

Le Mans: Porsche drivers give personal insights

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08/06/2017 On June 17 the LMP Team takes up the Le Mans 24 Hours. In the quiet before the storm, the drivers offer personal views into their relationship with regards to the endurance classic.

The six works drivers of the Porsche LMP Team have a tally of 37 entries between them in what is arguably the biggest car race in the world. Five of them have even taken overall victory. But it's not only moments of glory that come in to their minds when they are reflecting on this gruelling marathon prior to their next appearance on June 17/18.

In the quiet before the storm, the drivers offer personal views into their relationship with regards the endurance classic. The reigning world champion Neel Jani (CH) in 2017 shares the Porsche 919 Hybrid car number 1 with André Lotterer (DE) and Nick Tandy (GB). At the wheel of the sister car number 2 are Earl Bamber (NZ), Timo Bernhard (DE) and Brendon Hartley (NZ).

Zombie in the pit lane

“Le Mans 2015 was a whirlwind experience from the very start. It began when I was offered a test in the 919 just before Christmas in 2014 having just become a Porsche ‘factory’ driver. Having come from Porsche SuperCup and Carrera Cup, it was a massive and unexpected opportunity to drive an LMP Hybrid – I could never have imagined getting such an opportunity and it was very humbling that Porsche was putting its trust in me to make such a huge step. At my first simulator appointment in Weissach, our race engineer Kyle Wilson-Clarke asked what familiarity I had of driving a hybrid sports-prototype. I replied: ‘Mate I have no experience whatsoever, I’m used to driving a Porsche Cup car with two buttons on the steering wheel!’ But the test went well and connecting via Orlando on the way home, I got a ‘phone call from Porsche: ‘Get your diary out, we need to make an appointment – you’re driving at Le Mans in June.’ The pen dropped out of my hand.

“At Le Mans in 2015, our 919 had been pretty quick in practice and qualifying. Nico (Hülkenberg), Nick (Tandy) and myself all agreed that if we drove as fast as we were each comfortable with and avoided any collisions, we could get a podium finish. We were ticking the laps off, winding the clock down and not worrying too much about our position. But by the early hours on Sunday morning we were leading. In some respect, no one had really taken much notice of our car but that was when the pressure began. The reality of potentially winning the biggest race on the planet had not dawned on any of us. Once Nico took the chequered flag, everything just went crazy. I walked around the pit lane outside our ‘box like a zombie – I couldn’t comprehend what had just happened and didn’t know what to do or where to go. These were very special moments which came flooding back to me when I arrived in the Le Mans paddock last year. I had started out in karts in New Zealand coincidently back in 1998 – the year Porsche had last won at Le Mans before Nico, Nick and I did.”

Alex said...

“Since the early days of my Porsche career with the Junior team and to this day, Alex Wiggenhauser has worked as a mechanic on my car. He has always enthused about Le Mans. He told me of the GT1 entries and the Porsche overall race win in 1998. I could not imagine what this was like. When I started for the first time in the GT class, it slowly dawned on me what the Le Mans myth meant. Back then we had won our class but the overall winners were heroes to me. It seemed unthinkable but it became a target to stand once as an overall winner on the huge balcony in front of this amazing crowd. Between 2009 and 2012, Porsche loaned Romain (Dumas) and me to Audi. In 2010 the balcony dream worked out.

“I had the pleasure to drive the first and last stints of the race that year. Those obviously were the most emotional parts. It was the first time I had done the start at Le Mans and it comes after an enormous build-up of tension lasting hours. The formation lap is pure adrenalin and on the last lap the marshals stood on the track and waved their flags. We finished the race in convoy. I will never forget these impressions and feelings for the rest of my life. The final minutes in the car were very personal. It was as

if I watched a movie that brought everything back to me: childhood dreams, my parent's support, the hard work. I felt satisfaction. When I stepped on the podium, looking at thousands and thousands of fans, it felt surreal. Tom Kristensen stood next to me and asked: 'What's the matter – are you not happy?' I just felt overwhelmed from everything. The late kind-hearted journalist Gustav Büsing said to me: 'Now you are a Le Mans winner. This stays forever.' I felt very touched. I'm very much aware that no matter how good you are as a race driver, it is not granted you can ever win this race. The dimension, the endurance, the drama – Le Mans cannot be planned. I'm very grateful.

"Allan McNish once told me that he couldn't really appreciate and enjoy his first Le Mans win because everything was impacting on him at the time. He had managed it only when it happened for a second time. This is what I want to experience with Porsche!"

At warp speed through the night

"One of my most lasting memories of Le Mans was my first experience of taking on the Circuit de la Sarthe during the night in 2012. Coming from a single-seater background, there were many things to learn during my first Le Mans but for the most part I felt prepared. However, nothing quite equipped me for my first laps in darkness.

"Up until that moment, I believed I was a driver that drove purely by feel, and that I didn't use many visual markers like others. Oh how wrong I was! All the houses, guard rails, trees, lines in the road, sometimes seemingly useless objects in the distance that you don't put much thought into, were gone! That's when I appreciated how much my brain relied on those markers without me realising it. During those first five laps it felt like I was learning the track all over again, taking in completely new visual markers, most of which flashed by extremely fast, reflections and lights that weren't there during the day.

"The next thing I noticed was how there was a completely different sense of speed and how I was slowing the car too much at every apex. This was because when things are coming in and out of your tunnel vision created by the view of the headlights, it felt like the car was travelling at warp speed. After the shock of my first five laps in the dark I started to completely embrace the experience, enjoy the extra adrenaline flowing through my blood, and let my senses naturally heighten. It felt amazing! Although it's not physically harder to drive in the night, mentally you feel much more strain after a long stint. I now embrace the challenges of the night at Le Mans and always put my hand up if someone is needed to do an extra stint in the lonely early hours of the early morning."

Take every chance

"I came to Le Mans for the first time in 2009. Back then I didn't know what to expect. My priority was on single-seater racing and I also did some Formula One tests. I then received a request from Rebellion

to drive a closed LMP1 Lola Aston Martin. I was amazed how big this event was.

“A huge fascination comes from the race’s unpredictable nature and the incredible drama. It keeps developing in unexpected directions and sometimes not the fastest car wins. I have seen that over the years. Peugeot could have been clearly faster than Audi but retired with four cars. I understood you need to be quick but first of all you must stay in the race and be there when your time comes. Anything can happen and it’s rare that the same car is the fastest over the 24 hours.

“Last year’s race was a perfect example of this. When the Toyota retired just minutes before the finish, of course it hit me how hard it was for Toyota and its drivers. It confirms just how difficult Le Mans is to conquer. We were in a close fight with Toyota. It wasn’t a wheel-to-wheel battle because we were on a different refuelling strategy but on our simulation the gap was always only a few seconds. Sometimes our car looked like the winner, then it was the Toyota again. We had been unlucky with the Full Course Yellow timings several times and also had two punctures. I felt we had not much luck. In the end the pendulum swung our way. Of course you don’t want to benefit from someone else’s misfortune but somehow everything comes back and evens out. I’ve done Le Mans eight times and have only finished the race with no technical issues three times. Before the start, Jacky Ickx said to me: ‘You cannot win Le Mans. Le Mans lets you win.’”

The one that got away

“I love Le Mans – so much so that you could say I got divorced for it. Audi and I share a great history together and I could still be racing race for them but obviously not at Le Mans. But to enter this race with Porsche has a unique appeal because the brand is so closely knit with Le Mans and has been involved in motor sports from the beginning. This goes deep. When I was drawing sports cars as a kid, they always had the shape of a 911. In recent years I’ve been in the fortunate position to buy several Porsche cars for my collection. Now I’ve got two more: a company car and the 919 Hybrid!

“Le Mans is such a huge project, a tremendous race. Sports cars mean to share a car with your best buddies – the relationship with Benoît (Tréluyer) and Marcel (Fässler) was very special. Endurance racing is team sport through and through and Le Mans takes everyone to his limit.

“Winning this race is absolutely fantastic. I had this experience three times but regard my first win in 2011 as the biggest success of my career. It was the first one and you never know if you have a chance to fight for victory in this race for a second time. But it was also a very special race. The Safety Cars were on track for hours and we swapped the lead with Peugeot 40 times. With a difference of six seconds between us after almost 24 hours of racing we came in for our last pit stops at the same time. In the end I won the race with a 13.8-seconds advantage. I had been in the car for five stints, nearly four hours. Allan McNish’s car had retired at the end of the first hour after a big crash. In the night Mike Rockenfeller suffered his heavy accident. It was bad. We had two garages closed. Benoît, Marcel and I were racing all alone against Peugeot.”

Looking for a place to cry

“I still get goose bumps thinking about it (winning Le Mans 2015). I didn’t think I could ever grasp the opportunity to race there – I never dreamt for one moment I would ever get to race in something that special and big. I was wound-up with so much emotion for the last three hours of the race in 2015 – I was like a coiled spring waiting to be released. I sat in the pitbox, I walked around, I didn’t really know what to do with myself. I’d driven my last stints by that stage, it was down to Earl and Nico to finish the job off and it was hard not being in the car. Of course I had every faith in my two team-mates, I trusted them 100%, but I wasn’t in total control of my own destiny – I was watching on TV ‘my’ car with them at the wheel knowing that so long as nothing went wrong, I was about to win the biggest race in the world of motorsport after 15 years of hard work of being a professional to reach this crescendo – it was very tough!

“The pressure had been mounting as the clock ticked towards 3pm and for the last 15 or so minutes I was with Earl in our pitbox. But then I needed to just get out and walked out the back, simply to get away. The magnitude of winning the biggest race in my career – in the world – was too much of a strain, the weight was enormous – that’s what winning the crown jewel of motorsport meant to me. I wanted to find a quiet corner and cry I suppose! I didn’t take everything in after the chequered flag, there was so much going on and the relief was so overwhelming – it was a blur. I remember more now looking at photos and videos of the post-race celebrations.

“I left the Porsche party quite early on Sunday evening, I was so tired – physically and emotionally drained from the week. I went back to my hotel and slept like a baby. On the Monday I drove home to England with my wife and young daughter and it was the least stressful long car journey I’ve ever undertaken . . . the world was a great place to be in. When we arrived back in our village, family and friends had organised a party outside the local pub with banners saying ‘congratulations’ – it was amazing.”

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