

CLASSIC DRIVER

Meet the Autodrome stormers of Montlhéry at Les Grandes Heures Automobiles

Lead

Once again, the Autodrome de Linas-Montlhéry relived its greatest hour last weekend at Les Grandes Heures Automobiles. An incredible array of historic cars and motorcycles from various different eras took to the mythical – and deceptively steep – banking in what is France’s true temple of speed...



The Autodrome de Linas-Montlhéry is currently in something of a transition period, with construction occurring on the historic circuit’s infield around the daunting section of that famous banking which remains today, standing testament to the circuit’s former glory. In its heyday, the 12km Montlhéry circuit, located a stone’s throw from Paris, bore witness to classic inter-War Grands Prix, countless speed records, and, of course, numerous 1,000km endurance races. Suffice to say, it demanded the utmost respect from the drivers who were fortunate – and brave – enough to race there.



Now in its fourth year, Les Grandes Heures Automobiles aims to recall those years before the circuit was closed, attracting a spectacular array of racing cars and motorcycles, many of which did actually race at Montlhéry once upon a time. From pre-War record breakers and mid-Century sports-racers to flame-belching Group B rally cars and 1990s endurance legends, the roll call of cars is arguably more diverse than most other historic events, offering spectators of all ages a great cross-section of motorsport history to savour.



A demonstration it might have been, but that didn’t stop entrants from giving it the beans on the treacherously bumpy banking and enveloping anyone stood in the infield paddocks in rapidly rolling thunder, of both the two- and four-stroke varieties. The cars themselves were divided into myriad smaller categories, each very distinct from any other.



American muscle cars, for example, including a Plymouth Barracuda and a Corvette formerly raced under the North American Racing Team banner mixed it with a chirruping Audi 200 Quattro and a smattering of Peugeot 405 Mi16s. Another grid was dedicated to single-seaters and featured a brace of remarkable Ferrari 156 'Sharknoses', one fitted with a 65-degree V6 and the other with a 120-degree one. They were driven by Arturo 'Little Art' Merzario and Jason Stuart, respectively.



While Rennsport Reunion IV was taking place in California, Les Grandes Heures Automobiles was holding its own party for Porsche's 70th birthday. A grid for 'Vintage Racing Porsches' comprised a selection of delectable 2.0-litre 911s in addition to snarling 2.8 and 3.0 RSRs. Arguably the most impressive grid, however, was that for prototypes and purebred racing cars, which featured the French Rondeau Inaltera, Jacadi-liveried Venturi 500 LM, and Alpine M63 B; an extremely quick Porsche 910; and a trio of Abarths: a 1966 1000 SP, 1967 2000 SP, and a 1968 3000 SP. That latter belonged to the Château de Savigny-lès-Beaune collection and, for us at least, were the undisputed highlight of the weekend.





Rallying was well represented, too, with Lancia Stratos', Renault 5 Turbos, a Peugeot 205 T16, and a tiny Alpine A110 1800 driven by such heroes as Jean-Claude Andruet and François Chatriot. They might not have raced at Montlhéry in the period, but they felt right at home, particularly during the thrilling night sessions. Just what is it about racing cars under the cover of darkness that's so mesmerising? As Porsche 911s and Group B Lancias headlights blazing, pounded the concrete banking three abreast, so this special track seemed to truly come alive.



Those tempted to look for a car in which they could take part at Les Grandes Heures Automobiles in 2019 will have been well catered for at Aguttes' official event sale. A portion of the catalogue, which featured everything from Gallic hot hatch heroes to exotic 1990s supercars, was paraded on the circuit and we were lucky enough to take part in an Alpina E21 323 – a special experience, indeed. Our favourite was probably the 1981 Porsche 924 prepared to Group 4 rally specifications – its unfiltered charm and spartan character oozed the oh-so-familiar magic only old racing cars manage to conjure.



While Montlhéry's now-archaic infrastructure renders competitive racing a dream, for the time being, its tangible sense of history and countless aesthetic nods to the past make it the perfect place to gather and celebrate those halcyon days. One car's presence over the weekend was particularly special. It was a gold Jaguar XK120 FHC that clocked an average speed of 100mph over seven straight days and nights at Montlhéry in 1952. What a feat, what a place, and what an event...

Photos: Mathieu Bonnevie for Classic Driver © 2018

Gallery

