Porsche 718/2: From sports car to Formula One frontrunner

13/11/2026 Motorsport Magazine looks back at some of the most significant single-seaters in Porsche history. This time: the Porsche 718/2, a car never intended for Formula One, yet one that took on the very best in 1961.

I'm going to say it: no frontrunning Formula 1 car ever had a more unlikely backstory than the Porsche 718. This is a car that in 1961 came second three times in a championship of just eight races (including missing a win in France by 0.1sec), saw Dan Gurney tied on points with Stirling Moss in third place by the end of season, and took Porsche to third in the constructors', behind only Ferrari and Lotus.

And yet not only was it based on a design by then already fully four years old, but it wasn't even intended to be a single-seater, let alone a Formula 1 design. Instead it was developed from the 1957 RSK sports car and set on the path to F1 by Porsche realising its super-slippery bodywork and 1.5-litre engine were what was required to do well in Formula 2 of the time.

So, shortly after Le Mans in 1958 it converted one of its RSKs to a central driving position, fared in the

lights and sent Jean Behra to the F2 race at the super-fast Reims circuit to see what he could do. And despite opposition including works teams from Ferrari, Lotus and Cooper, the answer was pole position by over a second, followed by a comfortable win. At the end of that year the FIA announced that F1 would run to current F2 regulations from 1961 onwards. In the interim, and now designated the 718/2 with proper single-seat bodywork, it became a highly successful F2 car.

And you might think you can guess the rest from there. But actually the 718/2 was never intended to run in the new F1. For that was the job of the Porsche 787, a car derived from the 718/2, but elongated in wheelbase, with all-new front suspension and sufficient other changes to be considered a fresh car. A not very good one as it happened, and after decidedly lacklustre performances at Monaco and Zandvoort, the old soldier was brought out of retirement and asked to step up. Which, as we have seen, it duly did.

Yet despite this, I think the 718 is still a forgotten Porsche, because I guess if anyone thinks about the only two seasons in which Porsche competed as fully fledged F1 constructor, it is its 804 successor to which minds turn because it took Porsche's first and, to date, only F1 win as a constructor.

No matter that Gurney's "lucky" (his word) win at Rouen came about through attrition of faster cars or that Gurney and Porsche would finish further down their respective title orders than they had with the 718 the year before. It was a winner, and that was that.

I'm push-started and the old quad-cam flat-four barks into life easily enough. It's quite highly strung as you'd expect, so is noisy but lifeless at low revs. It takes off above 6000rpm and by 8000rpm is absolutely flying. But power is limited by both the design's age and configuration, and it surprises me not at all that Porsche chose to go with a flat-eight for the 804.

The six-speed gearbox is a treat, even though Stirling Moss (who raced it with great success in F2) and Gurney's regular team-mate didn't much like it, but the big surprise were those drum brakes, which felt both powerful and progressive, so perhaps Porsche knew what it was doing after all...

I never got to grips with the chassis in the short time I had on only part of Porsche's Weissach test track but it seems stable to me, perhaps overly so, though Stirling thought it was beautifully balanced so I'd be inclined to take his word over mine!

It is interesting to imagine what Ferrari and the British garagistas must have thought at the end of that 1961 season: "Here's Porsche, right up with the best of us, with an ancient car never designed to do this job, and they're doing a brand new one for next year. We could be in a spot of bother here..."

Little did they know that, most of a lifetime later, it would remain the most successful Porsche ever to race at the very top level.

Technical specs

Engine: 1.5 litres air-cooled flat-four boxer
Chassis: Steel spaceframe
Power: 165 PS
Transmission: Six-speed manual
Suspension (front): Independent with a transverse torsion bar spring system
Suspension (rear): Independent with coil springs over telescopic shock absorbers; Watt's linkage
Weight: 456kg

Info

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