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From the Archives...

Classic Le Mans – July 11th to 13th, 2008

Mulsanne – Arnage - Tertre Rouge – Indianapolis - Ford Chicane - Porsche curves. Le Mans. Yup. Been there, done that. A lifetime's ambition satisfied. Not quite the 24 Hours but damn near to it!

After George and I had completed a season's worth of racing his ex-George Loos RSR, the organizers, Patrick Auto, granted us an entry into this year's Le Mans Classic, which had been our ambition from the start. The event comprises three forty minute races, one at night and two in daylight, all on the full 24 hour circuit.

I had flown to England first, to visit my two daughters and the eldest, Lisa, had taken a week off work to accompany me to Le Mans. She is very keen on motor racing and had never been to Le Mans before. I had been in, I think, 1963 when a teenager and have vague memories of Ferrari GTOs and Porsche 550/718s with incredibly long first gear ratios that would seem to take an endless amount of time leaving the pits as they accelerated away from their stops.



reminding me of why I immigrated to Florida.

Lisa and I drove from Alcester, in the English Midlands, in her new Mini Cooper S (great car!) to Dover, caught the ferry (which appeared to be packed with lots of Olde English sportscars like Triumph TR3/4s, Austin Healey 3000s, Jaguar E types and XKs) and disembarked at Calais in France ninety minutes later. We all set off southwards towards Le Mans. It rained continuously until we reached Rouen,

A word here about French roads. They're brilliant! Super smooth highways, little traffic, speed limits that appear to be totally disregarded, in fact, just great! We had a brief burst up to 120 mph with Lisa driving, and I'm sure we could have gone a lot faster, for far longer, had we wished to. We stayed the night in the old cathedral town of Rouen, where a very kind taxi driver by the name of Sebastian, took us shopping for absolutely no charge! "I like the English" he said as he left us, "even though you burnt Joan of Arc!"



Early next morning the rain stopped, the sun came out and we left Rouen. Only two hours later we were at the Le Mans circuit. Happily, the weather stayed clear and bright for the rest of the week. On Thursday morning, we met up with George, Mauro Borella and Jim Pace, all of us due to get some driving in over the course of the twenty four hours. The field was split up into six "Plateaus" (Grids) catering for each era of cars that have raced at Le Mans, hence the first "Plateau" featured pre-war cars dating from 1923 and we were in "Plateau 6", which was for cars of the type that had raced at Le Mans between 1970 and 1979. "Plateau 5" also interested me as this contained the great sports-prototypes and there were no less than four Porsche 917s, some ten Lola T70 coupes, besides several Ferrari P3/4s, 512s, a Matra, various Alpine-Renaults, etcetera. Our Grid featured seventy one entries, with three Porsche 935s, two 934s, several RSRs and, in the Sports-prototype division, various Lola T280/290s, Chevrons B16/19/21/36s, a Porsche 936 (driven by Jurgen Barth and Jean-Marc Luco), and the usual bevy of BMW M1 Procars and CSLs. Amongst the other "old pros" driving in our group were Gerard Larrousse, Jean-Louis Schlesser (in a three liter Capri!), Jean-Pierre Jassaud in a Renault A446 Alpine, Rene Arnoux and the great four-times Le Mans winner, Henri Pescarolo.

Our RSR didn't arrive until Friday (the day of the drivers' briefing) and first practice was not until that afternoon, when the public roads that make up the circuit were closed.

We did not get to practice until dusk was falling and Mauro was first away, then George and then I got two laps in at the end. Jim Pace had raced a works Riley and Scott here in 1993 and so chose not to worry about daytime practice as he and Mauro had chosen to take the night session and race. Mauro came back from the night session with eyes as wide as saucers; "They are crazy!" he told me. "First time down the Mulsanne straight and two sports prototypes hit each other as they turned into the first chicane. Then a blue Ferrari 512 BB LM came by me and promptly blew up." The oil was all over the windshield.



When it was my turn, I helped George out and then climbed in. The mechanics strapped me in and I was off, accelerating out of the pits. I had been watching





various "Youtube" in-car videos for several months and so had already memorized the circuit. However, experience has taught me that these videos give no sense of gradient or camber of road, which can be somewhat disconcerting as you discover the real thing!

Out of pit lane and you accelerate into a gentle right hand curve towards the brow of a hill. Immediately over the hilltop is the first left-right chicane, which can easily catch the unwary out. Then it's under the Dunlop Bridge and downhill into the sweeping right-left and right, left and right again at Tertre Rouge. The famed poplar trees on the left leading down to Arnage flash by, one final fast right sweep and you are on the Mulsanne straight. Change gear into fifth, foot hard down, stretch your toes to the utmost (I suddenly found another 200 rpm by doing this!) and now here you are, playing Steve McQueen as you go faster for longer than you've ever gone before. Whoops, isn't that the famous "Les Hunaudieres" restaurant you're just sweeping past? It is and you're past in the blink of an eye. Glance briefly in the mirror, no one behind so it's okay to move gently over to the left hand side in order to take the take the first chicane, which is on the right of the straight. Wow! The public road is steeply cambered and, as you go over the crown, the car twitches nervously. Just two brake boards, the first at 200 meters. Let that go by, hit the brakes at the 100 meters board, shift down to third gear and the RSR slows enough to turn in. Feed the power in, holding the throttle as you apex the left turn, then accelerate hard as you exit onto the straight again. Back onto full top speed (about 175 mph at 8,000 rpm in the RSR), hold it until the 200 meter brake board for the second chicane appears. This one goes to the left of the straight, so repeat the brake and shift to third part and take this chicane also. When you are again on the straight, the infamous kink flashes by but you are not going fast enough to have to bother to lift. Over the brow of the hill and suddenly you're diving into Mulsanne corner. This bends slightly to the right and then tightens up a lot into the second gear corner and you really need the brakes here!



Away from Mulsanne and the road stretched out in front, sweeping over blind brows and through two fast sweeps to the right. All this is taken flat out again and it's amazing to see cars behind go backwards slightly in the mirrors as the ones who haven't studied the course lift off through these sweeps. Thank you "Youtube"! Another sweep to the left now and then it's into the ninety degree right corner at Indianapolis,

swiftly followed by a left and, after a short straight, another right. Flat out again with two minor left sweeps, neither of which require a lift of the right foot and then it's into the Porsche curves. These are a tricky set of medium speed (fourth gear) sweepers with, first of all, a right hander leading into a double apex left hander. From there it's into a 180 degree turn, where you can watch the car ahead twitching it's front wheels as they seek for grip and realize that you're doing exactly the same thing. After this, it's a quick left-right-left and then into the two second gear chicanes that lead into the pit straight. Dash past the pits and you're off on another lap. Only eight miles around.

I managed just two "familiarization" laps before the session was over. Then it was Jim Pace and Mauro's turn again for night practice and finally back to the vastly overpriced Novotel for a night's sleep.



For us, the saddest news was that the Sauber C5 that Sigg and Philipp were driving was going no further. The engine developed problems and was judged not fit to do the races. Such a shame as, although they tried to hide it, we could all see how disappointed Philipp and Sigg were.



Next morning, we arrived at the circuit at around 10 a.m. to find it absolutely jam packed. The organizers said that more people came to view the "Classic" than the real 24 Hours and I could believe it. Cars were parked on the approach roads from some four miles out. When we arrived, we found that we had to park in a competitor's car park, from where we were ferried in World War II jeeps into our paddocks, by folks dressed in American WWII uniforms; a nice touch, I thought.

From our paddock, we were transported to the driver's briefing in 1950's Swiss buses with panoramic roofs, which had been beautifully restored. Unfortunately, there were so many drivers (four hundred cars entered with two-three drivers per car), that not everybody made it in time. No real worry, as I am sure that most of the drivers were very experienced and didn't need to hear it. The only thing that I heard that was relevant was when Patrick Peter said: "If you're not confident about racing at night, I recommend that you don't do it!" As I had already reached that conclusion, I heartily agreed with his sentiments.

We then had eight hours to kill until the first race, which Mauro and Jim were going to do. We spent it in various ways, Lisa and I took a tour of the various stands, which were selling everything that one could wish for, either associated with Motor Racing or not, whilst Jim went to sleep (he's good at cat-napping!) and George and Mauro also went to look around the shops.



As we were Grid 6, we were the last people in each cycle to race so, as the racing started at the traditional hour of four o'clock, it was not until 10 p.m. that "our"

race started. With so many cars in the class, poor Jim Pace found himself down the end of the field and the grid did not all keep tight formation, necessitating Jim to put on a virtuoso demonstration just to get the RSR up to the middle of the field before he handed over to Mauro after some twenty minutes. At the end of the race, we were in an excellent twenty second overall. Thanks Jim and Mauro!



We had to wait for transport from the paddock to get back to our road cars and back to the hotel, where we slept for three hours. George and I would then set off to do our race, which was due to start at about 6 a.m., just as it was getting light. George took the first stint and drove exceedingly well (grovel, grovel, posting a 4:59 lap time). Well, he does own the car! He came in and the driver change went well and off I went, in anger, so to say.



I loved it. The car went great, handling was good, brakes good and the car gave me that feeling of confidence that only a well-sorted RSR can. I actually overtook some people in front of me! And then...going down the Mulsanne straight on the last lap, I felt the engine falter and then the car started to slow. I realized it was suffering from low fuel pressure and switched off and de-clutched. Reaching Mulsanne corner, I started the engine again and put the car into gear but it was no good, it was slowing fast and I crawled onto the grass by Indianapolis corner. To say that I was upset would be to put it mildly; all season long, apart from a gearbox problem, our dear RSR has gone great, as the highest-placed customer in the 1975 Le Mans 24 Hours should.

So it was an ignominious trip on a tow rope behind an ACO-provided Audi back to the pits where Heiko and Dimitri diagnosed a pick-up problem in the tank, which they swiftly fixed. Sadly, that result (we were classified 32nd, I'm happy to say) made it an uphill battle for Jim and Mauro, who drove the last race of the day, at 3 p.m.



They did a sterling job, Jim actually getting in amongst the Sports-prototypes and getting up to 20th overall, despite a gearbox that was now beginning to cry "enough" and, at 4 p.m. on Sunday, we could happily record that we had, at the first attempt, finished the Classic Le Mans of 2008. We finished 27th overall out of 71 cars, not bad for 1974 RSR with only some 330 horsepower from three liters. One of the other RS owners, who passed us on the straight, said: "You need a big engine for Le Mans!" He is right – it is a place where power really tells.

A big thank you to George Tuma, who made it all possible. Also Mauro, my old racing buddy of twenty years, Jim Pace, Siggie and Philipp Brunn, Walter, our timekeeper (who had worked twenty years in the Porsche race department under Norbert Singer and then joined Sauber-Mercedes for their Group C effort), and Dimitri and Heiko. Thanks for making a happy man so old.





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