

CLASSIC DRIVER

Why the Spa Six Hours beats any other classic car race

Lead

Now that the tyres have cooled, the podium's dried, and adrenalin levels have returned to normal after another unforgettable Spa Six Hours, together with title sponsor Graf von Faber-Castell we're exploring why this special race managed to get under our skin unlike any other historic event...



"In many ways, the Spa Six Hours has exceeded my expectations," says Count Charles Alexander von Faber-Castell, who's clearly still buzzing having just handed the winners' wreaths to Count Marcus Oeynhausen and Nico Verdonck after a close-fought victory in their dark green Ford GT40, just 2.5sec ahead of Craig Davies, Andy Newall, and John Young. "The atmosphere is so relaxed, there aren't really any boundaries, and the drivers and teams are very accessible. There's no pretentiousness here – it's about the drivers and the battles out on the track, despite the incredible value of the cars themselves. All those factors combine to give it a real charm."

We couldn't agree with the Count more. The Spa Six Hours is the most unadulterated, grueling, and authentic historic motor race on the planet. You'll find no extravagant frills here – it's just hardcore racing, pure and simple, we imagine just as it was in the golden era the event recalls. And the drivers clearly concur – almost all of those we spoke to are lured back to Spa each and every year to soak up its magic and take on the greatest challenge in the historic motorsport world.



From the wall of the old pit lane on the steep descent towards Eau Rouge, you hear the braying pack of 114 historic racing cars poised to start the Spa Six Hours well before you can see them. The noise rumbles through the dense surrounding forest like thunder, heightening excitement and anxiety in the pit lane in equal measure.

When the harem of leading Ford GT40s finally negotiate the achingly slow La Source hairpin and barrel down the hill towards you at a frightening pace, the ensuing explosion of speed, smell, colour, and noise leaves your heart beating out of your chest, your ears bleeding, and each and every hair on your neck truly on end. It's unbelievably glorious!



Of course, it's a multitude of factors that make the Spa Six Hours so special. But if the teams, drivers, and cars form the supporting cast, the history-steeped circuit most definitely plays the leading role. When the late summer sun slowly drops behind the vast and undulating racetrack and the frenetic war of attrition edges towards its conclusion, the race comes alive and serves up a spectacle unlike any other.

"I've always been fascinated with the idea of racing at night," said the German driver Bernd Georgi, who contested the race for the 11th time with a feisty Ford Falcon and finished a commendable 40th place. "When I was a child, I'd turn the lights off in my bedroom and play with my Carrera slot cars – headlights ablaze – in the dark!" So, how does the real thing compare? "It's really challenging at night as it's much harder to spot your braking points. More annoying, however, is that you have cars constantly flashing you from behind and you have no idea if it's a leading Ford GT40 or a much slower car."



The traffic is perhaps the most obvious challenge. With over 100 cars – the quickest of which are over *40 seconds* a lap quicker than the slowest – on a circuit that's just 7km long, things can get chaotic to say the least, especially when darkness falls and concentration levels dwindle. "It's every man for himself," commented RM Sotheby's Car Specialist Michael Squire, who raced in the Six Hours for the very first time in a delectable little Lotus Elan 26R. "At other smaller race meetings, you often know the guys you're up against. But there are so many drivers here that there's an element of working it out as you go along."

While some drivers are put off, others actually embrace and enjoy the unique challenges this race presents. Part of the only Finnish team on the grid and running a Shelby GT350, Henry Hamunen was faced with a rather large issue during Saturday evening's qualifying session. "We lost our high beam lights, so I had to do our fast lap half blind!" he recalled. "But it was great fun nonetheless."





The race was also a reminder of just how cruel motorsport can be. The pole-sitting Ford GT40, for example, which was due to be driven by Oliver Bryant, Graham Bryant, and James Cottingham, suffered a broken valve spring just eight minutes into the race. But Cottingham told us that's part and parcel of the event. "Coupled with the Tour Auto, this is *the* historic event of the year," he told us. "It's all about the atmosphere, the teamwork, the camaraderie, and, most importantly, getting to the end!" Needless to say, he'll be back.

Another car that (temporarily) felt the wrath of Lady Luck was Wolfgang Dietrichs' Aston Martin DP214, which he co-drove with Simon Hadfield and Michael Mallock. It was struck by an electrical issue at the midway point. We happened upon the stranded car just after Les Combes as Mallock and his engineers – who appeared to have run through the forest to the stricken car's aid – frantically tried to revive the car. And revive it they did: the Aston came home in 75th.



The overwhelming memory from the Spa Six Hours, however, is the camaraderie. They might be fighting tooth-and-nail out on the track, but you get the distinct impression that the drivers and the engineers are all willing each other on to the end. The huge applauding crowd that gathered for each individual class's podium celebration after the race was a testament to that.

It's one of a number of values that prompted Graf von Faber-Castell, the luxury writing instrument and leather goods brand, to [make its first foray into the world of historic motorsport as the event's title sponsor](#). Of course, parallels can be drawn between the craftsmanship, design, elegance, and understatement of its fountain pens and the broad variety of classic cars taking part in the Spa Six Hours. But it goes further than that. It might be a high-octane and exhilarating race, but, in a world where we're inundated with fast-paced technological evolution, such weekends are also about going back to our roots and unwinding – which is exactly the same as taking the time to hand-write a letter, rather than sending an impersonal message on WhatsApp or email.



Count Faber-Castell sums things up beautifully: "It just goes to show that historic motorsport brings people together. Whether it's a chap who's racing an MGB he saved up for years to buy or a veteran racer in a front-running GT40, every driver at the Spa Six Hours is on the same page." Suffice to say, we've already pinned next year's race onto our calendar.

Gallery

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