

CLASSIC DRIVER

Bentley Boys commission hand-crafted racing shoes



'The hand-made shoes are not only more comfortable in a long distance race, they also increase the sensitivity and the man/machine interface,' says Johnny Herbert, who had his first-ever race for Bentley at Sebring. 'It is surprising the difference they make.'

The 2003 Bentley Boys sported exclusive made-to-measure racing shoes, as they contested the Sebring, Florida 12-hour race last weekend.

The leather-lined fireproof nomex racing shoes are custom-made to the drivers' feet in much the same way that a Bentley can be handcrafted to the exact specification of its customer.

'Bentley has always believed in the value of beautiful hand-made objects,' says Brian Gush, Bentley's director of motor sport. 'There are many things that a craftsman can make better than a robot. That includes the leather work and wood work in a Bentley cabin. It also includes made-to-measure shoes.'

Bentley has a famous tradition for hand workmanship. In an age of mass production, much of a Bentley is still created by skilled craftsmen. In addition, Bentley's Mulliner department offers a bespoke service that enables a car to be commissioned to the owner's precise taste and exact specification.

The bespoke race shoes are made by German craftsman Axel Himer in his fin-de-siècle workshop in Baden-Baden in southern Germany. He has been making hand-made shoes for ladies and gentlemen since 1988, and branched out into racing shoes in 2000. 'Made-to-measure shoes are more comfortable, because they fit your feet perfectly,' says Axel Himer. 'One crucial element is the flexibility of the sole, which has to be different for each individual driver. That is the only way to guarantee the utmost sensitivity when driving a racing car.' The shoes take a minimum of 50 hours to craft. The first step is to measure the driver's feet and then make a wooden mould. The first pair of prototype shoes is hand made on the mould. After two fittings, a second pair is made. They are worn during test driving. Changes are then made to the third and final pair of shoes, which will be used for the actual race.

Team Bentley's six Bentley Boys all have been fitted out with Axel Himer's exclusive shoes and undoubtedly will have the best footwear, as well as the most prestigious cars, in the Sebring and Le Mans paddocks. The drivers are British Formula One stars Johnny Herbert, Mark Blundell and David Brabham, who will be driving the number eight Bentley Speed 8 prototype, and Tom Kristensen, Rinaldo 'Dindo' Capello and Guy Smith in the number seven car.



The race -

Starting from the back of the field, the Bentley Boys crossed the line third and fourth, in a fast paced 12-Hours of Sebring. The Bentley Speed 8, number 8, driven by Johnny Herbert, David Brabham and Mark Blundell ran a trouble free race to secure the final podium position.

Teammates Tom Kristensen, Rinaldo 'Dindo' Capello and Guy Smith brought their number 7 Bentley home right behind in fourth place. The only difference separating the two Speed 8s was slight contact on lap 75 between Guy Smith and a GT car causing a brief pit stop to repair the front nose.

Tom Kristensen set the fastest lap of the race with a time of 1:49.52 further proving the pace of the Bentley. In the companion Bentley, David Brabham set that cars fastest lap with a 1:49.74. Kristensen, taking full advantage of his strong Michelin tyres, made a very competitive pass into turn one on the number 9 Audi of Mika Salo, further proving the quickness of the car. Designed for Le Mans, the Speed 8 could not fully utilize its refined aerodynamic shape or the full power of its 4.0-litre motor to really showcase its performance on the short straights of Sebring.

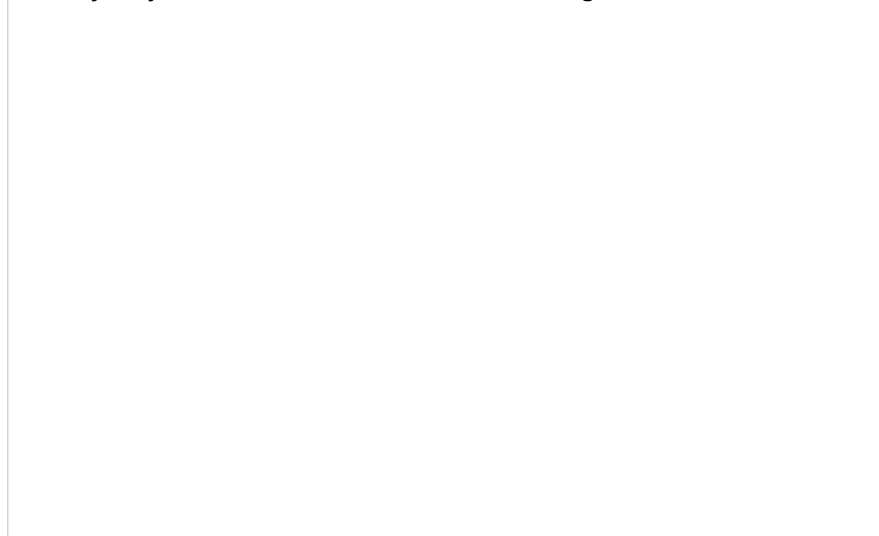
Utilizing the 12-Hours as a full race test in preparation for Le Mans in June, the team is delighted with the pace and durability of the Speed 8. The race ran from green to chequered flag with only one caution period. Prior to its Sebring debut the new Speed 8 hadn't completed a full race distance in testing. The Sebring track, being intensely rough, is unusually hard on cars, particularly those competing for the first time. To simulate a 24-hour race the Bentley returned to the track on Monday to run another 12+ hours in further preparation for Le Mans.

The race was won by Frank Biela, Marco Werner and Philipp Peter in an Audi R8 13.493sec ahead of the ADT Champion Racing Audi R8.

Story and photos; Bentley Motors

Gallery

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