Reunion with Porsche motorsport legends

22/07/2019 The Porsche Museum at the Solitude Revival 2019: iconic racing cars such as the 917 KH "Gulf", 550 Spyder or 804 Formula 1, but also drivers such as Hans Herrmann, Hans-Joachim Stuck or André Lotterer were there.

He was beaming the whole time. It was love at first sight when Stéphane Ortelli laid eyes on the Porsche 917 KH in Gulf livery. “A fantastic car, and a fantastic course,” raves the Le Mans winner from 1998. In fact, their first encounter didn’t take place on the legendary race course at La Sarthe, but on a different circuit and one which is in everyday use as a country road: the Solitude Racetrack, 11.7 kilometres long, set deep within the woodland between Stuttgart and Leonberg. In use as an official racetrack until 1965, ever since 2011 it has been reactivated for one weekend every two years for the Solitude Revival.

And Porsche is always on board. “For us, taking part in this event is both an obligation and an honour,” comments Achim Stejskal, Head of Historical PR and the Porsche Museum. After all, many legendary names and cars from Porsche racing history are among the lists of winners at Solitude races: the 550 Spyder and 718 RS 60 Spyder, 718 Formula 2 and 804 Formula 1. “I’d also like to pay tribute to the volunteer organisers, who have once again created a first-rate racing sport festival,” Stejskal adds.

Anything with two, three or four wheels is welcome here, from old favourites to modern classics – though race cars are the clear favourite. Exhibiting in various classes, they are taken out onto the track as part of a series of driving demonstrations. The Porsche Museum has brought the 356 B 2000 GS Carrera GTL Abarth and even the 917 KH Gulf to take part. This latter classic is particularly captivating for Stéphane Ortelli, Le Mans winner with the 911 GT1. “Its sound, its acceleration, just how brilliantly everything works – it’s extremely impressive,” raves the Frenchman. He is invited to take the legendary race car round the track for a few laps, and 50 years seems to fall away. He shares the cockpit with Marc Lieb, 2016 overall winner at Le Mans and World Endurance Champion with the 919 Hybrid. “I’m surprised every time at just how easy the 917 is to drive,” emphasises the Porsche engineer.

Like Stéphane Ortelli, he also has a great deal of respect for the racing drivers who were on the track with this legend 50 years ago. Hans Herrmann for example, who won Le Mans in 1970 with the 917 K, and relived his memories at Solitude Revival. After all, it was not only generations of racing cars that came together at this motorsport festival, but also generations of drivers: legends of the 1950s and 1960s like Hans Herrmann, Eberhard Mahle and Herbert Linge; winners from the 1970s and 1980s like Walter Röhrl and Hans-Joachim Stuck; and younger drivers such as Stéphane Ortelli, Marc Lieb, Neel Jani and André Lotterer. And with them, Hans Mezger, former Head of the Motorsport department at Porsche, and also the man responsible for the suction and turbo engines of the 917, as well as the 6-cylinder engine of the 911 and the 8-cylinder engine of the 804 Formula 1 which both also bore his

signature. “We didn’t win Formula 1 with the 804,” he says with a mischievous smile, while the Monoposto completes its demonstration laps on the track. “But we did win with the TAG Turbo in the McLaren.”

The enthusiasm for classic race cars is inescapable throughout the weekend. “This is my first time at Solitude Revival, and also my first time with the 718 Formula 2,” comments André Lotterer, who will race for Porsche in Formula E in the upcoming season. “You get a wonderful feeling for that time and the origins of our racing history. The Formula 2 drives like a dream on the racetrack. You get really excited about pushing it to the limit.” He’s not the only one who would prefer not to have to get out of the Formula race car with the four-cylinder vertical shaft engine. “I’ve fallen in love with this car,” sighs Hans-Joachim Stuck. “And Solitude is fantastic – everything in it, fast and slow, uphill and down. I would really like to have been one of the drivers back then.”

The mood at this motorsport festival is unique. The excitement generated by around 12,000 spectators, viewing more than 430 historic cars, may even come close to the energy at the Solitude races that took place before 1965, when visitor numbers could exceed 400,000. This is probably due to the fact that there are no fears of contact or barriers between the racing cars, drivers, and the public. When the invitation to the Porsche tent for the signing session is announced over the loudspeakers, the queue grows to around 20 metres within a few minutes. And it’s clear that the enthusiasm is not gender-specific either – there’s an equal number of male and female fans.

“This is my first time at Solitude Revival,” comments Neel Jani, who will pull up to the starting line in Formula E together with André Lotterer as Porsche works drivers, as he eagerly signs programmes. “It provides added value for all car enthusiasts. I recognise many of these cars only from black-and-white images and films. Seeing, hearing and experiencing them here and now, live, is truly unique.” Vivid memories come flooding back for Walter Röhrl: of how his father took part in the Solitude Race for the first time in 1954, and of being a seven-year-old lad sitting on the hay bales next to the track and seeing the race cars flying past dangerously close. “Later, when I was saw a similar scene from inside a racing car, I thought: Are they insane?”

One of the people who saw the hay bales from the driver’s seat at that time was Eberhard Mahle, who started the Solitude rally for the first time in 1954, going on to win his class. Precisely 60 years ago, he achieved exceptional success: Mahle raced in three classes at the Solitude circuit race, won two, and took third place in the other. He recounts: “Solitude was a driver’s course – it was even possible to win with an inferior car, just by being better.” And he adds, with a grin: “I’m still the best at driving cars to this day.”

Eberhard Mahle, Hans Herrmann and Hans Mezger are among the honorary members of Solitude Revival e.V., which hosts the motorsport biennial, as is their former colleague and previous Porsche works driver Herbert Linge. Even at 90, the founder of the ONS track safety team can’t resist coming to the track where he was class winner in 1963, alongside many other international successes. The Herbert Linge Special Run is started in his honour on the evening of both days; the hum of the engines and roar of the crowd are an ovation specifically for him. Stéphane Ortelli also puts his foot on the pedal again.

Beaming.

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