

CLASSIC DRIVER

Stirling Says Goodbye to Racing - but stays to support the Le Mans Legend 2011

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'Number 7' for the last time - final practice for Sir Stirling Moss in his 1961 Porsche RS 61

At a private party at the famous Hotel De France at La Chartre-sur-le-Loir, on the Friday before the Le Mans 24 Hours, Sir Stirling Moss said that he was a 'racer' rather than a 'driver'. What he meant was that he prefers to drive flat-out for a win, rather than pace the car along expecting others to drop out.

His comments were made in the wake of his decision to retire from competitive racing altogether, a decision made after driving in the qualifying session for this year's Le Mans Legend, the historic race that precedes the Le Mans 24 Hours.

In closing the door on an incredible racing career that has spanned more than 60 years, and includes winning the British Grand Prix twice, the Monaco Grand Prix three times, the Mille Miglia, the Targa Florio and the Tourist Trophy, Stirling said, "This afternoon I scared myself and I have always said that if I felt I was not up to it or that I was getting in the way of fellow competitors, then I would retire."

Stirling had come to Le Mans to race his own 1961 Porsche RS 61 in the Le Mans Legend, which this year invited Le Mans-type cars from 1949-65 to take part in a 45-minute race at 10am on the Saturday morning before the 24 Hours. Qualifying for the 61 spectacular historic cars was on the Thursday - and proved to be the scene of Stirling's last ever competitive laps.

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Behind the wheel of the 1955 Mille Miglia-winning Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR

Duncan Wiltshire of Motor Racing Legends, organiser of the Le Mans Legend, expressed what was in many people's minds when he said, "It can be no easy thing to make such a decision, and we applaud the wisdom and strength of mind he showed in leaving the race itself to co-driver Ian Nuthall, thus ending - on his own terms - an incredibly long and illustrious career. In the years to come, we look forward to seeing plenty more of Stirling, who is as much a part of the motorsport world when he's off the track as he is when behind the wheel of a car in flat-out racing action."

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Jon Minshaw's Lister Jaguar 'Knobbly' noses ahead of Carlos Monteverde and the Ferrari 250 LM

In the Le Mans Legend race itself, Ian Nuthall took Stirling's RS 61 to an extremely impressive 23rd place in a race which demonstrated historic motorsport at its most nail-bitingly exciting - with five cars vying for the lead throughout, and top-class drivers including multiple Le Mans winner Emanuele Pirro.

The race was a cracker from the outset, with the Lister 'Knobblies' of poleman Alex Buncombe and Jon Minshaw on the front row of the grid, and a mere 1.2 seconds covering the first four cars. At the first chicane, Buncombe braked too late and ran off line, letting Minshaw through. Then, at the second chicane, Minshaw overcooked it slightly and the Bizzarrini 5300GT of Joe Twyman went ahead but, as they reached Indianapolis, the Lister of Minshaw was poised to slip back in front.



At the end of a frantic first lap, Minshaw was just ahead of a recovering Alex Buncombe, followed by Oliver Bryant's AC Cobra and Carlos Monteverde's Ferrari 250 LM. Twyman's Bizzarrini was still very much in the hunt, soon forging back into the lead and looking comfortably secure until Bryant broke away from the Listers and Monteverde's Ferrari, which was trailing a faint line of blue smoke after a trip across a chicane.

As Bryant's Cobra closed relentlessly on Twyman's Bizzarrini, both the Listers appeared to be gradually fading. Soon the round of compulsory pit stops began, Bryant waiting later than most of his rivals, and then emerging from the pit road just in front of Monteverde's Ferrari and Twyman's Bizzarrini. Despite his trail of smoke and many exciting moments under braking, Monteverde passed the Bryant Cobra to take the lead. The furious pace was telling, however: the Bizzarrini, sounding rough, slowed down, Gregor Fiske retired his Aston Martin DBR1 and the Bryant Cobra ran out of fuel and stopped on the Mulsanne Straight, just two laps from the end.

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Monteverde takes the chequered flag

Monteverde claimed a fine victory, taking the fastest lap at an average speed of 108.7mph and finishing just 2.4 seconds ahead of Buncombe's recovering Lister and the similar Lister of Jon Minshaw.

Sir Stirling was generous-spirited enough to present the trophies at the prize-giving, despite the slight sadness he must have felt at knowing he would not race again. "I love racing," he commented, "but now it is time to stop." It takes a brave man to know when that time has come – but then one thing Stirling has never lacked is courage.

Text: Charis Whitcombe

Photos: Motor Racing Legends / Roger Dixon

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