

CLASSIC DRIVER

Battles between legends at the Le Mans Classic 2014

Lead

Even a downpour couldn't temper the heat of battle. At the Le Mans Classic 2014, the greatest racing cars of the 20th Century went wheel-to-wheel and Classic Driver was there to witness the action...

When you're overtaken on the public road by a formation of thunderous Ford GT40s – followed closely by a Lamborghini Countach and a Ferrari 512BB – you're either hallucinating from motorway monotony, or on the way to Le Mans. Every other year, the European historic racing scene congregates in northwest France for its own version of the legendary 24-hour race. But the circus doesn't only take place on the 8.5 mile-long circuit: more than 100,000 speed pilgrims from all points of the compass bring their faithful steeds, including Lotuses, TVRs, De Tomastos, Alpines and countless others – many of which barely make the journey. Even on the campsites, where many choose to immerse themselves fully in the unrivalled atmosphere, you'll not only find VW Type 2 camper vans in their droves, but also the likes of a Rolls-Royce Phantom (yes, really), a thoroughly convincing Aston Martin DBR1 recreation, and just about every flavour of Porsche 911 ever made.

The magical home of racing



Le Mans is the spiritual racing home of many, including the Bentley Boys, Carroll Shelby, Jacky Ickx and Derek Bell, and of course Steve McQueen; each has written history at this semi-road circuit. Countless drivers have been immortalised here, through triumph or tragedy, and now they are back – whether in spirit or in racing overalls. Completing the spectacle this year are some 450 machines, spanning 1923 to 1979 and split into six grids. Anyone doubting the racing commitment of the drivers should spend time at a rain-misted Arnage corner at 1am, as the thunderous machines are driven at outrageous speeds and angles, with *most* making it through to the Porsche Curves.

Clash of the Titans



The selected racing plateaux were fantastic matchings of machines. Blower Bentleys faced Bugattis and Talbot-Lagos in the pre-War grid (each grid races three times during the 24 hours); the early Ferraris, Lotuses and Jaguars provided a stunning sequel in the one of the post-War plateaux. Thereafter, the various Ford GT40s fought to prove their might against the Cobras and the Ferrari 250 LM. Then came the unforgettable prototype era, which saw the likes of Ferrari 312 Ps, Chevron B16s, Matra MS 660s, Alpine A 220s and Lola T70s. But, for many, the highlight was seeing a Porsche 917 back at Le Mans. In the paddock, with the engine cowl removed and all 12 cylinders exposed, it was a sight to behold. Watching a 917 scream down the Mulsanne Straight at ridiculous-miles-per-hour must have seen the bucket lists of thousands become one item shorter.

Flaming blips and glowing discs



The weekend's events will surely haunt the dreams of drivers and spectators for months to come. Whether it's the frantic driver changes, the continuous symphony emanating from the paddocks, or the mixed scent of petrol, oil and brake pads – this is why people travel thousands of miles to Le Mans every two years. Yes, the rain might have travelled too, but for true enthusiasts this only added an exciting extra ingredient. As darkness falls, an apex-clipping line becomes a chuck-and-hope slide; priceless machines pirouette into the gravel and graze the Armco. Downchanges throw flames, brake discs glow, and the silence otherwise present in the early hours is chased away by the collective war cries of Porsche 935s, Ferrari 512BB LMs and BMW M1s. Later, a greasy corner sees an Aston Martin DB4 GT spin as it nibbles the heels of a little Lotus on the final straight, leaving a finned D-type to wiggle through in its place.

Spirit levels on the Dunlop arch



Ultimately, it's not so much the winning that matters, but the spirit that this competition engenders; the spirit that puts the Le Mans Classic firmly at the forefront of the historic racing calendar. It's palpably shown by the sporting approach of the drivers, the stresses placed on man and machine, and the typical French staging. The latter sees rosé bottles everywhere, streams of steak-frites making their way to tables, and racing cars being escorted back to their respective bases at alarming speed by whistle-blowing gendarmes in period clothing, with BMW motorbikes to match. It's over all too soon. But as the sun sets behind the Dunlop arch and the circus disappears for another two years, you close your eyes in order to seal in the weekend's sights. Until the next meeting in 2016, it will be these memories that occupy the vacant moments.



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Gallery

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