Walkies with Mark Webber

19/12/2020 Canines, combustion and coronavirus crisis: we walk and talk with Porsche brand ambassador Mark Webber.

Back in the UK for a short stay between Formula One grand prix, one of the world's most familiar and in-demand ex-racers has the prospect of some precious downtime. Mark Webber has gone from pivotal player in both F1 and endurance racing to globe-trotting pundit and Porsche brand ambassador, so the chance to spend some time with him away from the coalface is as valuable as it is rare.

Today, however, we are doing just that; shooting the breeze over a long dog walk in the company of Webber's beloved German shorthaired pointers, Sammy and Saxon. It's an opportunity to talk shop for sure, but also to let the conversation wander onto the wider issues affecting everyone at the moment.

But first to the dogs, eager and powerful enough to pull us face first into the Buckinghamshire mud. Once off the lead they lope ahead on the scent of elusive pheasants, ploughing up huge drifts of fallen leaves before charging back to check in with their devoted owner.

"We've had dogs in the family all my life," Webber explains. "On the farm in Australia we had 13. My grandfather used them for mustering cattle and sheep so we always had them in the house and I'm a huge animal lover now. I've had a wide array of dogs since, generally bigger breeds because I like running and training with them. I'm with Sammy and Saxon every day when I'm in the UK and we have a really special bond. When I've got back from travelling abroad, or if I've been stressed, sometimes I just lay down with them. They have this amazing vibe about them."

The return to top-flight endurance racing

Despite retiring in 2016, Webber's ambassadorial role means he is rarely in one place for long. He maintains a close interest in Porsche's racing endeavours, however, and when asked about the brand's return to top-flight endurance racing, Webber is effusive. "Endurance racing is something motorsport needs and loves," he says. "It's the backyard for Porsche – we've been addicted to it for over 50 years – so I'm delighted to see Porsche going for outright victories again. The new LMDh prototypes will mean that, from 2023, Porsche can compete at the top in Europe and the US with the same car. It's going to progress hybrid tech too, and bring a lot of big names back to Le Mans. I can't wait."

As the dogs circle back, now spattered in mud and panting madly, Webber returns to the 919 Hybrid to illustrate the point. The moment Porsche's three-time Le Mans winner was retired, Weissach unleashed the Evo that ran unrestricted by Balance of Power, crushing lap records across Europe in the process. "Porsche loves racing", he reminds us, "and uses it as a vital means of development, but it also wants to win fair and square."

The talk of technology transfer leads the conversation inexorably to electrification, and the crossroads we are at both on road and race tracks. “We’re at a really important junction in terms of legislation,” Webber says, “and naturally that’s going to accelerate the appetite for going electric. Of course, it’s hard to unlearn what you’ve loved in the past, but I really enjoy driving the Taycan, as do quite a few Formula One drivers. One of them told me how a combustion engine felt like steam power after he’d driven it.”

Webber’s schedule and that close community of racers means the coronavirus crisis has not affected him as much as many by his own admission, but he has felt the absence of friends and family and acknowledges the huge challenges faced by others. “The big thing is missing people, not being able to socialise. Everyone’s dealing with it in different ways but I try to always be glass half full, to see every day as a day closer to getting back to normal.”

As we arrive back at the car and a very wet and muddy Sammy and Saxon clamber into the boot of the recently valeted Macan Turbo, Webber sits down on the tailgate to take off his boots. “My advice,” his says after some thought, “is to control the controllables and just be present. Be 100 per cent focussed on each day and jump out of bed with gusto. Try to smile and surround yourself with people who have a similar attitude.” Failing that, a pair of pointers in a Porsche should do the trick.

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