Out in force: the 917 at 50

10/04/2019 For the first time, Porsche has presented four driving examples of the 917 at 77th Goodwood Members' Meeting in Great Britain. The audience could marvel at 917-001, 917/30-001, 917/30 Spyder and 917 KH, among others driven by Porsche Brand Ambassador Mark Webber.

Dawn over the Goodwood paddock shines a pale Spring light on one of the more spectacular sights in the Tribe's collective memory. Side-by-side, huddled together under timber awnings, are five 917s, ranging from the very first to one of the last, bookending the most evocative and spectacular period in Porsche's racing history.

This is the 77th Members' Meeting, a vintage motorsport event held annually at the famous Sussex circuit in Southeast England. This year, Porsche chose Goodwood as the primary venue to celebrate 50 years of the 917, offering as it does the perfect period backdrop and unmodernised circuit to recall the drama and potency of these iconic racers.

Chassis 917-001 is undertaking its first laps since a full restoration to the exact specification in which it left Zuffenhausen in 1969, bound for its international debut at the Geneva Motor Show. Having been used as both display car and development mule, 001 underwent countless alterations in the intervening years, but this dramatic reworking will be its last. Finished in Porsche's traditional racing white with the green nose that adorned all 25 of the 1969 homologation cars, 001 has the curvaceous original bodywork, long, finned and sculptural, enveloping surprisingly modest rubber and its spindly spaceframe chassis.

Next to it is, for many, the quintessence of the 917 programme. The John Wyer Automotive Kurzheck or short tail, finished in the instantly familiar orange and blue of sponsor Gulf. These were the cars that dominated the World Sportscar Championships in the early Seventies, toe-to-toe with Ferrari's 512s around Europe's fast and unforgiving circuits, with the luminous likes of Elford, Siffert and Rodriguez at the wheel.

As the sun begins to burn through the high cloud over Goodwood, the crowds grow in noise and number, drawn to this unprecedented line up, four of which have travelled together from the Porsche Museum in Zuffenhausen to be here. Surrounded on all sides is the Sunoco 917/30, currently pulled out from its bay and in a state of undress as the Museum mechanics attempt to get it started. Air lines are deployed to clean the fuel lines and dry off the spark plugs, its vast rear clam held aloft to expose the dizzying workings of an air-cooled and turbocharged flat-twelve capable of generating 1200 PS.

In a little while and with a little luck, all these cars will be firing in unison, ready to take to the track for one of the most unforgettable demonstration runs Porsche has ever put on. Testament to just how significant a moment this parade is to Porsche's drivers, 85-year-old Vic Elford has flown in from

Florida for the day to witness it, while Derek Bell and Richard Attwood have put their hands up for a drive. Representing the modern era, meanwhile, are Romain Dumas, Neel Jani and our own Mark Webber, all eager to be part of this unique and magical moment.

When Mark appears it is with the usual lack of fuss. “Which one am I in?” he asks, genuinely unaware which of the four 917s he has been allocated. It turns out to be Mark Donohue’s 917/30. “This one?” he says with a nod towards the vast rear wing created to tame the most powerful Porsche engine ever made. “Ah, good.”

The cars are all pushed to the assembly area where they form up at an angle towards the track, much as the early coupes would have done for infamous Le Mans start. The engines begin to fire in turn until we are surrounded by a sound that surpasses description. Five air-cooled flat-twelves, side-by-side, roaring in unison as they warm up through the rev range, throttles blipped or sustained to a gigantic and truly deafening crescendo. The sound is overwhelming, a wall of noise so rich in history, so awesome in magnitude, that it is difficult not to feel emotional.

Richard Attwood has folded himself into the compact cockpit of 917-001, the diminutive Neel Jani slipping with ease into the John Wyer car. Romains Dumas has the striking Vaillant 917/30 that Vic Elford drove to victory in debut at Hockenheim in the 1973 Interserie, while Derek Bell is in Joe Siffert’s 917/10, the only car here that has not come from Porsche’s own collection. Mark, looking as unconcerned as if he was just popping to the shops for a newspaper, straps on his open-face helmet and clambers carefully across the vast offside fuel tank into Donohue’s Can-Am-winning 917/30.

The laps are over almost before they’ve begun, the five cars flashing past in a giddy spectacle of sound and colour, devouring the 3.8 km circuit like an amuse bouche before the main meal. But short as it was, the sight will live long in everyone’s memory. For the old hands for whom these cars were once the office, it’s been a flashback to a golden era. For the young men still in their racing prime, a potent reminder of the vision and risk-taking that took Porsche to the top half a century ago. And for the rest of us, a privilege and a pleasure just to be able to say ‘I was there.’

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