars held the top five positions with Porsche-powered Kremers and Courage in sixth, seventh and eighth places. The West McLaren was a lap ahead, Nielsen and Mass excelling despite the lack of a wiper, since the motor burned out. Wallace and the Bells were second in the Harrods McLaren despite a delay when a throttle cable support bracket had to be mended, and the 'Japanese' McLaren of Lehto, Dalmas and Sekiya was third, also a lap down. PC Automotive's Jaguar XJ220Cs were running extremely well, though on low boost in the quest for reliability. The turbocharged cars were extremely difficult to drive in the wet - "animals" according to Win Percy - but at midnight the Richard Piper/James Weaver/Tiff Needell Jaguar was up to fourth place, and the Win Percy/Olindo Iacobelli/Bernard Turner Jaguar was ninth. The Jaguars didn't last the night,

unfortunately. Iacobelli was caught out by the conditions and crashed, and the engine failed in Piper's. Ferrari had arrived with a splash, but its effort was not rewarded: Massimo Sigala's Ferrari 333 SP, entered against the wishes of the sponsor, retired after 28 minutes with an electrical failure; Luciano della Noce's Ferrari F40 broke its transmission; the second Ferrari Club Italia F40, with a line-up including Gary Ayles, needed a new transmission before midnight. With Porsche's representation restricted by the ACO to a quarter of the grid, and then devastated by crashes, the GT2 category was led by Reeves Callaway's Chevrolet Corvette at midnight, followed by Rocky Agusta's Corvette with Robin Donovan and Eugene O'Brien on duty. Coming up fast, though, was the Kunimitsu team's Honda NSX GT2, which started badly with a broken oil line catching fire. But it recovered well enough to win the class. Judged by the clap-o-meter, though, the two works Marcos cars were far ahead in public appeal, although troubled by exhaust and electronic problems. The West McLaren effectively went out after 11 hours when the clutch failed. It was replaced in an hour, but then Nielsen crashed out with cold brakes.

Also out of the contest was the second Gulf McLaren, that of Lindsay Owen-Jones, which was damaged when a lapped competitor hit it up the rear when Philippe Alliot was driving.

- THE SPLASH TO GLORY -

With the two Jaguars out by morning, the run to the flag was a straight contest between two McLarens and the Wollek/Andretti/Dalmas Courage. The McLarens were proving extremely reliable, but the leading cars were beginning to be handicapped by dragging clutches which made gearchanging difficult. Once the West McLaren had gone, the Dave Price-managed Harrods McLaren doggedly hung onto its lead, but was always under threat from the Dalmas/Lehto/Sekiya GTR. Derek Bell's hopes of winning for a sixth time, a record that would put him level with Jacky Ickx, his former driving partner, were dashed with two hours to run. Andy Wallace took over for the final sessions, but stalled leaving the pit. He lost three minutes over the normal span of a refuelling and tyre stop while the clutch fluid was bled. That was all the time it took for Dalmas to sweep into the lead, and for Andretti to get onto the same lap. Like last year, the closing stages were not to be missed. Dalmas maintained his lead despite a short fuel stop half an hour from the end but, with Wallace struggling for gears, Andretti was eating into his advantage, and the American finally seized second place in the last hour.

It was a momentous race, and it certainly vindicates the ACO's policy of trying to equate the performances of GT and WSC sports cars. An exotic GT has won for the second time, and although Monsieur Bertaut is adamant that the WSC and LMP2 categories will be maintained next year, it may be for the last time. With IMSA's WSC category in trouble in America, and with no more than six WSC open-top cars at Le Mans, their prospects look bleak. The future of Le Mans, it seems, lies with McLaren until an even better GT car comes along.

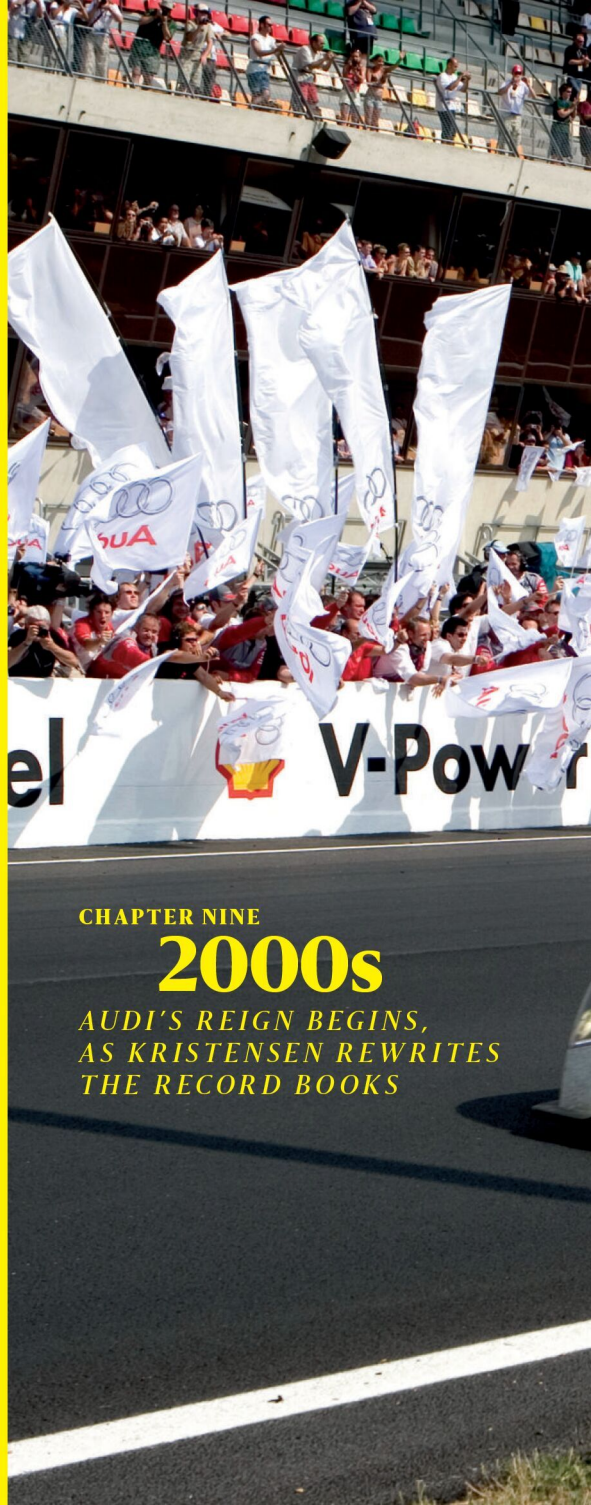
The new millennium marked the start of a definite era: an Audi era. Its open-topped R8s had made their Le Mans debut in 1999 after decades of Audi achieving its glory on the rally stages and in the touring car arena. It was clearly time for a change of image, and Audi wasn't hanging around, as it took the first win of the decade. This went to Tom Kristensen, Frank Biela and Emanuele Pirro. It proved a great formula, as this trio then won again in 2001 and 2002. Success in this great enduro is down to far more than outright speed and the story of Kristensen's golden decade is how his crew constantly rose above Audi's other excellent crews. Coincidence certainly wasn't part of this equation as he proved that his focus was laser sharp and his ability to attack through triple stints invaluable by winning seven times in the 2000s.

In 2003, though, sportscar racing historians were treated to a once-great marque striking back. Bentley had made its return in 2001, found speed in 2002 and then been offered a near open goal when Audi stood down for a year, ostensibly to let Bentley win. After all, the marques were owned by the same parent company. As it happens, the winning Speed 8 ran faultlessly and even its slightly delayed sister car was good enough to beat the best of the Audi privateers, with Kristensen, Rinaldo Capello and Guy Smith heading home Mark Blundell, David Brabham and Johnny Herbert. Kristensen and Capello then returned to Audi in 2004 and won again. Then, in 2005, Kristensen surpassed Jacky Ickx's long-standing Le Mans record by taking his seventh win.

Nothing stays the same forever, and it was time for Audi to retire its R8 in 2006 to usher in turbo-diesel power with its R10. The result? Another win, the first of two in a row for Biela, Pirro and Marco Werner. Then, in 2008, it was a third win for the R10 TDI, this time with Kristensen (yes, him again) getting to stand on the top step of the podium with Capello and Allan McNish.

Finally, in its third year of trying to match Audi, Peugeot triumphed in 2009. It had had the fastest car in 2008, but it had been trumped by Audi's operational superiority, something that could only be appreciated if you were lucky enough to witness the way they went about their work in the pits. This time Peugeot got everything right and triggered huge celebration from proud French fans, but it was slightly tempered by the all-French crew of Sébastien Bourdais, Franck Montagny and Stephane Sarrazin being beaten by a lap by the sister car driven by David Brabham, Marc Gené and Alex Wurz. The latter's second Le Mans win followed some 13 years after his debut success.

Emphasising how the entry lists were strong throughout the decade, there was little need to change the class structure. There was a renaming of the prototype classes in 2004, from LMP900 and LMP675 to LMP1 and LMP2. The GT classes became GT1 and GT2 the following year. This would prove to be the start of a global explosion in GT racing that continues to this day, its cars often just as popular as the prototypes.



CHAPTER NINE

2000s

*AUDI'S REIGN BEGINS,
AS KRISTENSEN REWRITES
THE RECORD BOOKS*



We'll have none of that 'oil-burner' talk here. Audi's revolutionary R10 TDI of 2006 changed the game at Le Mans, and followed perfectly on from the R8, which won the race five times to become the most successful Le Mans racer ever

2000s

CAR TO REMEMBER

Audi R10 TDI

When an electric vehicle wins the Le Mans 24 Hours, or a prototype powered by a hydrogen fuel cell manages the feat, its inspiration will be traceable to a racing machine we now consider almost conventional. Audi's R10 TDI was anything but when this turbodiesel arrived in 2006, starting of a three-year winning streak.

The R10 wasn't the first diesel-powered Le Mans racer: there had been so-called 'oil-burners' straight after World War II and a small British privateer team had brought the fuel back to Le Mans in 2004. But the Audi was the first purpose-designed diesel racer with, most pertinently, the first bespoke diesel racing engine. The Audi changed attitudes, both inside and outside the sport. It showed what could be possible with what was still called an alternative technology in the world of racing and it showed the outside world, most pertinently in the USA, that diesel engines could be sporty, even sexy.

The R10 was a winner from the outset: it was one of a line of Audis, stretching from the R8 to the original R18, to notch up a debut victory in the Sebring 12 Hours. It wasn't an easy car to drive initially, thanks to the weight of the V12 turbodiesel and its massive torque. But once long-time Audi



tyre supplier Michelin had honed its rubber for the car in time for Le Mans, it was a dream.

"It was a tricky car to tame," says Emanuele Pirro, who scored two of his five Le Mans victories with the R10 together with Frank Biela and Marco Werner. "Even if the car looks big and bulky today, it was a big step forwards on the R8; it had to be because it was designed six years later.

"In the beginning, we didn't know how to handle the weight and the torque, but it became agile and even user-friendly. It was a car you could really push on street circuits in the American Le Mans Series and rain was the ultimate test. I was really worried when it was wet in qualifying in 2006, but it was still enjoyable to drive."

The R10 is important for reasons other than its technology. It is often forgotten that the car was unbeaten at Le Mans in the hands of the Joest team. It won first time out in 2006, beat the new Peugeot turbodiesels one year later and then, in its dotage, scored arguably Audi's greatest victory. Audi's ageing contender wasn't a match for the Peugeot 908 in 2008, but Joest, Allan McNish, Tom Kristensen and Rinaldo Capello ran the perfect race to snatch a final victory for this trend-setting design.

STARS OF THE DECADE



Frank Biela

After winning the German, French and British touring car titles for Audi, Biela was drafted into the LMP team. He reeled off three Le Mans wins early in the decade and retired with five total.



Emanuele Pirro

Another of Ingolstadt's touring car aces who came good in prototypes, the Italian partnered Biela at Le Mans, the pair making eight starts together. They took all five of their victories together.



Tom Kristensen

The most successful endurance driver ever. Nine victories at Le Mans, including a first with Porsche in 1997 and six in a row from 2000-05 (one with Bentley), will be a tough record to beat.



Oliver Gavin

Gavin was a GT stalwart from 2001, finishing on the class podium eight times, including five wins in Corvettes. He retired after 2019 having made 18 consecutive starts with the American brand.

THE WINNERS

2000

AUDI R8

Frank Biela/Tom Kristensen/
Emanuele Pirro
5008km

2001

AUDI R8

Frank Biela/Tom Kristensen/
Emanuele Pirro
4367km

2002

AUDI R8

Frank Biela/Tom Kristensen/
Emanuele Pirro
519km

2003

BENTLEY SPEED 8

Rinaldo Capello/Guy Smith/
Tom Kristensen
5146km

Audi withdraws its works cars, opening the door for its sister

2004

AUDI R8

Seiji Ara/Rinaldo Capello/
Tom Kristensen
5170km

2005

AUDI R8

Tom Kristensen/JJ Lehto/
Marco Werner
5051km

Audi's R8 enters the record books with a fifth Le Mans win, the most of any single model of car

2006

AUDI R10 TDI

Frank Biela/Marco Werner/
Emanuele Pirro
5187km

Audi shocks the world by taking the first outright win for a diesel

2007

AUDI R10 TDI

Marco Werner/Emanuele Pirro/
Frank Biela
5029km

2008

AUDI R10 TDI

Allan McNish/Rinaldo Capello/
Tom Kristensen
5193km

2009

PEUGEOT 908 HDI FAP

David Brabham/Marc Gené/
Alexander Wurz
5206km

The adoration of a home crowd; after years of Audi dominance, Peugeot celebrated its all-time LMP1 high in 2009 when the 908 HDI FAP finally beat its German rivals. Marc Gené and David Brabham savour the moment from the podium



2000s





Top: The arrival of Peugeot Sport from 2007 sparked Le Mans' 'diesel wars' as both brands fought it out with the alternative fuel. Audi held firm in 2008, as Capello's R10 TDI leads Jacques Villeneuve in the Peugeot 908

Left: Since the turn of the decade, Corvette had been a constant at Le Mans with its ever-evolving run of GT1 cars. It held an unbroken 20-year appearance record until Covid hit and kept the Americans away in 2020. Oliver Gavin drove for 18 of those races in the 2000s

Right: Audi drivers (L-R) Emanuele Pirro, Frank Biela and Marco Werner would win twice as a trio. Here they take in the 2006 drivers' parade





Left: Emanuele Pirro at the wheel of his Audi R8 in 2000. The R8s would sweep the board and win the race five times in total

Right: The start of the 2006 race, the first to feature proper front-running diesel power. McNish leads Biela as the Pescarolos and Courages languish in their wake

Below right: Lord Paul Drayson (British secretary of trade and innovation) broke into GT racing during this period. Here is his biofuelled Aston Martin during the 2009 race. He championed many alternative fuels, such as ethanol, electric and self-charging hybrid

Below: Audi took a break from winning in 2003, allowing sister brand Bentley a shot at glory with its Speed 8. Kristensen, Guy Smith and Capello did the business in the third year of the LMP1 programme. Bentley promptly quit afterwards





FROM THE ARCHIVE

Tom Kristensen won Le Mans at his first attempt, and was barely off the podium thereafter. Little wonder the Dane's passion for La Sarthe still shines through. This is his story.

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Le Mans is an extraordinary race, and to conquer it takes an extraordinary mix of abilities. Physical fitness and stamina, high levels of concentration, often during dramatically changing conditions. And, nowadays, real tenths speed, day and night, hour after hour.

Thus, to win Le Mans even once is a signal achievement. To win it eight times [nine after 2013] indicates a truly exceptional talent. Only Tom Kristensen has done this. In 1997 he was an F3000 driver, leading the European championship and knocking on the door of F1, when at a few days' notice he was summoned to Le Mans for the first time. Having never sat in the car before, he won, and set a record fastest lap during the night.

Tom was born in the small northern town of Hobro, in a flat over his father's garage business. Today, every inch the professional racer, he lives in Monaco. But to relax he likes to spend time with his young family in his holiday house on the North Jutland coast at Skagen. We meet there, and lunch is at the 100-year-old Ruth's Hotel, a stone's throw from the sea.

"My dad was a big influence on me," he says. "He was into hot rod racing and rallycross, even a bit of circuit racing. But money was tight, so he was always struggling with bad equipment. He'd work hard all day and work on his race car all night, and his enthusiasm came across to me. From when I was six I used to go with him to races. At first I was more interested in stickers to add to my collection, but even then I was aware of the friendship, the paddock camaraderie."

Fast-forwarding through a hugely successful, but also hugely punctuated karting and single-seater career, Kristensen eventually found himself in F3000, leading the championship in 1997 when a chance phone call changed everything.

"The week before Le Mans, on the Thursday, I got a call from Ralf Jüttner of Joest Racing. They were running a Porsche with Michele Alboreto and Stefan Johansson, and thought of me for the third seat. Everything happened very fast. I flew to Germany next day. The car and most of the mechanics had already left, but on the workshop floor was a spare monocoque, and Jürgen Hördt suggested I get in and try it. I wriggled into the seat and I said, 'It's fine, it fits me very well.' Then, starting to feel at home, I said, 'Maybe if the brake could be just a fraction closer, it would be perfect.' And old Jürgen put his head down to me in the cockpit and said, '*Das schnellste bestimmt bei uns*' - 'with us, the fastest driver decides that'.

"I went to Le Mans, and had just 18 laps in practice. And we won. Michele and Stefan were so good to me. Michele knew the car well, so I spent a lot of time with him. We went together on a scooter and looked at parts of the track, and I asked him about lines and gearchange points. He never told me what to do, but when I asked questions he always gave me good answers. He gave me confidence, such a good guy.

"And during the night I happened to set a few quick laps. It was getting towards what we call 'Happy Hour': it's just starting to get light, so visibility is better, but it's still cool, so you can run a relatively soft tyre and the air density is good.

The rules allow you to stay in the car for up to four hours, so I was on my third stint and the tyres were still good. Jüttner came on the radio and said, 'Fastest lap, well done. Keep the pace.' That meant: don't go slower, don't go faster. Three laps later he came on again, and told me I had beaten my new record. That was 3min 45sec. Then, because the tyres seemed OK, he said, 'Tom, can you do another stint?'. I did, but I was knackered. It was my first Le Mans and I was concentrating so hard, even on the straights. Back then there was no power steering, no paddle-shift: you shifted with your left hand, a good old Porsche 'box, very strong, but heavy. But they'd given me this chance, and I wanted to pay them back.

"For 1998 I signed with BMW, which was developing its new Le Mans car with Williams. I had a good relationship with Williams, and got on very well with Patrick Head. I hoped it might lead to something, and I tested the F1 car. But they had Zanardi, Ralf Schumacher, suddenly there was Montoya, Button, Junqueira, Jörg Müller... so it didn't work out."

The BMW V12 LM had barely run when the teams went to the May pre-qualifying weekend. "It was only the second time I'd been at Le Mans, and that was when I had my worst scare. On the fast stretch between Mulsanne Corner and Indianapolis, suddenly I had no steering. At around 200mph I was on the grass. I braked with my left foot and managed to keep the car out of the barriers, got back onto the Tarmac, drove back to the pits and said, 'I think I have a rear puncture, or some sort of aero problem.' They couldn't find anything wrong, and my team-mates Steve Soper and Hans Stuck were saying, 'If Tom isn't happy let us take over.' Then they found it: the floor had split, allowing air to build up under the car. Patrick Head showed me later on the telemetry that the front wheels had been off the ground for between 19 and 27 metres. In the race we ran in the top six, but there was a problem with the wheel bearings. After four hours we parked it."

BMW was back in 1999 with the radically revised V12 LMR. "It was a big year for manufacturers - Mercedes, Toyota, Nissan, Audi, BMW - and we led for most of the race. We were three laps in front after 19 hours and it was all looking good. But at Le Mans a small thing can always turn into a big thing. A damper unscrewed itself and pushed against a rollbar, which in turn jammed the throttle cable to one bank of cylinders. JJ was driving, and with half the V12 on full throttle he had a massive crash. A couple of months later I had my first meeting with Audi. Dr Wolfgang Ullrich, its head of motorsport, showed me a drawing of the R8, and we made a deal that day."

It was the start of a very fruitful relationship. Now, at 32, he realised that sports cars were his future. And, teamed with Emanuele Pirro and Frank Biela, he won the next three Le Mans races on the trot: "The 2001 victory is particularly unforgettable, because on April 25 that year we lost Michele." Alboreto was killed during a pre-Le Mans test at the Lausitzring, when a rear tyre failure led to a terrible accident. "We respected Michele greatly, he won his final race at Sebring, and we felt

him missing at Le Mans, we all thought about him. After his crash there had been a lot of talk about the danger of this type of racing. And Le Mans 2001 was wet. Endlessly wet. Heavy rain at Le Mans means you are constantly aquaplaning, because water lies in the indentations in the track. That year the 24 hours felt like a week. There were a lot of accidents, and driving slowly during all the safety car periods the cockpit filled up with water, up to your arms, like sitting in a bath. Because of the conditions, and all the safety car periods, we weren't changing gear at full throttle, and that upset the transmission. In the end I lost fourth gear, so I chugged into the pits in fifth and, with less than four hours to go, they changed the gearbox. We still won by a lap. On the podium I felt completely empty, physically and mentally. Dr Ullrich said, 'This one is for Michele', and we all burst into tears. It was the most emotional Le Mans for me.

"In 2002, close to midnight, I had a right-front puncture going into the Porsche Curves. A huge explosion, took out a lot of the front bodywork. I managed to get to the pits on three wheels, but I thought our race was gone - or, at least, we'd be in the pits a very long time. The mechanics were working on the right front, I was just sitting in the cockpit trying to be calm, and after about two minutes the chief engineer said, 'Tom, be ready.' The guy working on the right front caught my eye and put his thumb up. Then the engine was fired up and out I went. I'd been stationary about three minutes. I couldn't believe it. We won the race, and the next morning when I looked at the car I realised there was a metre and a half of bodywork missing, back to the radiator."

In 2003 there were no works Audis at Le Mans, so Tom was seconded to Bentley. With Dindo Capello, already a familiar partner from the ALMS, and Guy Smith he won again.

"The Bentley was a closed car: better aero, but little space inside, and very hot. Running behind the safety car was almost unbearable, because at low speeds there was no airflow. But for me the Bentley is still the most beautiful Le Mans car."

Tom won the 24 Hours again in 2004, with Dindo and Seiji Ara in a Japan Team Goh Audi R8, and in '05 with JJ Lehto and Marco Werner in an American Champion Racing R8. He had now scored a quite astonishing six consecutive victories, and seven in all - beating Jacky Ickx's long-standing record. For '06 the Audi works outfit was back with its mould-breaking R10 TDI turbodiesel, and Tom was teamed with Allan McNish.

Tom, Allan and Dindo won the R10 victory first time out, at Sebring, but at Le Mans Capello had an off avoiding a slower car. Delays to mend battered bodywork and replace a turbo left them third. Then in April 2007, doing the DTM for Audi, Tom was involved in a horrifying high-speed pile-up at Hockenheim. His car was T-boned, reportedly generating forces of 63g. "I woke up in hospital feeling fine, because of all the adrenaline, but by Monday night I felt terrible. For a long time I was just unwell, with dizziness and headaches. It took me two years to recover fully."

Nevertheless at Le Mans that year things seemed back on script. "We were ahead almost from the start, and after 17



hours we had a lead of over 15 minutes. But at Le Mans the biggest lead can turn into the biggest disappointment. While Dindo was in the car on Sunday morning, he lost the left rear wheel and crashed." Then came 2008, and a major onslaught from Peugeot, determined to end Audi's winning streak.

"The Peugeots were quicker, and everyone was waiting to see Audi get beaten at last. We were fighting the fastest Peugeot right up to the end, and we were on the same lap at the flag - but we were in front. That win really meant a lot, because it was so close-fought. For us it was a mega-triumph." But in 2009 Audi did get beaten. The French cars finished 1-2, with Tom, Allan and Dindo only third, six laps down, after many problems with the new R15. "In the bad weather the radiators silted up, a problem we'd never had before. When you run those diesels out of the temperature range you have two choices: run with less power, or blow up the engine within one lap. So we ran with less power. Afterwards the whole Audi team went over and congratulated Peugeot. That evening the Peugeot guys were wearing Audi shirts, all completely out of their heads, with the Germans in Peugeot shirts."

Le Mans is now a flat-out sprint that happens to go on for a day and a night. "You have to be absolutely on it, all the time. But you must be intelligent about it. The car is very strong, but if you are clumsy with it you won't get to the end. The key to being quick at Le Mans is how you deal with traffic. What matters is not your time over a single lap, it's keeping your average up over a whole stint. You have to read the traffic, because driving abilities vary. As you approach a car you can soon tell if there is a pro or an amateur at the wheel. If you catch one on the straight, you're lucky. If you get into somebody's boot



Still winning, with or without the factory: Kristensen shared this winning Audi Sport Team Goh R8 with Seiji Ara and Dindo Capello (in car) in 2004, and won again with Champion Racing a year later, before the factory returned with the R10 TDI

going into the Porsche Curves, it can cost you. You almost never get a clear lap. It can rain a lot at Le Mans. In the rain you're still flat out on the Mulsanne, but your absolute speed is less because the wet tyres have more drag. Visibility is a problem, because the spray from 50 cars hangs trapped below the trees. For a lot of the time, in traffic, you're driving totally blind. In 2001 we were only on dry tyres for five of the 24 hours. And, like I said, the aquaplaning...

"With Allan and Dindo, we blend together well. Guys you've won Le Mans with, you have a bond. I have so much respect for those two. At Audi all nine drivers get precisely the same in terms of car and equipment, Dr Ullrich insists on that. Of course each driver wants his car to win, but we all share information. I can tell you, not all Le Mans teams are like that.

"Everybody's goal has to be to maximise Audi's chances of winning. In 2008, late in the race when we were fighting the Peugeots, it was raining on one side of the circuit and not the other. One of the Audis was several laps behind for various reasons, so it was used as a guinea pig: it was sent out on intermediates to find out whether they were right for the conditions. Those guys helped us to win, because it's the whole team that wins. If anybody isn't a team player, or is just out for fame and fortune for himself, he doesn't get asked back."

In January [2010], playing badminton, Tom tore his left Achilles tendon, which compromised his fitness regime for a while. But, apart from some discomfort jumping in and out of the car during pitstops, he says he's now as good as new. "I do a lot of cardio work - running, cycling - plus strength training. When I'm stuck in a hotel room I do exercises. These cars are physical to drive. We have paddle-shift now, of course, and power steering, but with the diesels we run a lot of downforce. You can't afford to run too soft a brake pedal,

because you want the brakes to last, so they're set up with heavy pedal pressure. The clutch too: it's only used at pitstops, but you need enough travel so that, at the end of a hard race, if it's worn you can still get out of the pits.


"Some say I talk a lot on the radio, but there are drivers who talk more than me. I talk when I get out of the car. Some drivers just say to the engineer, 'It's OK, it's all good,' and then walk away. On the radio I tell them things they need to know for the pitstop, and then after I'm out of the car I talk to the chief mechanic - I had to avoid a car here, I touched a bit too hard on the floor there. Things like that are easy to remember because they give you a scare. We have an event button on the steering wheel, and if you have a bad shift or maybe you hit a kerb too aggressively, you hit that button and say over the radio what it was. They can check the telemetry and take note of it. From every single lap there are positives and negatives you can pass on. It's a constant process, because you're not going to win unless you can keep the average speed over the 24 hours up around 135mph with all the stops.

"After I've talked to the engineers and spoken to Ullrich and Jüttner I take a shower, get fresh underwear and overalls, go to the physio and they arrange some food if I want. I just want to calm down, but I don't sleep for long, just small naps. At the start of my Le Mans career, when I wasn't in the car I wanted to be in the pits all the time, like a kid in a candy store. Now I'm more relaxed, better at preserving energy. If I eat it will be a bit of pasta and tomato sauce, which is easy to digest, maybe yoghurt or a banana. And a lot of fluids, isotonic drinks. You lose weight during the race, but you need to keep your fluid intake up. We don't have a drinks bottle in the car, we just get a drink handed to us on a long pole during each stop.

"Howden 'H' Haynes engineers my car. I've known H since he was a young data engineer at Bentley in 2003. His number two is Leena Gade, a very clever woman. We love working with her, love to wind her up. Then there are 10 mechanics for each of the three cars. Stefan Grimm is chief on our car. They are all Joest people. The operation is Audi Sport Team Joest: Joest is actually running the car, but there are Audi people on all three cars as well. On the engine side it's Audi, so it's a carefully worked out mix. You'd struggle to know who was from Audi and who was Joest.

"A driver's working friendship with the mechanics should be automatic: if you have to think about the relationship, it's already too late. But the older you get the more you have to work at it, because it comes more easily when you are a young driver and you are the same age as most of the mechanics. The people working in the pits have just the same passion to win as the drivers do. A lot of them would have loved to race but didn't get the opportunity. When we have kart races, it's always interesting to find that some of them are very quick.

"On Monday morning, if the race has gone well, you wake early, still full of adrenaline, and breakfast tastes wonderful. I always go back to the circuit because the guys are packing up, I like to say thanks to all of them. If the race hasn't gone well you feel different, but I still want to say thank you."



CHAPTER TEN

2010s & '20s

*FROM HYBRIDS TO
HYPERCARS: THE
FUTURE IS HERE*

The 2010s began with four wins on the trot for Audi, with Marcel Fässler, André Lotterer and Benoît Tréluyer winning three, interrupted only by team-mates Loïc Duval, McNish and Kristensen in 2013. This was the Dane's ninth win, a record that is unlikely to be beaten.

The 2014 season was pivotal, as it marked a push towards hybrid technology. It had been seen first in the WEC's top class in 2012, but the ante was raised as twice the hybrid power was now being allowed. Pleasingly, the manufacturers attacked this concept differently. Audi chose to use a flywheel system that fed the front axle. Porsche opted for a lithium ion battery to harness the megajoules produced under acceleration and braking before releasing them to the front

axle. Toyota went for storing energy in a super capacitor and then feeding that to both axles. Better still, their different approaches meant that their cars all had performance advantages at different points around a lap, and Audi gained bragging rights by winning this sharpened contest.

Then came a sea change in 2015 as Porsche took its first outright win with a works entry since 1987. Success came thanks to Earl Bamber, Nico Hülkenberg and Nick Tandy. The Hulk was the first current F1 driver to win since Gachot and Herbert won for Mazda in 1991, so there was kudos aplenty when he took the trophy to the following grand prix.

Toyota was finally set for victory in 2016, but cruelly fell at the last, with Porsche taking the gift as Audi failed to add one more Le Mans win before quitting. It was Porsche again



Toyota rose to become the crew to beat during the later days of LMP1, scoring its first Le Mans win (finally!) in 2018. It has remained unbeaten since

in 2017, but then it too took its leave and with only two of the six LMP1 starters finishing, two LMP2 crews completed the podium, with Jackie Chan DC Racing's Oliver Jarvis, Thomas Laurent and Ho-Pin Tung just one lap away from what would have been an historic upset. Then, winning the prize for perseverance, Toyota landed its first Le Mans win in 2018, with Fernando Alonso sharing its winning car with Sébastien Buemi and Kazuki Nakajima, and they won again in 2019 when their sister car had late-race puncture issues.

One of the features of the race is the interest supplied by the other classes and the late 2010s were marked by glorious action in GTE.Pro, with six manufacturers entering 17 cars in 2018. Their racing was nose to tail in a changing mix of Ferrari, Ford, Corvette, Aston Martin, Porsche and BMW.

Toyota made it three in a row in 2020. Then came the first year of Hypercar in 2021, as the new top class. There were just five takers, with two from Toyota, two from Glickenhaus and one from Alpine. Despite a fuel pick-up problem that required shorter stints, Mike Conway's frustrations at Le Mans were replaced with success, sharing with Kamui Kobayashi and José María López. The most explosive drama came in LMP2 at the start of the last lap when one Team WRT ORECA failed and the other got home by just 0.7sec. Not surprisingly, Toyota won in 2022 again, this time through Buemi, Brendon Hartley and Ryo Hirakawa.

The anticipation for this year's centenary is extreme, not just for Ferrari's return to top-line sports car racing, but also for the top class entry soaring from five to 16.

2010s & 20s

CAR TO REMEMBER



Porsche 919 Hybrid

Let's face it: after its domination of the race through both the 1970s and '80s, Le Mans had become something of a strange place without Porsche. Sure, there were the near-constant GT efforts, but the Stuttgart marque is the sort of name that should always be vying for outright top spot. It is the most successful brand of all at Le Mans, having racked up 19 overall wins, courtesy of 36 different drivers. But prior to 2015 that tally stood three wins short, and Porsche hadn't celebrated an overall victory since 1998... Enter the 919 Hybrid.

The hybrid LMP1 rules that were brought in for 2012 quickly grew, and grew in more ways than one. What started out as a world-leading display of racing efficiency gradually developed into a war for all-out power. By 2016, LMP1 Hybrid cars were developing obscene levels of power, and lap times were tumbling. But none were quite as well put together as the 919 Hybrid. Porsche took a very pragmatic approach to the car, deciding in 2011 that it would arrive for 2014, and be up and running at least a full year before that. Porsche has never been scared to take its time, and what arrived was rather remarkable. At its heart the 919 Hybrid ran a tiny 2-litre V4 engine, which Porsche's engineers had managed to coax 500bhp from, and added to that were twin energy

recovery systems (kinetic from the brakes and heat from the exhaust), feeding their energy into a lithium ion battery that could then send it direct to the front axle on command to create temporary four-wheel drive. When the 919 Hybrid arrived at Le Mans in 2014, Porsche was incredibly keen to play the underdog card, but few were surprised to see the car leading the race at one point. Ultimately, it failed to win on debut against an impeccably drilled Audi team, but 2015 was a different story. The car was lighter, stiffer, the engine was tuned to as much as 600bhp, with an additional 400bhp available from the hybrid. Read 1000bhp, in race trim, and three works cars on the grid. Ultimately, the third car of Earl Bamber, Nico Hülkenberg and Nick Tandy would emerge victorious in a fight determined by Tandy's outstanding night-time stint. And from there the 919 Hybrid steamrollered both Le Mans and the WEC for the next three years, winning every title put in front of it. As a fitting tribute, Porsche took the reins off to create a monstrous Evo version, simply to show how fast the design could go without regulation. It weighed just 850kg and produced almost 1200bhp. Lap records fell to it around the world, including Neel Jani breaking the F1 lap record at Spa, hitting 223.1mph on the Kimmel Straight.

STARS OF THE DECADE



Fernando Alonso

Forget the cynical marketing ploy of his self-imposed mission to match Graham Hill's Triple Crown, Alonso was genuinely a class act at Le Mans, winning on both his attempts with Toyota.



Sébastien Buemi

Red Bull's ousted F1 protege took a while to find his feet in LMP1, but is now on course to etch his name into the list of all-time greats, boasting four Le Mans wins from the last five. Kristensen-esque form.



André Lotterer

Forget F1, he never needed it. Lotterer is simply too good and too quick in a sports car. Three wins for Audi alongside Fässler/Tréluyer made them the trio to beat, and now he's back, with Porsche.



Nick Tandy

Only one win (so far) but what a win it was. His stand-out night-time stint in 2015 won the race for Porsche. Lost to the GT ranks, he did get one more go in LMP1, and was leading in 2017 when his engine blew.

THE WINNERS

2010

AUDI R15 TDI PLUS
Mike Rockenfeller/Timo Bernhard/Romain Dumas
5411km

2011

AUDI R18 TDI
Marcel Fässler/André Lotterer/Benoît Tréluyer, 4838km

2012

AUDI R18 E-TRON QUATTRO
Marcel Fässler/André Lotterer/Benoît Tréluyer, 5152km

2013

AUDI R18 E-TRON QUATTRO
Loïc Duval, Tom Kristensen, Allan McNish, 4742.9km

2014

AUDI R18 E-TRON QUATTRO
Marcel Fässler, Benoît Tréluyer, André Lotterer, 5165.4km

2015

PORSCHE 919 HYBRID
Earl Bamber, Nico Hülkenberg, Nick Tandy, 5382.8km

2016

PORSCHE 919 HYBRID
Romain Dumas, Neel Jani, Marc Lieb, 5233.5km

2017

PORSCHE 919 HYBRID
Earl Bamber, Timo Bernhard, Brendon Hartley, 5001.2km

2018

TOYOTA TS050 HYBRID
Fernando Alonso, Sébastien Buemi, Kazuki Nakajima
5286.8km

2019

TOYOTA TS050 HYBRID
Fernando Alonso, Sébastien Buemi, Kazuki Nakajima
5246km

2020

TOYOTA TS050 HYBRID
Sébastien Buemi, Brendon Hartley, Kazuki Nakajima
5272.5km

2021

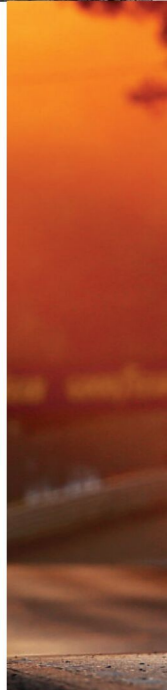
TOYOTA GR010 HYBRID
Mike Conway, Kamui Kobayashi, José María López, 5054.5km

2022

TOYOTA GR010 HYBRID
Sébastien Buemi, Brendon Hartley, Ryo Hirakawa, 5177.1km

Farewell to LMP1: a defining era of sportscar racing finished in 2020, with Toyota dominating to score its third-straight win. A constant in all of them was Kazuki Nakajima. He became the first circuit-racing Japanese FIA world champion in 2018-19, following world rally star Toshi Arai's 2005 and 2007 Production WRC wins

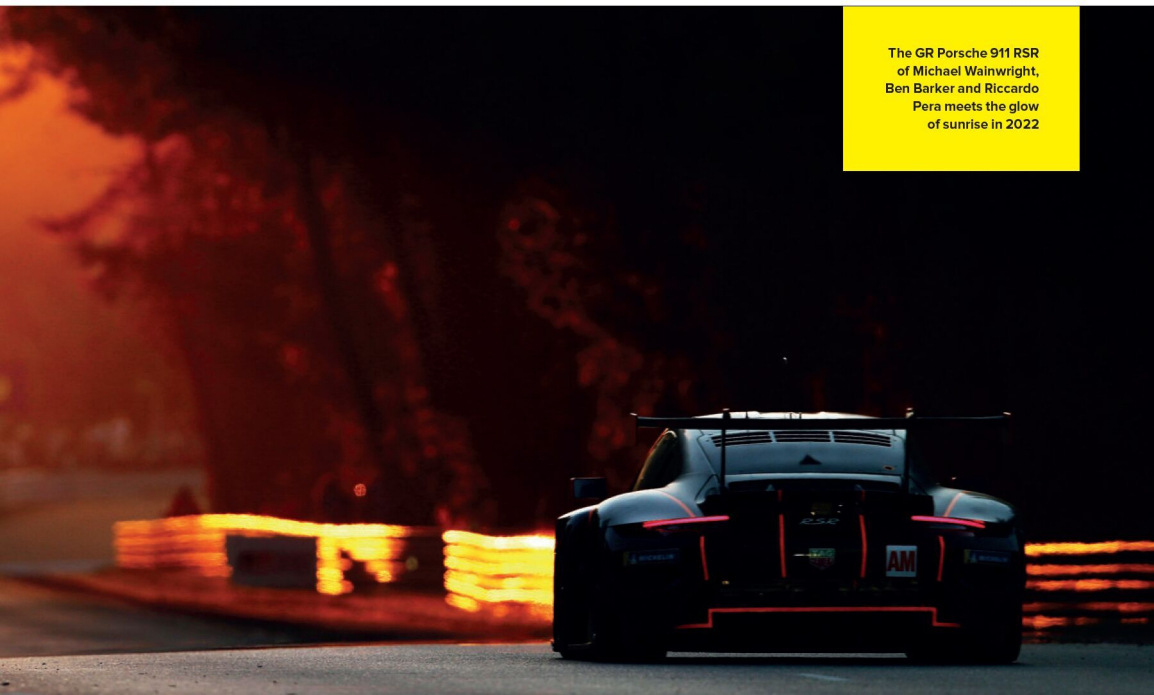
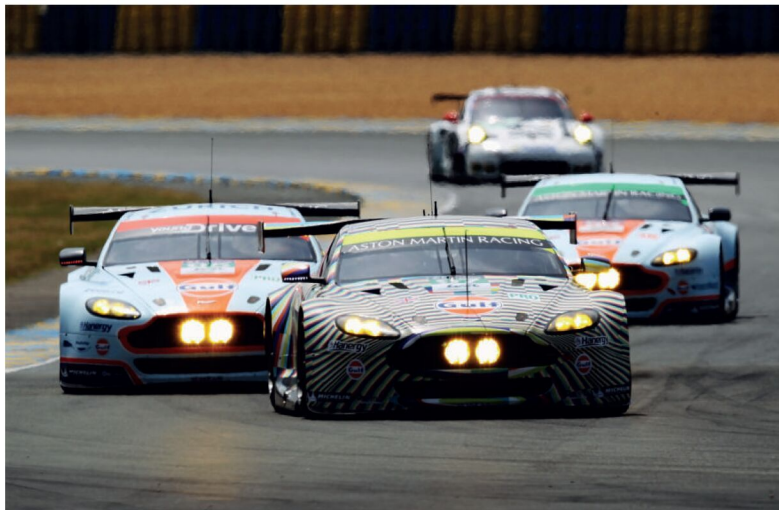




Left: we wonder what he's thinking? Tom Kristensen poses for a family photo with his nine winner's trophies. Will anybody ever match that?

Right: the explosion in popularity of GT racing has been a boost for Le Mans, and the GTE Pro and Am classes were a real highlight. Aston Martin was a constant, winning three times between 2014-2020. This is the 2015 Art Car in action

Below left: Nakajima could easily have been a four-time Le Mans winner, had it not been for heartbreak in 2016 when his car cut out while starting the final lap with just three minutes left, handing victory to Porsche. Here he is helped from the stricken TS050 Hybrid in tears



The GR Porsche 911 RSR of Michael Wainwright, Ben Barker and Riccardo Pera meets the glow of sunrise in 2022





Fernando Alonso's WEC sojourn pays off: The Spaniard and Switzerland's Sébastien Buemi (R) celebrate after winning Le Mans in 2018 with Toyota. Alonso would win again in 2019 and still holds a 100% record in the race

Above left: they certainly weren't pretty, but they were devastatingly effective. Audi's twin-tusked R15 TDI Plus swept the podium in 2010, with Timo Bernhard/Mike Rockenfeller/Romain Dumas taking the win

Right: US film director and team owner Jim Glickenhaus in 2022. He would watch one of his Hypercars score a podium finish

Left: the Fässler/Lotterer/Tréluyer superteam scored its final win in the R18 e-tron quattro in 2014, their third in four years





Left: one of Le Mans' defining women – Audi engineer Leena Gade became the first female race engineer to win Le Mans in 2011

Right: Hypercars are here! The #7 Toyota Gazoo Racing GR010 Hybrid of Mike Conway/Kamui Kobayashi/José María López leads the start of the 2021 race

Below right: Nobody could mistake that rumble. The sound of a Corvette echoing round the pits at night is a right of passage for endurance racing fans. This is the 2013 C6.R of Oliver Gavin, Tommy Milner and Richard Westbrook



Giving them the ol' one-three: Alex Lynn and Nicki Thiim stage a GTE Pro formation finish for Aston Martin Racing in the 2020 race. Lynn/Maxime Martin/Harry Tincknell's #97 took the glory, with the sister car finishing third



FROM THE ARCHIVE

And so, we come to the dawn of a whole new era, one that promises to eclipse even the great Group C. The Le Mans Hypercars are here, and you'd better believe the hype...

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This is it. Finally, and after so long, premier-level sports car racing is united. The same cars that race at the Daytona 24 Hours and Sebring 12 Hours in America's IMSA Sports Car Championship can now compete at the Le Mans 24 Hours in the World Endurance Championship - and major manufacturers are flocking back. Two parallel rule books are the key: Le Mans Hypercar (LMH) allows for greater technical freedom and four-wheel drive through front-axle hybrid systems; LMDh is simpler, more contained and based around a spec rear-axle hybrid on the spine of a next-generation LMP2 chassis, yet still allows for creative expression. Both forms should be able to race on an equal basis - and crucially win thanks to a system of Balance of Performance. So who's in, and who's doing what in what's known confoundingly as Hypercar in WEC and GTP in IMSA? Let's find out as a new golden era for a united world of endurance racing begins.

FERRARI

One of the longest waits in racing history is over. Ferrari is returning to top-level prototype racing as a factory team after an absence of 50 years. Or to put it another way, half the lifetime of the Le Mans 24 Hours itself, yet it's a race that Ferrari has won nine times.

Its comeback with the 499P LMH owes a lot to those numbers. The 50th anniversary of its last shot at outright victory with the 312PB in 1973 and the 100th birthday of the French enduro in 2023 were compelling draws when it looked at making a return. But so were rules that allow for a cost-effective entry at a fraction of what the manufacturers were spending during the LMP1 era and the freedoms that give a carmaker the chance to imbue its racer with the look of its road vehicles.

Nor was the significance of the era just about to begin lost on Ferrari and its sports car racing boss Antonello Coletta, the architect of the 499P programme. Ferrari wanted to be part of something big. So it would be fair to say that the stars aligned for the Scuderia to facilitate the biggest sports car story since Porsche ended another long absence in 2014.

The historic day of Ferrari's comeback announcement came in February 2021. The 499P - named after the capacity

of one cylinder of its twin-turbo V6 - was up and running at Fiorano back in July and since then has been on a whirlwind development programme: the marque has been conscious that it has a lot of catching up to do with the manufacturers in the WEC, as well as Porsche, which has been busy testing its LMDh for a year already. It had two cars running alongside each other almost from the get-go.

The pressure will be on for Ferrari when it and its chosen partner team - AF Corse, which gained vital experience of prototype racing in LMP2 last year to smooth its step up from GT racing. And it paid off, to an extent, with the 499P scorching to pole position on its debut at Sebring. The race proved a different matter though, as the superbly-drilled Toyota team still emerged ahead. Still, Ferrari looks quick and reliable, which should be a potent combination come Le Mans.

PORSCHE

Porsche was the first manufacturer to put its hand up in support of LMDh and was almost certainly the first to get board approval, though not the first to commit publicly. But that commitment, announced in December 2020, means that it will be back at the top of the sports car tree only five years after it axed its LMP1 programme with the 919 Hybrid. That compares with the 15-year absence ended by the arrival in 2014 of that car, which would go on to score a hat-trick of Le Mans wins.

As an early adopter, Porsche got its LMDh out on track ahead of its rivals. A car that was subsequently christened the 963 was up and running as early as last January, giving it a six-month head start. It's not quite what it may seem, however. Much of that time was spent debugging the off-the-shelf LMDh hybrid system produced by Bosch, Williams Advanced Engineering and Xtrac.

A key selling point of the new category for Porsche was that it could race the same car in both WEC and IMSA. It kicks off another chapter in its rich sports car racing history with a pair of two-car assaults in conjunction with Penske. A new entity called Porsche Penske Motorsport will look after the programmes from Mannheim in Germany and Mooresville, North Carolina respectively.

Penske ran Porsche's RS Spyder LMP2 programme of 2005-08 and the V8 from that car was the starting point for



Above: The class of 2023 speeds away at Sebring. This is the first time Hypercars and LMDh raced as one. Here: Ferrari's new 499P enjoyed an impressive debut in Sebring





Porsche's new 963 has yet to score big, but don't count it out.
Below left: The well-drilled Toyota team is the one to beat.
Below right: Peugeot's radical 9X8.
Bottom: Cadillac looks strong early on



the 963's internal combustion unit. What started out as a 3.4-litre normally aspirated unit, morphed through a 4.6-litre version in the 918 Spyder plug-in hybrid road car and has now been turbocharged for the LMDh.

The chassis of a new 963, the nomenclature of which tips its hat to the all-conquering 962 Group C car, has been developed by the Canadian-based Multimatic Motorsports organisation. It was also behind the abandoned Audi LMDh, which would have been a 963 with different bodywork.

Audi canned its programme early last year, but there will still be multiple Multimatic-built cars on the grid in both WEC and IMSA. Customer cars are an integral part of the Porsche programme and there will be privateer 963s racing from early in the year. And so far, the 963 has looked a potent tool, even if luck has somewhat deserted it so far. Technical hiccups blighted it at Daytona, and the bumps of Sebring put it behind the Ferrari, Toyota and Cadillac in the WEC opener. One should probably have won the following Sebring 12 Hours, had both not been involved in an unlucky multi-car collision. There's a lot more to come from the 963.

TOYOTA

The vital statistics of the four seasons in which Toyota raced alone as the only major carmaker undertaking a full season in the WEC, two in LMP1 and two in Hypercar, make for impressive reading: five Le Mans victories and a further 18 wins, as well as a clean sweep of the drivers' and manufacturers' titles each time. But now it gets serious for the Toyota Gazoo Racing squad. Perhaps more pertinently it has the chance to cement its sports car legacy by beating Ferrari, Porsche, et al.

Toyota is returning to the WEC with an update of the GRO10 Hybrid LMH introduced at the start of 2021. It is understood to have had a new design on the drawing board but took the decision around Le Mans time in 2022 to continue with a rejig of the existing package. The upgrades for this year smack of evolution rather than revolution, with the tweaked car sprouting additional brake cooling apertures, frontal diveplanes to boost downforce, and new rear-wing endplates. Team technical head Pascal Vassellon said: "We have not been working on pure aero efficiency, [rather] aero consistency, trying to help driveability."

The driver line-up is unchanged, however. José María López stays as part of the No7 crew that won the title in 2019/20 and '21 after Toyota had to abandon plans to promote Nyck de Vries from his test and reserve role when he landed a Formula 1 ride with AlphaTauri.

As the reigning champion and the manufacturer with the most experience in the WEC, all eyes will be on Toyota in 2023 as it enters an 11th consecutive season in the championship. The BoP might equal things up in terms of car performance, but teamwork, strategy, reliability and, crucially, getting the most out of a set of tyres through a double stint, lay outside its scope. At Sebring, Toyota's prowess became clear as both its cars ran like clockwork, without a single error, to emerge

as clear winners. It is this sort of organisation that its rivals will have to match to beat what has become the best endurance racing outfit of modern times.

PEUGEOT

Peugeot shocked many when it revealed a show car in the summer of '21 without a conventional rear wing, and then surprised quite a few when it began racing a car known as the 9X8, sans wing last year. The French manufacturer exploited the freedoms in the Le Mans Hypercar rules to come up with something outside of the box and insists that the concept is sound.

The French manufacturer didn't look entirely convincing on its return to top-flight sports car racing after an absence of more than 10 years. The bosses at Peugeot Sport always stressed that 2022 was a learning year ahead of the big push this season as it aims to repeat the Le Mans successes of its 905 3.5-litre Group C car of 1992 and '93 and the 908 HDI LMP1 turbodiesel in 2009.

The car never made it onto the podium in the three races it undertook from Monza on, nor did one of the cars get to the finish without suffering some kind of technical delay. It would be wrong to say the car wasn't quick, especially after a BoP handout for the Bahrain finale, witness Paul di Resta's front-row starting slot and fastest race lap for Jean-Éric Vergne. But the jury is out on its pace over a double stint on the tyres.

Peugeot chose not to join the WEC until Monza in July, though it would be wrong to call it a delay. When it announced its LMH in November 2019, the deadline was for the start of the 2022/23 season (the series was running to the winter-series format at the time). That would have meant a late-summer debut, so it was arguably ahead of schedule.

Peugeot opted for six months of testing prior to debut in the knowledge that once the 9X8 was homologated, its specification would be largely fixed for the lifespan of the car. The LMH rules allow only five 'evo joker' upgrades made in the name of performance.

Peugeot conceded that there was work to be done, but that there was a plan in place as it strove to take a step forward. Problem is, we've yet to see any step. The team eschewed the Sebring Prologue test, preferring to continue testing in Europe and in doing so essentially wrote off the opening round. The bumps at Sebring were never going to suit a ground-effect-style car, but even so it was embarrassing to see one car limp out before the race start with gearbox issues, and the second hugely delayed by electrical gremlins. More is expected here, so is it too early to use the word 'crisis'?

CADILLAC

Cadillac was the 'winningest' marque – in American parlance – during the DPI era of 2017-22 and General Motors always looked likely to continue its participation in IMSA under the new rules. The big news, though, when the General Motors



Glickenhaas hasn't enjoyed an easy winter, or start to the season. But its 007 LMH was a fan favourite last year

brand confirmed its programme in September '21 was that it would also be contesting the WEC and bidding for Le Mans victory for the first time since its Northstar LMP of 2000-02. A single entry will be fielded in the WEC by the Chip Ganassi-run Cadillac Racing squad, which will also run one LMDh in IMSA alongside a car from Action Express. Cadillac will be filing entries for both the IMSA cars to go to Le Mans.

Cadillac has maintained its relationship with Italian constructor Dallara for its new prototype, which is known as the V-LMDh. Underneath the aggressive styling is a 5.5-litre normally aspirated V8. It's the same capacity and architecture as the power unit in its DPi-V.R, though it is billed as all new.

Like Acura and BMW, the new car was up and running in the summer, so six months after the Porsche. Unlike the other LMDhs, the V-LMDh began testing in North America and has continued its programme, with two cars, on home ground. Third place on its debut at Daytona wasn't bad, but arguably its WEC debut was even better, running consistently on the tail of both the Toyota and Ferrari Hypercars, and winding up fourth overall, ahead of the Porsches. This should be a team to keep an eye on this year, especially with an expanded line-up from Spa onwards.

GLICKENHAUS

The fledgling US carmaker punched above its weight with its 007 LMH in 2022. The car finished on the podium at Le Mans last year and would almost certainly have won the Monza WEC round but for a turbo failure. Not a bad showing for the minnow

of the WEC field. Yet for all its successes, Glickenhaas' programme with its Pipo-engined non-hybrid developed in Italy by Podium Advanced Technologies has been in a state of flux since last summer when it ducked out of the WEC with two races to go. Jim Glickenhaas has been candid about the need for sponsorship or partnership with a customer team if it is continue. Only in mid-December did he confirm that he would be back for 2023.

All he had said as 2022 drew to a close was that Glickenhaas would race with a minimum of one car, most likely fielded by the Podium-run factory team. He hinted that there could be more than one 007 on the grid and that talks with potential partners were ongoing. He wouldn't be drawn on whether that might involve an extra car at Le Mans in June.

Glickenhaas will need to contest all seven races. The ACO is being firm on what it expects from its entrants in the Hypercar class and that is a participation in all rounds. Last year's situation when it cut Glickenhaas a bit of slack to skip races isn't likely to be repeated.

Glickenhaas has also outlined a desire to upgrade its LMH design. The team concedes that it is already too late to have them in place for the start of this season, but upgrades could arrive after Le Mans in June on the 007. A single car was wheeled out and went straight to Sebring, but failed to shine as the team's lack of pre-season running showed. It qualified off the pace and then stopped with engine electrical issues early in the event. It's a shame to see one of the most popular additions to the grid for quite some time endure such a tough start, but, like Le Mans itself, better things are on the horizon.



Welcome home: Derek Bell's Porsche 936 approaches the chequered flag and a finish line already swamped by track invaders in 1981. The victory was the second of three he shared with favourite partner Jacky Ickx



Le Mans 24hr record breakers

Driver: Tom Kristensen, **9 wins**

Team: Joest, **15 wins**

Manufacturer: Porsche, **19 wins**

Nation: Germany, **35 wins**