

Fire on Ice

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13/01/2019 The legendary “Ice Race” in Zell am See, Austria, will be revived. Porsche motorsport legends will get behind the wheel.

Though it was little more than a diversion for winter visitors to Switzerland in the 1930s, the Austrians quickly transformed the activity into a spectacular event. In St. Moritz it was a rather sedate affair, involving little more than riderless horses with a tow rope, pulling skiers on the frozen lake.

The landscape around Zell am See has the same heavenly qualities as the St. Moritz area, with the brooding Bergsee, a breathtaking Alpine backdrop of towering white peaks shimmering in the cold winter air – and has been further blessed with a pioneering figure in cars and motorsports, as Professor Ferdinand Porsche chose to make his family home in this picture-postcard location at the foot of the Schmittenhöhe.

Grand Prix on ice

With a keen sense of how to put on a great show, the Zell resident replaced the heavy Engadin equine stock with motorcycles, propelling intrepid skiers across the frozen lake at hair-raising speeds. The Zell am See skijöring offered everything the public could hope for, as early as 1937, though it only really began to flourish after the Second World War. From 1952, the event was held in memory of the great designer, Prof. Dr. h.c. Ferdinand Porsche himself, as it became something like a Grand Prix on ice, with separate motorcycle and car classifications.

The natural next step was for the emerging sports car manufacturer to adopt the race as its own, and to send along a full team of ice racers from its own stable: Porsche 356 Coupés, and later the 550 Spyder mid-engine race car, appeared with factory drivers like Richard von Frankenberg and Huschke von Hanstein at the wheel, as well as local competitors such as Otto Mathé and Ernie Vogel. Mathé – a one-armed driver from Innsbruck – was simply in his element on ice and was almost unbeatable in a Porsche Monoposto that he had developed and built himself. In his professional life, Ernie Vogel was a manufacturer; as president of the Austrian Porsche Club he knew enough about speed to beat Graf Berghe von Trips, one of the best wet-weather private race car drivers in Central Europe, in an RSK Spyder factory Porsche.

These kings of ice and snow revelled in a world of massive drifts and cascading falls until the ice melted – quite literally: in 1974 a Unimog, together with its driver, sank in the lake during snow clearance, and the ice racing event in Zell am See appeared to be consigned to the history books.

Now Ferdinand Porsche, great-grandson of the technology pioneer and grandson of the company founder, is set to relaunch this spectacular event on 19 and 20 January. The first ice race of the millennium will be held at the Zell am See airfield, showcasing everything the sport has to offer, including touring cars and vintage vehicles.

The drivers are also legends in their own right, with the crème de la crème of the racing world to be found in and around the various Porsche sports cars, including Le Mans winner Hans-Joachim Stuck, current GT racers such as Richard Lietz, endurance world champion Mark Webber as well as two-time rallying world champion Walter Röhrl.

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