

CLASSIC DRIVER

Oldtimer Grand Prix 2011 at the Nürburgring: Water power

Radar-based collision warning, adaptive brake assist, adaptive headlamps, blind spot and lane departure warning systems: all contemporary high-tech wizardry relegated to the parking lots of the 39th Oldtimer Grand Prix at the Nürburgring.

On the racetrack itself during the biggest annual German historic race meeting, a few thousand years of automotive history were gathered together, wonderfully and lovingly prepared and restored: 900 drivers from around the world with their classic and historic cars, in 20 superb races.

Individual races had such promising names as the World Sportscar Masters or the Revival Deutsche Rennsportmeisterschaft (German Racing Championship), with powerful machines from nearly every era vying for the attention of 61,000 fans. Even Lola was there, bringing to mind the successful German film *Lola rennt* (Run Lola Run). At the Oldtimer, the young and no-longer-quite-so-young at heart race down memory lane thinking of names from the past: Wolfgang von Trips or Jochen Rindt. The weather gods were also having a good day at the races. At least from 11am on Saturday until 3.15pm on Sunday. Then things got a lot wetter.





Baar is a hamlet just seven kilometres from the Nürburgring. It is from here that the classic cars set out on their journey to the fabled track. A snow-white Mercedes 180 Ponton with licence plates from the small German town Ahrweiler heads 'Ring-wards and, a short while later, a Volvo P4 moves sedately in the same direction. Next, a VW Bulli minibus from the T1 series rolls by: it's that time of year again, with oldies and goldies heading toward Nürburg, ready to flex their muscles at the 39th AvD Oldtimer Grand Prix, organised as usual by the German car club Automobilclub von Deutschland.



And now historic Formula 1 cars are powering round the track. I can't see them yet, but I can hear them. As I make my way to the 'Ring, names resurface in my memory that have long lain dormant: Denny Hulme, Jo Siffert, Clay Regazzoni. Sometimes they won, and sometimes they lost the race, but all too often they lost their lives.

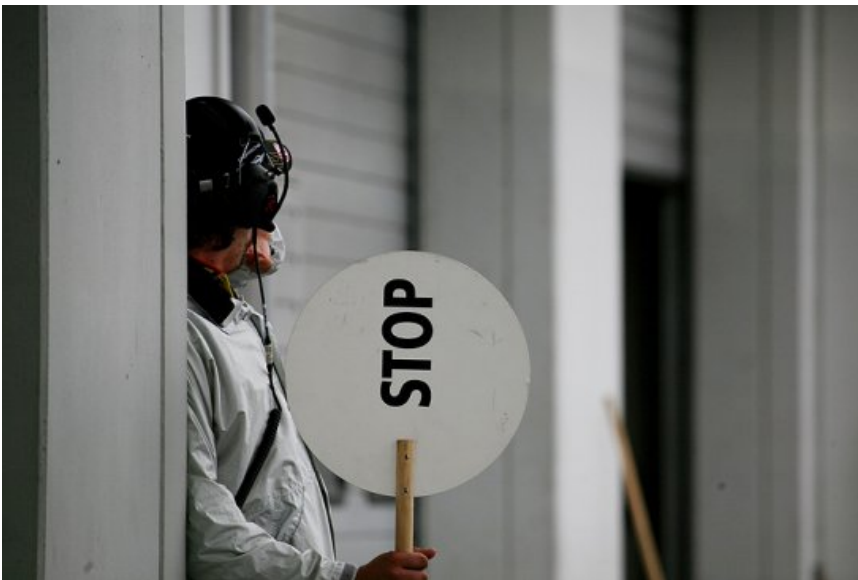


Traditionally, the most important race is the AvD Historic Marathon, which this year has been extended from 3½ to 4 hours. This is where former racing greats such as Walter Röhrl, Stig Blomqvist and Jochen Neerpasch fight for tenths of a second – but even current racing drivers like Claudia Hürtgen from Aachen would not want to miss an event like this. Röhrl (“I basically come here just to catch up with friends”) clawed his way back from position 21 all the way to number three, before the sudden rains made the Dunlop tyres on his Porsche 911 highly unreliable. Or as he put it: “Every wheel was going every which way.” The powerful and impressively motorised Ford Fairlane 500 of last year’s winners, Fred and Barney (the siblings entered under a pseudonym), was swallowed by a Jaguar E-type Lightweight Competition on the 16th lap. Frank Stippler at the helm was experiencing technical problems again – like last year – but managed to defend his victory by the skin of his teeth as he swept past the chequered flag. The Ford came in second, and in third – perfectly timed for the 50th anniversary of the E-type – was a Competition Roadster.



It was dry on Saturday, at least for a while. The morning had started with rain, joined at noon by humid heat, which had the almost-submerged Nürburgring sizzling. Then, in the early afternoon, just as the races were getting underway, the next downpour set in. The chicane at the end of the start/finish line became something of a catch-tank for the overly ambitious. The marshals had to raise the yellow flag until the competitors were all back in line, manoeuvring with wild drifts. At the head of the field, Wolfgang Kaufmann in his orange 'Jägermeister' Porsche 935 K3 and Daniel Schrey, also in the cockpit of a K3, fought each other like demons. Somewhat lagging behind, the BMW M1s came next, exiting the chicane rather more diagonally than straight on. Hard work there at the steering wheel.





The audience was thrilled by this spectacle, giving rounds of applause whenever the drivers passed them on the cooling-down lap, their wet hair plastered to the heads and shoulders hunched against the elements. "That was probably eleven tenths," an onlooker muttered, as a rather mangled BMW 2002 ti was towed away. Meanwhile, Klaus Ludwig's pink-and-white 935 K3 broke down due to technical mishaps, and so the professional driver had to accept 12th place.

And the rain poured down... calling it a deluge would be an understatement. But the assembled fans took it in their stride, as they inched along the grandstand, plastic bags over their heads or just ran for it through the endless rain. Hooded jackets, capes and umbrellas were very much in evidence during another special event, the Jaguar E-type challenge, to FIA rules. Thanks to the weather, the race was so tricky to drive that even the victorious Gary Pearson had slowish lap-times of around 2:30 minutes.



Too bad the weather gods were not amenable to the drama of motorsport. And especially to that particularly daring elderly gentleman, visible in the swishing haze of my windshield wipers, on a NSU Quickly, properly outfitted with half-shell helmet and long leather coat. With a full load he headed home on his classic moped, unperturbed. And no doubt he'll be back next year, thanks to the allure of things so totally non-digital.

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Gallery

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