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Team Bentley in 2003 - from Sebring to Le Mans



Team Bentley is delighted to confirm the details of its 2003 racing programme, a year that will bring not only the best chance yet of outright victory at Le Mans 24-hours, but also its debut in the Sebring 12-hours, an event shorter in duration but, if anything, even tougher on machinery than Le Mans.

Both events will be contested by two new Bentley Speed 8 prototypes which have been redesigned from the ground up for 2003. The first car will be crewed by Tom Kristensen, Rinaldo 'Dindo' Capello and Guy Smith, the second by Johnny Herbert, Mark Blundell and David Brabham.

The focus, not only for this season, but for the last two seasons is and has been this year's Le Mans. When, in 2000, Bentley announced it was returning to the track it was with a clear three year strategy aiming to put Bentley in the best position possible to win Le Mans. The first two years - which saw Bentley back on the podium and first home behind the all-conquering works Audis - proved the team's capability and the car's reliability. But every member of the team knows that, in 2003, 'best of the rest' is no longer good enough.

Of course victory at Le Mans is not a given for even the best-prepared team, but Team Bentley is confident that everything that can be done to provide the best possible chance of victory will be in place by June.

Critical to these preparations is the Sebring 12-hours. For over 50 years this race has competed with the Daytona 24-hours as the most prestigious endurance race in the Americas. With the Daytona regulations currently rendering the Speed 8 ineligible, it was clear where Team Bentley should make its return to American soil, its most import. The last time a works Bentley raced in America was in 1922 when, in the first ever international event contested by the team, WD Hawkes competed in the Indianapolis 500 in a barely more than standard 3-litre. Pitted against a field of highly specialised oval racers there was no chance of success - indeed it came last - but still enjoyed a trouble free run and captured the imagination of the American press.

Team Bentley hopes for a considerably better result at Sebring in 2003, but while victory is entirely possible even against three Audis in their fifth consecutive year competing in the event, the team will be treating it as a vitally important dress-rehearsal for Le Mans. Throughout history it has been consistently shown that a team that goes well at Sebring stands a very good chance of success at Le Mans.

In addition to designing and building an all new car for the 2003 season, Team Bentley this year also welcomes Michelin as its new tyre partner. Michelin has been the most successful tyre constructor in the sportscar arena for many years, and the team regards its participation this year as a vital component in the campaign for success on both sides of the Atlantic. Though the rules governing the LM GTP category at Le Mans means the Bentley Speed 8 runs on narrower tyres than Michelin is accustomed to supplying, early testing has provided some extremely promising results.

For 2003, Team Bentley also has the pleasure in confirming Breitling as its headline sponsor. Few companies could be more suited to this task than Breitling, a company whose brand values of performance, prestige and precision match closely those of Bentley. The Breitling logo will appear prominently across both the front and the sides of both Speed 8 prototypes. Breitling also has collaborated with Bentley Motors on the design of the clock for its forthcoming Continental GT road car, the first time a Breitling time-piece has ever been commissioned for use in a car.

Team Bentley continues to be run from Crewe with Bentley motorsport director Brian Gush overseeing the operation and heading up the steering committee. As in previous years, the 2003 Bentley Speed 8 is being

built at Race Technology Norfolk (rtn) who are also responsible for the test and development programme. The team will continue to be managed by John Wickham.

In short, Team Bentley believes it has now assembled as many of the components as humanly possible to deliver victory at Le Mans back to Bentley. We believe we have the right car, drivers, team and partners as well as the enthusiasm, guts and determination to get the job done. Nothing is ever certain at Le Mans, but every one of Bentley's legion of fans around the world can be assured that Team Bentley will be doing everything in its power to make the dream, some 73 years in the making, come true.

Story and photos: Bentley Media

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