

CLASSIC DRIVER

Le Mans Legends - 2003 Event details announced



A new era has been chosen for the Le Mans Legend race at next year's Le Mans 24 Hours weekend. This is the Historic race run on the Saturday morning of the main event and, as with the sensational successful Le Mans Legend 2001, it will be exclusively for actual cars which ran at Le Mans and genuine sister cars of the same specification.

This time, however, the eligible years will be 1959 to 1971, which promises a spectacular battle between some of the greatest sports-racers of all time. It spans the last great front-engined classics, the mid-engined revolution and the emergence of the dramatic Group 4 and Group 6 racers.



The Le Mans Legend, held a few hours before the start of the famous 24 Hours race, was initiated in 2001 and is now run every second year. In front of the vast Le Mans crowd, and basking in the unrivalled atmosphere of the greatest endurance race in the world, it recreates legendary Le Mans battles gone by on the full 8.5-mile circuit. This is a serious race - not a parade - with classes based on engine size and age of car.

The chosen years, 1959 to 1971, represent a golden era for Le Mans. In the mid-1960s, as Ford took on Ferrari, the new generation of mid-engined cars was reaching unprecedented speeds on the 3-mile Mulsanne Straight. Then, as the decade drew to a close, the emergence of aerodynamic downforce changed the face of racing for ever. The Porsche 917 and Ferrari 512M were not only faster in corners: they also raised straight-line speeds well in excess of 200mph.



Yet 1971 was the swansong of these 5-litre beasts. Their short but glorious life as contemporary racers came to an abrupt end in 1972, with the introduction of a new 3-litre capacity limit. Changing regulations, and alterations to the track, have meant that the average speed of the winning Porsche in 1971 – over 138mph for a day and a night – has never been beaten. In 2003, the Le Mans Legend will re-run the heroic battles between Porsche 917 and Ferrari 512, between Ford GT40 and Ferrari P4, between Matra V12 and Porsche 908. Also invited are charismatic GT cars like Le Mans Cobras and Lightweight E-types, Ferrari GTOs and Aston Martin Project cars.

In the smaller-engined classes, too, history was being written between 1959 and 1971. A fascinating mix of cars is eligible for the 2003 event, from period Porsche, Lotus and Lola via Le Mans versions of Austin-Healey Sprite, Triumph, Sunbeam and MG to less familiar marques like Chevron, Costin, Abarth and Ligier.

The Le Mans Legend was the culmination of a life's work for Ray Wiltshire, president of the Bentley Drivers' Club and first ever non-French Main Board Member of the Automobile Club de l'Ouest. When Ray passed away earlier this year his son, Duncan, took over the reins of Motor Racing Legends (previously Motoring Cavalcades Ltd), which is the company behind the Le Mans Legend.



"When the first Legend race proved so popular with the crowds at Le Mans," explains Duncan Wiltshire, "we decided to maintain the excitement of subsequent events by accepting Le Mans cars from different eras. Each time this historic battle is run, we'll review the eligible dates. By accepting cars from 1959 to 1971, the spectrum of entries in 2003 will take us forward in motor racing history to years of great innovation, before the era of the magnificent 5-litre racers came to a close."

Potential entrants should contact Motor Racing Legends, Hillstone Barns, Brook Street, Hargrave, Northants NN9 6BP, UK

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Gallery

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