

CLASSIC DRIVER

Meet the drivers of the Le Mans Classic 2018

Lead

Be it an amateur chasing the ultimate driving thrill or a former winner reliving the seminal experience, to race at Le Mans is surely the greatest privilege for a driver. This is what it's like to tackle the hallowed circuit from seven men who all raced during last weekend's Le Mans Classic...

Howard Donald



Forget the number one singles, the world tours, and the jet-set lifestyle – Howard Donald of *Take That* fame gets his kicks from classic cars. No stranger to the historic racing circuit, Donald made his Le Mans driving debut in his ex-Stuck/Adam/Boutsen Porsche 993 GT2 Evo on Sunday, as part of the Global Endurance Legends demonstration.



So, did the Circuit de la Sarthe live up to his expectations? “It was better than I could have imagined,” he told us. “As I was driving down the Mulsanne, the Bentley Speed 8 blasted past me and I just thought wow. I just wish I’d arrived in time for yesterday’s session so I would have known the track a bit better!” A self-confessed Porscheophile, he hopes to be racing his fabulous 356 at the Goodwood Revival later this year.

Sam Thomas



For Sam Thomas, Le Mans Classic was a bittersweet occasion. Both the Jaguar E-type he drove in the Jaguar Classic Challenge and the brutish Chevrolet Corvette he raced in Plateau 4 sadly retired. But the British racer was pleased as punch with three class wins in Plateau 2 driving the dinky little MG A. We asked what it's like to drive such drastically different cars at this intimidating track. “The Corvette is crazy – in qualifying, we hit 174mph and at that speed, the nose is up in the air and it moves around a lot,” explains Thomas. “The thing will out-drag a Ford GT40 up to 150mph and it wheel-spins *everywhere*.”



“But the MG is awesome, bless it. It’s got a tiny little sewing machine engine but we went really well. It sounds strange, but I welled up in the car last night. It was my first ever night race and because it’s so open and you’re so exposed, you can really feel the history, especially around the back of the circuit. This place just gets you – it can be so cruel, but those special moments make all the heartbreak disappear.”

Peter Iversen



The Porsche prince of Denmark, Peter Iversen, picked quite the car in which to race for the very first time at Le Mans – the 1966 Porsche 906 Carrera 6 he has owned for 12 years. And he was clearly relishing the experience. “It’s all so new to me, but it’s a fantastic circuit to drive, especially at night,” he commented. “It’s much more challenging in the dark because the original lights are not so powerful and the corners arrive far too quickly! I reached around 250kph on the straight, though the car got a little nervous at that speed.” In the final race for Plateau five, Iversen and his driving partner Erik Nielsen finished a very impressive 17th overall, beating a plethora of much more powerful prototypes. *Tillykke, Peter!*

Sam Hancock



Sam Hancock has had worse weekends. He was down to drive four cars at Le Mans Classic – two Ferraris, a Daytona Group IV and a 512 BB LM, and two Alfa Romeos, a Tipo 33/3 and Arturo Merzario’s championship-winning Tipo 33 TT 12. “I did a little bit of set-up work with the Ferraris in practice, but concentrated on the Alfas for the races,” he told us. “We had some niggling technical issues, which I was a little frustrated about, but then when I was suddenly driving into the sunlight at Indianapolis and diving into the Porsche Curves, I realised I had nothing to complain about – Le Mans is always so incredible.



“The two Alfas are so different that it’s hard to see why they share the Tipo 33 nomenclature. The 33/3 feels more kart-like and confidence inspiring, yet I prefer driving the TT 12. Ridiculous is the only word I could use to describe the engine – it’s like a thundercloud bolted into the chassis that doesn’t wake up until you hit 10,000rpm!” In race two, Sam clearly got in the groove with the car – having started high on at the back of the grid, he brought it home in 10th place in the dark. “I overtook over 50 cars in 45 minutes!”

Heinz Swoboda



As birthday gifts go, we’re sure you’ll agree that letting one of your friends drive your significant and highly original Ferrari 360 GT LM at Le Mans is a good one. That’s exactly what the Austrian collector Heinz Swoboda did for his good friend Rudolf Budja, the Miami-based gallerist. “This car competed only at Sebring and here at Le Mans,” he commented. “Unfortunately, it retired from both, but as a result, it was never destroyed and it’s completely original.



“To bring it back to France and complete the story, if you like, was truly fantastic. I’m a big enthusiast of these sports cars from the 1990s and I think events like this and the Challenge & GT Days I organised earlier this year are the future for their owners.”

James Turner



For James Turner of Classic Driver dealer Sports Purpose, there was only one way to christen his striking new 1965 Porsche 911 2.0 art car, and that was to race it at Le Mans Classic. Designed by the British fashion icon Paul Smith and built by Richard Tuthill, the car competed in the Porsche Classic Race and finished a commendable 27th out of 68 starters. "I'd like to take my son to school in the car on Wednesday, so I didn't push too hard!" quipped Turner.



"I won't ever race in the 24 Hours of Le Mans, so to come here and drive in the tyre-tracks of my heroes is such a pleasure and a privilege. The best time is at five o'clock in the morning - six years ago, I was racing a Lotus Elite at dawn and Gregor Fisker lapped me in an Aston Martin DBR1. It was so perfect that I needn't have raced ever again!" We'll be talking to Turner, Paul Smith, and Tuthill all about this colourful Porsche 911 at the Goodwood Festival of Speed, so keep your eyes peeled.

Xavier Micheron



One of the more unusual cars racing at Le Mans Classic last weekend was the whistling Howmet TX - an experimental 1960s prototype powered by a helicopter turbine. It was driven by Xavier Micheron of Classic Driver dealer The Ascott Collection and, save for a slow puncture in race two and some niggling engine issues, performed very well all weekend. "It's such a fast car - I think we're among the fastest on the Mulsanne as I touched 300kph twice - and it handles really well," he told us shortly before hopping in his other steed, a 'ground-effect' Lola T600, on Sunday morning. "It's the only car here with a helicopter turbine, so in that respect, it's a real dream to drive such a unique and special car at Le Mans."

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