

The formula for success at the Porsche works teams

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15/07/2020 The oldest dictum in racing may well be that your teammates are your greatest rivals. Porsche has reversed the principle and made it a model of success: team spirit instead of ego trips. With their titles in the IMSA Championship and the FIA World Endurance Championship, two dynamic duos—Earl Bamber and Laurens Vanthoor as well as Michael Christensen and Kévin Estre—demonstrate that friendship is the winning formula.

Team 1

Earl Bamber, 29:
A New Zealander who has settled in Kuala Lumpur

Laurens Vanthoor, 29:
A family man from Belgium living in Germany

You never get a second chance to make a first impression, as the saying goes. So the friendship between Earl Bamber and Laurens Vanthoor is nothing short of a miracle. Their first encounter was particularly dramatic. Bamber, a New Zealand native, and Vanthoor, born in Belgium, were driving under different colors at the 2016 GT World Cup in Macau: Bamber in a Porsche and Vanthoor in an Audi. Bamber passed Vanthoor to take the lead, with Vanthoor then grazing a wall and landing on the roof of his Audi. The accident caused the officials to end the race. When that happens, the results are based on the positions at the end of the previous lap, so Vanthoor went home as the winner. With Bamber's blessing. "If I can't win, then Laurens is the one I'll root for," he says today.

In 2018 the former rivals, now both driving for Porsche, became close allies. There was a strategy behind it. Leaders in Weissach realized that respect and strong partnerships yield results, all the more so in endurance racing. Compatible personalities sharing cars on the factory team paid off doubly in 2019. Both the Bamber-Vanthoor duo and the team of Michael Christensen and Kévin Estre took top honors in their respective contests. Porsche required that the driver teams in total command all the qualities needed on any racing weekend. That includes the ability to produce a top performance precisely when needed in the qualifying as well as aggressive attacks in the race itself. Endurance, driving styles that are easy on the materials and use resources intelligently—whether human or mechanical—and meticulous coordination are also crucial. But the most important requirement in Weissach is for team members to understand that they're in it together. Working against each other means working against oneself. For Porsche, compatibility is more than a clever algorithm. It's based on a profound understanding of human nature.

When Bamber and Vanthoor proposed racing together in the USA in 2018, it suited the team's agenda. The chemistry was right. In 2019, the second year they shared a Porsche 911 RSR in the IMSA, they enjoyed a sensational season with three victories and the title in the GTLM class.

Their secret to success is that they both know each other's strengths and weaknesses. "Laurens loves qualifying, so we've decided that he always drives for the pole," says Bamber. This means that Bamber gives up his chance to shine in the qualifying. Instead, he concentrates his strengths on the race. There's only one goal. To win! As Bamber adds, "We use more strategy than other teams. Not many people are willing to admit that their teammate can do something a little better than they can." For that to work, you need trust. Or better yet, friendship.

Bamber and Vanthoor are a living example of friendship. On racing weekends they share a motor home. Otherwise, they talk on the phone every day or send WhatsApp messages. Vanthoor and his family live in the town of Waiblingen near Stuttgart, and Bamber stays there when he visits Porsche. "Laurens is one of my best friends," he says. Bamber, who grew up on a farm in New Zealand, has settled in Kuala Lumpur and founded a successful racing team. One is a restless cosmopolitan, the other a family man. But the different worlds they inhabit are fertile grounds for conversations above and beyond motorsports. "We talk a lot and openly. We don't keep secrets from each other," says Vanthoor.

In their free time, both men are avid cyclists. Vanthoor passed this passion on to Bamber—along with a used racing bike the former had revamped. One expression of this heartwarming bromance is the hashtag #bamthor, which a fan created and the two drivers have since developed into their own collection of T-shirts and caps.

Team 2

Michael Christensen, 29:
A Danish soccer fan with a new home in London

Kévin Estre, 31:
A Frenchman with a love of skiing and Lake Constance

The story of the second driver duo also began with a bang. Michael Christensen and Kévin Estre literally came up against each other in the 2012 Porsche Carrera Cup. "I bumped into Kévin as part of a chain reaction in an accident on the Norisring in Nuremberg," recalls Christensen.

The incident had long been forgotten when the two became teammates at the 2017 FIA World Endurance Championship. The first highlight came in 2018: a GT class victory in Le Mans at the season kickoff. Followed almost inexorably by the world championship title in 2019. "That was a dream come true. We could have won every single race in the 2018–2019 season; we were a strong combination," says Estre, though only after some prompting. The two champions are justifiably proud of two victories and four appearances on the podium but are both reluctant to blow their own horns. Although this Danish-French Porsche duo doesn't offer fan merch, it's guided by the same principle as #bamthor. "The team is our focus," says Christensen. "Each member puts an enormous amount of energy into it and deserves the same amount of respect." He and Estre are less conspicuous examples of the Porsche philosophy. But for them, too, the "we" transcends the ego. Their shining success eliminates any need for further comment.

Putting the brakes on their ambitions for themselves? That may be the single most difficult thing for a race-car driver to do. Christensen and Estre have found their own approach. Because Estre is harder on tires, he usually drives on fresh ones for the short intervals between fueling stops. Christensen, who's known as a "tire whisperer," often takes on distances twice as long.

Another reason the two work so well together has to do with their more reflective personalities. They took up golf together—a sport on the calmer end of the spectrum from racing. And they're there for each other in tough times as well. Like in Le Mans in 2017, when Christensen caused an accident while leading the most important race of the year. "I came back to the pit and Kévin just said, 'Let's go have a beer.' That's real support. It's moments like that when you really get to know someone."

Info

Text first published in the Porsche magazine Christophorus, No. 395.

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