

CLASSIC DRIVER

40 Years of BMW M: Reunion at the 'Ring

Lead

What better way to celebrate the M division's 40th anniversary than to sample some of the highlight cars at the track where it all began: the fabled Nürburgring.

Understandably, BMW pulled out all the stops for this one. The historic fleet, along with a full chronological roster of M5s and M6s, took to the Nordschleife; meanwhile, a selection of M convertibles headed off into the switchbacks of the surrounding Eifel mountains. Some of the manufacturer's more agile offerings of recent years (E46 M3 CSL, 1M Coupé etc.) used a loop of the GP circuit to highlight handling abilities, and the event was rounded off by a thunderous display from racing cars spanning four decades, with the drivers clearly enjoying being reunited with their old steeds.

3.0 CSL 'Batmobile' (1972)





Though it doesn't carry the eminent 'M' badge, the CSL was the first offspring of the Motorsport division. A lap around the Nordschleife in a heritage fleet example wearing just 25,000 miles proved its embodiment of the phrase 'right first time'; the seats are supportive, pedals nicely aligned for heel-toe gearchanges and the metal three-spoke wheel reminiscent of a 1960s GT car. Softly purring at idle, the inline-six delivers a rasping crescendo as it approaches the 6,400rpm redline – a point commonly neared, given the four speeds offered by the Getrag gearbox.

BMW 320 Group 5 (1977)





When it joined the Group 5 invasion of the DRM (the German Touring Car Championship which preceded today's DTM), it hardly did so quietly. Thirty-five years later and it's still up to its old tricks; the reunion saw the Formula 2-engined 'Flying Brick' enjoy repeated drive-by screaming matches with the 1999 V12 LMR racer as they passed each other in the pit lane – despite the Group 5 car having a third of the engine capacity. Out on the track in the hands of driver-in-period Marc Surer, it also provided some fascinating battles with contemporary equivalents in the form of Bruno Spengler and newly signed Alex Zanardi's M3 DTMs.





When you're behind the wheel of an M1 road car, about to embark on a lap of the Nordschleife, what could possibly make you relinquish your driving seat seconds before you're due to leave the pit lane (aside from the comically askew driving position)? The sight of M1 progenitor Jochen Neerpasch wandering past your driver's side window – and the chance to question him about the car that he and his team sired, while he takes your place to drive it round the 80-odd corners (the precise number is open to debate, and depends on the car) which were instrumental in its development.

Though understandably disappointed by the pace of the train of cars ahead (restrained by a cautious escort, since two of the historic fleet had already been 'lost' the day before in greasy conditions), Neerpasch reminisced about the Procar series. "For the first race, we had to pay the F1 drivers in cash to get them on board. After they drove the cars in the first race, we didn't have to pay them again," he chuckled.

BMW M3 Generations



So well-respected is each generation of the M3 that deciding which to pilot first was almost as difficult as a lubricated and aptly named *Angst Kurve*. It was the boxed arches and legendary status of the E30 that swung it, though, and following the engagement of the dogleg first gear, and a chirp of the rear tyres, we were off

into the *Grüne Hölle*. The years haven't been as kind to the steering feel (not on our low-mileage car, anyway) as they have to the looks, but the chassis remains one of the all-time greats – and in 20-or-so years, we fully expect the also-impressive E46 CSL to receive similar praise.

BMW M5 Generations





All five generations of the M5 were in service for laps of the Nordschleife (again led by an understandably wary escort), as was an example of the M535i antecedent with a barely run-in odometer reading. On the rain-greased surface, the later versions gave a perfect insight into the developments made in traction control technology over the years, despite the power hikes. The sweet spot in the bloodline was the E39, the direct steering and abundance of V8-induced surge marginally outweighing the charm of its ancestors and almost excessive muscle of its successors.

BMW X5 V12 LM (2000)





There were some confused (read 'disgusted') looks as a first generation X5 joined the line-up of roundel-wearing motorsport legends on the grid for the demonstration run. But some recognised the gold BBS wheels and deeply vented bonnet from some 12 years ago, when BMW decided to counter the blasphemy of adding an SUV to its range by shoehorning a V12 from the Le Mans racing car into the engine bay. Producing 700bhp, the straight-line acceleration is flabbergasting; to put this into some perspective, it once beat the Z8's Nordschleife lap time by 25 seconds with Hans-Joachim Stuck at the helm.

Photos: Max Kirchbauer

Gallery

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