

Reliving Le Mans with downhill legend Aksel Lund Svindal

24/10/2023 A new short film, 'A High Speed Portrait', brings to life the daring Le Mans debut of the former Norwegian skiing champion and Carrera Cup guest driver, Aksel Lund Svindal.

On Saturday 10 June, 2023, five-time World Cup skiing champion Aksel Lund Svindal found himself in unfamiliar territory. Behind the wheel of a 911 GT3 Cup car, the veteran downhill racer and Porsche Brand Ambassador was readying for a rolling start at the Circuit de la Sarthe, side-by-side with a field of seasoned professionals in front of a record Le Mans crowd.

This was the culmination of a journey that had begun just two years and a handful of races earlier, back in his native Norway. Svindal grew up near Oslo and although interested in cars and motorcycles from an early age, his formative passion was skiing. Following a stellar 18-year career at the highest level of competition, Svindal retired from the sport in 2019 as a two-time Olympic gold medallist and Norway's most successful World Cup skier.

Shortly afterwards, Svindal was invited to become a Porsche Brand Ambassador. His new role soon saw

him taking part in an event that pitted a group of celebrities against Norwegian Formula Two driver Dennis Hauger in a series of timed laps around a local circuit in a Porsche. A complete novice, Svindal was just 1.5 seconds slower than Hauger and considerably quicker than the rest of the group. His remarkable performance caught the eye of the motorsport team at Porsche Sweden, who invited him to take part in the upcoming season of the Sprint Challenge Scandinavia.

“Obviously I said yes,” Svindal says with a smile. “It’s the sort of thing kids dream about, and coming from a skiing background and not having any motorsport connections, it was something I really wanted to experience.”

Svindal’s season in the Sprint Challenge, Porsche’s Carrera Cup feeder series featuring identical Cayman GT4 Clubsport cars, was an impressive debut, with a win on his first weekend and four subsequent podiums. But the graduation to guest drives in Carrera Cup in 2023 was a significant step up for the still inexperienced amateur. “The Cayman GT4 Clubsport is fairly easy to handle and very forgiving,” Svindal explains. “You can push hard and when you’re about to overstep the limit, the car will tell you. It’s very different in Carrera Cup. When you climb into a 911 GT3 Cup car with zero experience, the line between what’s too much and what’s just enough is so narrow that it almost feels invisible."

But part of what made the offer of an unforgiving 911 GT3 Cup car too tempting to turn down was the possibility of that outing to Le Mans. In 2023, Carrera Cup Scandinavia would join its French counterpart at the Circuit de La Sarthe for a support race on the same day as the 24 Hours. For the 100 th staging of the most famous race in the world, in Porsche’s own 75th anniversary year, this was the opportunity of a lifetime.

So it was that Svindal arrived in the hot seat of a 510-PS thoroughbred racing car, watching the lights go green on Le Mans’ start/finish straight before grandstands packed with fans from all over the world. “That track is so fast,” he recalls today, “and the Cup cars were doing just shy of 300km/h, which feels *really* fast when there are cars all around you. So you get that mix of being super-excited but also really nervous. As a downhill skier, you just watch what’s ahead of you, but in car racing you’re doing that while also looking in your mirrors and even through your side windows. There’s a lot of information to take in!”

Svindal’s innate ability and calmness under pressure were enough to see him through a frenetic race in which, far from merely finishing, the modest 41-old made some impressive passes for position. Crossing the line in a very respectable 13th place, the sense of relief and elation was palpable. “With all the history of Porsche at Le Mans, it was one of those situations that felt almost unreal. Things had happened pretty fast over the two years and suddenly I was there, at the climax of this incredible adventure, and I had finished. It was nerve-wracking, but really special.”

Svindal’s Le Mans has been turned into a documentary film entitled ‘A High Speed Portrait’ by Swedish filmmaker Erik Stenborg, a gripping short using unprecedented levels of recording equipment including 11 onboard cameras and five microphones. The result is a visceral 360-degree experience from inside the car that gives a unique perspective of the iconic race. The film, which was first screened in

September at the Porsche Festival in Rudskogen as part of the Carrera Cup Scandinavia weekend, also offers an insight into Svindal's philosophy when it comes to success, both within the realm of sport and the broader spectrum of life.

"I'm so grateful to Erik for making the film because it brings back all these memories," Svindal says. "Watching it back today still gets the blood pumping. I can reconnect with all those emotions and truly feel like I am back in the car. And it reminds me that we actually went to Le Mans and raced there. We really did that!"

Video

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