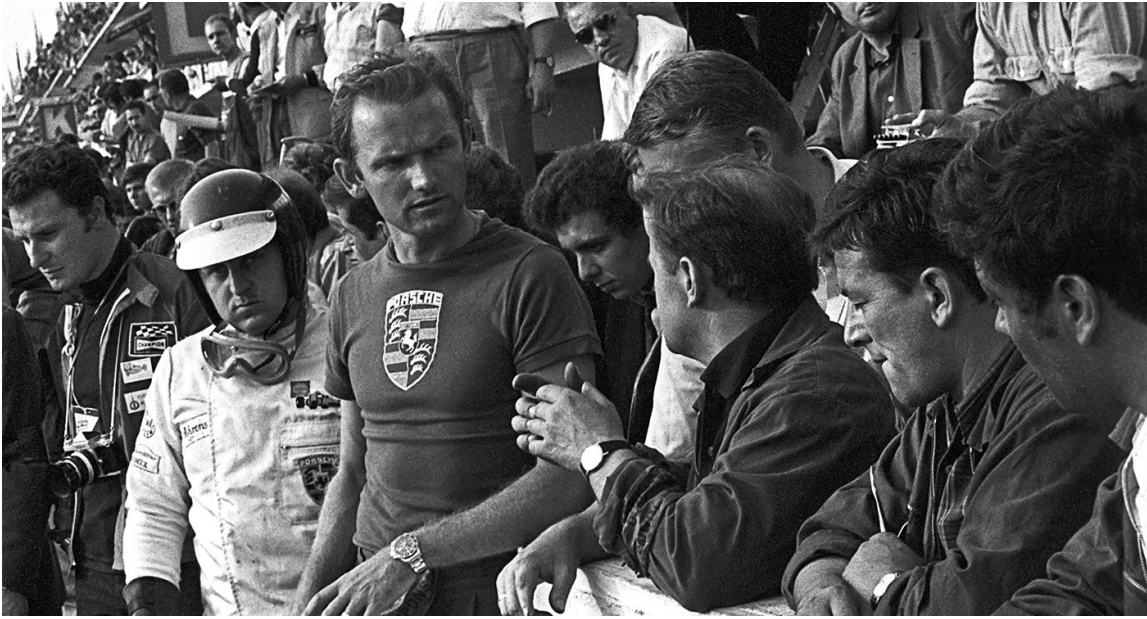


CLASSIC DRIVER



Snapshot, 1969: Ferdinand Piëch banks everything on victory

27 August 2019 | Jan Baedeker

It's June 1969 and at the 24 Hours of Le Mans, we're about to find out whether the engine of the Porsche 917, designed by chief development officer Ferdinand Piëch, can withstand the superiority of Ferrari and Ford. Little does anyone know how dramatically the day will end...



For Porsche's racing department and its head of development Ferdinand Piëch, 1969 is a decisive year. In March, the new 917 - which was designed by Hans Mezger under the supervision of Piëch - celebrated its debut at the Geneva Motor Show. In April, Piëch lined up 25 examples of the prototype racer in front of Werk 1 in Zuffenhausen for the FIA to inspect and homologate. In May, Jo Siffert and Brian Redman scored the big flat-12's maiden victory at the 1,000km of Spa. And here at Le Mans during practice, the long-tailed 917 reached almost 380kph on the Mulsanne Straight and left the competition for dead. The cars were difficult to control, however, even for the experienced factory drivers, and boasted technology that was very much in its infancy. An accident feels inevitable and so it will be - on the first lap of the race, the British privateer will lose control of his 917 at the Maison Blanche curve and tragically die at the scene of the accident.



The tragedy will prompt Piëch to have the 917's bodywork dramatically reworked for next year and develop a more stable short-tailed version – a car that will score the marque its first overall victory at Le Mans. Piëch probably did not expect the 917 to be an immediate success, but then the same will likely be said about his countless engineering milestones and the strategic chess moves he'll make that will, in the coming decades, put Audi and Volkswagen at the forefront of global automotive culture. One thing that's unmistakably written on his face today at Le Mans, however, is his unconditional desire to win.

Ferdinand Karl Piëch died on 25 August 2019 in Rosenheim. He was 82 years old.

Photos: Bernard Cahier / Getty Images / Porsche Archive

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