Calculated gamble: putting the Porsche 963 to the test at Daytona

27/01/2023 This weekend Porsche will put its boundary pushing technology to the test on a global stage, when the 963 debuts at the 24 Hours of Daytona. One of the world's most accomplished endurance-racing drivers, Hurley Haywood, reflects on the sports car manufacturer's successful history of moving forward, while staying true to its past.

It takes more than one calculated gamble during a career to reach more than 30,000 race victories. They do not come without courageous minds willing to dream bigger and drive limits further. In 2023, Porsche sets out on its newest challenge, one that will drive not only the future of the German sports car manufacturer but the automotive landscape as a whole. As it has always done, the marque will use motorsport to test its boundary pushing technology.

The Porsche 963, which makes its international competition debut on January 28/29 at the 24 Hours of Daytona, is the latest iteration of a decades-old tradition of testing its industry advancing technology on the race tracks of the world. Motorsport is a calculated gamble where every detail is dissected to maximise its return but testing and preparation only go so far. This is where the gamble begins.

Porsche's goal to create the world's top performing sports cars has always come through efficiency; driven by what daring thinkers have crafted for the circuit then transferring it to the road. The first to announce its participation in the new international prototype racing platform known as LMDh (Le Mans Daytona Hybrid), Porsche was also the first to make its debut on a test track. Its testing kilometres assisted the development of the standardised hybrid technology that will be shared across all competitors, and it was the first to complete a 36-hour-long pre-season test.

Passion to perform and improve

The passion to perform and improve its roadgoing counterparts has pushed the most successful sports car racing manufacturer to create a car that will contend for a record-extending 20th 24 Hours of Le Mans overall victory in the World Endurance Championship's (WEC) LMDh category and in the GTP class of North America's top long-distance series, IMSA. This month Porsche hopes to extend its current record at Daytona to 23 overall race victories.

Dating back to the unanticipated 1963 Porsche 550 Coupe and continuing regularly up to and including the Porsche 919 Hybrid, which scored a Le Mans hattrick for Porsche when it scooped overall victory in 2015, 2016 and 2017, the Weissach-based Porsche Motorsport 'brain trust' has pushed expectations, performance and efficiency with legends such as the 907, 908, 917 K, 936, 956, 962, RS Spyder and now with the icon in the making, the 963.

A legend himself, Hurley Haywood has witnessed many of these greats in person, wrestling several to record-setting victories at Daytona, Le Mans and Sebring. Having had the privilege of piloting a car from before his time – the pristine Porsche 917 K owned by The Brumos Collection, which shared the track with the Porsche Penske Motorsport-prepared 963 at Daytona International Speedway last year – gave the five-time Daytona- and three-time Le Mans-winning ace an opportunity to reflect on the lineage of innovation and success enjoyed by the brand.

"What Porsche really does well is to get everyone on the same page," offers an insightful Haywood. "Porsche isn't interested in who sets the fastest time of the weekend because people only remember who wins the race. So that is the goal. There are many racing drivers who have only driven for Porsche for a very short period of time because they tried to influence the engineers on where they wanted to go. My approach is to articulate what a car is doing very clearly and then let them develop it. That works well for Porsche historically. You see in the line-up for Daytona that the Porsche drivers are drivers with a long history with Porsche. That provides some insight – the approach remains the same today."

Porsche uses motorsport to drive technology. The 963 is the latest in the line of Porsche racing machines that don't merely dip a toe into uncharted motorsport waters but are an immersive plunge into the future of automotive performance. In compliance with the international LMDh regulations, the Porsche 963 is based on an LMP2-category chassis. This newly developed chassis is supplied by the Canadian high-tech company Multimatic. Bosch, Williams Advanced Engineering and Xtrac contribute the standard hybrid components. At the heart of the powertrain lies a twin-turbo 4.6-litre V8. The

engine is based on the high-performance 918 Spyder hybrid sports car. Its DNA goes back to the RS Spyder racing car, with which Porsche and Team Penske notched up many victories between 2005 and 2008. The design of the new Porsche 963 hails from the victorious 956 and 962 classics from the 1980s.

Since December 2021, the Porsche 963 has tested at tracks in Europe and North America, accumulating a total of 24,500 km on the two chassis prepared for the purpose. At the most recent round of testing, an endurance programme at Daytona, the team ran for 36 hours covering 7,331 km. Haywood has paid close attention to the development efforts of the 963 since its introduction, just as he has with so many goal-post moving Porsche racing cars since the 1970s.

Porsche racing cars since the 1970s

“Going back to the days of Peter Gregg, I have no idea how many new cars I have been a part of. The 956, 962, 917-10,” Haywood recalls. “Each one was an innovation. It was a solution to a problem. For instance, the 962 was the answer to IMSA not allowing the 956 to compete in North America because the driver’s feet were ahead of the front wheel centreline. So, Porsche brought the feet back and the wheelbase was lengthened and it became one of the most successful racing cars ever built. It ran in various versions for over 10 years. The longevity of it is amazing.” Would America’s most successful sports car racer like to be strapped into the red, white and black mid-engine 963 when the clock starts ticking at Daytona at the end of January?

“In one view, I am glad I am retired,” grins Haywood, who was born in Chicago but now lives in Florida. “I honestly don’t think I could drive a new car with all the responsibilities a driver has now. The cars are so electronically controlled. My foot was the traction control, my foot regulated the braking. I worked out to have the strength to move the wheel against all the force and now the cars have power steering. Shifting is on the wheel and the electronics regulate matching the engine revs with the transmission.

“My focus was entirely inside that racing car and on the track for 100 per cent of my stint. No outside interference. Now they have engineers speaking to them from the pitlane requesting critical changes to the car, to the systems. All of that has to be done on the steering wheel, through a complex set of dials, buttons and paddles. This is spaceship kind of stuff. I am sure I could learn it but is a very difficult scenario for these modern guys to drive the cars competitively and fast, doing what had to be done in a car like the 917 K or the 936 or 962s that I raced plus all of these requests.

“Some things might be easier for them but there are so many additional responsibilities we didn’t have to deal with. It is a new world in many ways but the desire and drive to be the best never goes away.”

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