

CLASSIC DRIVER

24 Hours of power: We join Porsche at Le Mans

Lead

For the first time in 16 years, Porsche was back at La Sarthe. It should have been a spectacular occasion – but sadly neither of the two Porsche 919 Hybrids made it to the end of the 24-hour race. Yet Le Mans was still a success for Stuttgart, as J. Philip Rathgen reports...

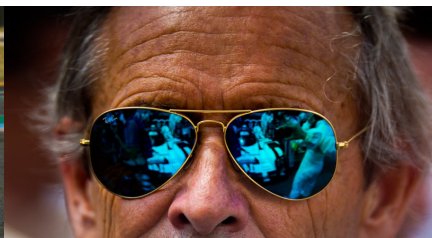
The sun is shining on the Le Mans circuit. Only the ladies and gentlemen in their fireproof suits resent the growing warmth as, almost one and a half hours before the end of the toughest endurance race in the world, the second Porsche retires with gearbox problems. It joins the #20 Porsche in the pits, a car which had been vying for the lead against Audi just a few hours before on Sunday morning. At this moment, with both Porsche 919 Hybrids out of the race, the 'Return to Le Mans 2014' mission seems to have failed. But has it really? Far from it! Even if Porsche has been unable to finish its first Le Mans race after fifteen years of absence, the two four-cylinder Hybrid racers are definitely the crowd favourites – far surpassing the popularity of their VW Group colleagues from the Audi Motorsport team. But back to the start.

Moderate tension



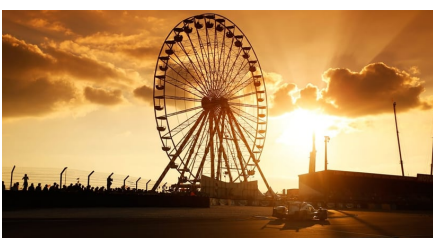
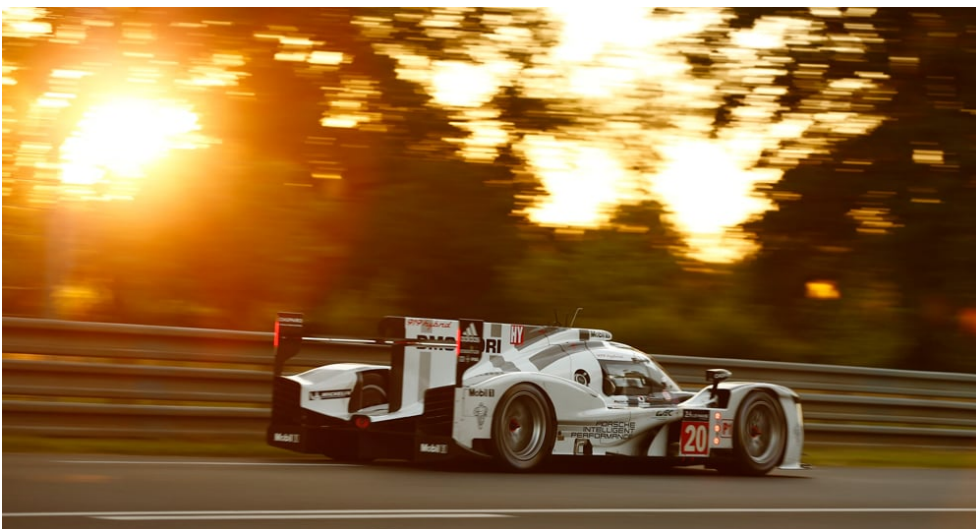
It's Saturday, 14:22 hours. Only with difficulty do the team mechanics push the futuristic race cars of the LMP1 class through the pit-lane crowds to get to the grid. The tension is overwhelming. Nerves are stretched to breaking point. With shrill whistles, the pit marshals help to assemble the race cars and herd the two Porsche 919 Hybrids to their starting places on the grid. There is an even greater pressure on the two LMP1 Porsche team cars, #14 and #20, than on the Le Mans Audi team and its fierce competitor from the Far East, Toyota, because there are such strong expectations of Porsche. The marque desperately wants to claim its 17th overall victory at the greatest endurance race in the world and, since 2011, team manager Fritz Enzinger and his colleagues have been working hard on their 'Return to Le Mans' project. Now, just before the start, the tension is not just written on their faces, but also in their body language, Enzinger clenching and unclenching his water bottle. As we approach the start of the race, we ask what he's feeling. Enzinger smiles: "Moderate tension".

High Noon at 15:00 hours



'Moderate tension' is clearly felt throughout the 107-strong Porsche team. In qualifying, the two Porsches did extremely well to position themselves at two and four on the grid, behind the two racing cars from Toyota and closely followed by the Audis. As the French commentator announces the two Porsches over the loudspeakers, spontaneous jubilation breaks out among the 250,000-plus spectators. One of the Porsche mechanics looks anxiously at his watch: there are still 10 minutes to go. Nervously, he chews gum, as did Steve McQueen in the legendary film 'Le Mans'. The highly complex four-cylinder engine of the Porsches – the smallest in the LMP1 class – and their transmissions have not yet run for 24 hours. But there is no time to worry. The last notes of the title music from Kubrick's '2001 - A Space Odyssey' fall to silence and, at exactly at 15:00 hours, the race begins. The countdown is on and the Porsche team manages a good start, but the top dogs from Audi immediately bare their teeth and attack.

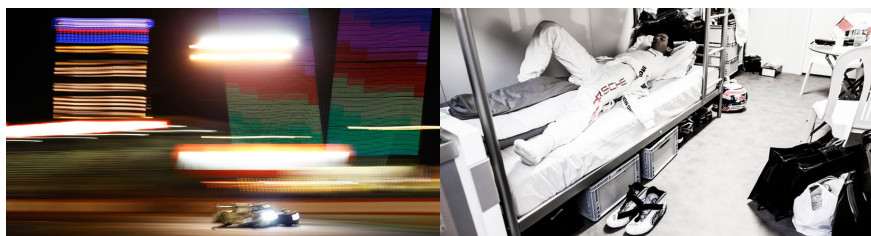
Twilight of the gods



Slowly, the veil of night falls over the 13.6km Le Mans track. This blue hour seems to cast a spell over the spectators. Tirelessly, for more than seven hours, the race cars have been lapping the high-speed circuit. In the Porsche pit garage the atmosphere is intense: the mood of the team has recovered after an earlier fright, when Romain Dumas's car suffered a defect in the fuel supply. But that was quickly rectified, the Frenchman on the Porsche team, in car #14, making

it back out of the pits successfully after a quick stop. The team is currently satisfied with the state of affairs, because Timo Bernhard has briefly taken the lead with the other Porsche, #20.

The night is long



It's 3am and an icy wind blows through the paddock. In the Porsche pit garage calm has returned, interrupted only every 13th lap for a fuel stop, fresh tyres or a driver change. When the signal is given, the masked men and women work as one, and those who have just recently been asleep on one of the folding chairs in the garage are now giving 100 per cent. There is not much talk as the telemetry data is analysed and, on the team radio, the driver informed of the situation. Both Porsches are proving themselves in the race and, bar some minor problems, the 919s are showing themselves to be very reliable runners. Every minute, every mile, every lap increases the chances that Porsche will be successful in this 24-hour race. But now, with 12 hours gone, the digital countdown of time remaining seems to run much slower than it did in the first half.

Shock in the morning



The Porsche teams continue their run of good luck through the night and into the morning, but Audi is now in the lead. This reflects the experience of the 12-times Le Mans winner. But then comes the shock: less than two hours before crossing the finish line, while running in third place, the #20 Porsche with Webber at the wheel returns to the pits with engine problems. It soon became clear that the car would not be returning to the race. The mood is at once extremely tense in the Porsche camp: some mechanics are not willing to give up, and try everything to get the car back on track – but without success. Now all hopes are on the #14 car, in which Marc Lieb is currently running in seventh place. In the Porsche pits no one is sitting down: all are following the action on-screen. But then something desperately unfortunate happens: with just one and a half hours of the race still to go, car #14 comes in for an unscheduled pit stop. Feverishly, the mechanics work to find the fault but with every minute in the pits, the Porsche is falling further behind. After 25 minutes, the truth is clear: for #14, too, the race is over.

Huge disappointment, two hours before the end



The disappointment is huge and hard to bear. But Porsche has proved that the 919 can run reliably, at high speeds, for very long distances. And is it not exactly this mix of drama and joy that fuels the legend of Le Mans? This year's race was a 'cliffhanger' – and we can't wait for an even more exciting race next year.

Gallery

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