

Makers' day

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02/05/2019 50 years ago, it took less than 12 months to develop the legendary Porsche 917 from an idea through to the inspection of 25 prototypes as required by FIA. Now contemporary witnesses came together in Weissach for the very first time to reminisce about those crazy times – accompanied by the sound of the roaring engine of the 917-001.

It was a grey and cool spring day at the skid pad of the Weissach research and development centre. However, those present were not disturbed by the conditions as they watched the Porsche 917-001 with awe while it completed laps with an incredibly deep engine roar. At the wheel: Le Mans winner Marc Lieb. Those watching on: the makers. For instance Hans Mezger, back then Head of Motorsports and responsible for the project, among other things. Or Hermann Burst, process planner and responsible for the 25 homologation vehicles that were inspected by FIA on the management car park of Plant 1 on 21 April 1969. They were joined by designer Eugen Kolb, body maker Klaus Ziegler, laminate expert Roland Bemsel, test driver Günter Steckkönig and Gerhard Küchle, an engine construction mechanic. And of course Kurt Ahrens – then a works driver without a works contract. A genuine “917 tamer”.

Hans Mezger, Gerhard Küchle, Roland Bemsel, Klaus Ziegler, Günter Steckkönig, Hermann Burst and Eugen Kolb (l-r)

Plastic body maker and laminate expert Roland Bemsel can still remember the problems they had with the windscreens. “Drivers were struggling with reflections. All windscreens were different, as they were shaped by hand. But at least they supported the vehicle’s stability.” However, the main problem was: “Will the body stay on the tubular frame? Is everything secure? We were covering a lot of new territory back then.”

Legend has it that the wives of the married racing drivers tearfully begged their husbands not to get behind the wheel before the race at Spa. Ahrens recalls: “But the sound was the best part. You could hear all of the work that had gone into the engine.” By the way, the 917 was officially available to purchase – the price tag: 140,000 marks. This included the removable long tail to transform the vehicle into a short tail vehicle, but also the fact that each engine required a top up of four litres of oil for each stint at the Le Mans race. And the flaw that quite a few exhaust parts disappeared into thin air – they just came off as a result of the vibrations.

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