

TRIUMPH AT THE NÜRBURGRING

GREASED LIGHTNING

Racing enthusiasts who came to see this year's 24-hour race at the Nürburgring were treated to a gripping spectacle with drama and excitement to spare. The Manthey Racing team emerged victorious thanks to a stellar performance by its 911 GT3 RSR and the drivers' outstanding skill.

By Eva-Maria Burkhardt

Wedged in among well-wishers crowding around to offer their congratulations, Wolfgang Porsche can barely move. Even Olaf Manthey, who as strategist and head of the Manthey Racing team is usually one to keep his cool, gets a bit flustered for a moment. It seems he has lost sight of his wife Renate amidst the sea of people, but then she emerges from the throng of supporters and fans, beaming. And Hartmut Kristen, the normally unflappable head of motorsports at Porsche, even gets so carried away by the celebratory mood that he grabs the Michelin representative next to him and sweeps the dumbfounded man off his feet. And why not? Even Porsche's tire partner can claim some share in this spectacular victory.

Everyone gathers in the pit lane to congratulate the Porsche factory drivers Timo Bernhard, Marc Lieb, Romain Dumas, and Lucas Luhr on their triumph. They put in a flawless performance in their 911 GT3 RSR, beating strong opponents from Audi, BMW, Ferrari, and Mercedes-Benz and setting a new distance record with a total of 156 laps, or 3,958.968 kilometers (2,460 miles). It was a feat that could be pulled off only by going all out for a full 24 hours. At the Nürburgring, drivers not only have to beat the

competition to win; they also have to go through hell—or, rather, the infamous Nordschleife that is also known as the “Green Hell.” Victory here requires an iron will, utmost discipline, and a superb team effort. Wolfgang Hatz, board member for Research and Development at Porsche AG, puts it simply: “I’m proud to be a part of such a troupe”—and he has every reason to be.

The word “emotional” comes up more than once in the first few minutes after the Porsche victory. We hear it from Matthias Müller, the CEO and president of Porsche AG: “This is my first time at a 24-hour race for Porsche, and I certainly hadn’t anticipated it being so emotional.” And Marc Lieb, a member of the “gang of four” at the wheel of the winning Porsche, uses the same word in summing up his experience: “Winning this year is one of the most emotional moments of my career.”

Porsche has an impressive track record when it comes to 24-hour races: it has chalked up 54 wins in races from Daytona to Le Mans and Spa-Francorchamps over the years. The motorsport experts of Weissach have celebrated ten victories at the Nürburgring, with four of those in just the past five years. But victory at the Nürburgring is not determined solely by a vehicle's



Reliable and efficient: The 911 GT3 RSR required one fuel stop less than the competition did



Surrounded: Photographers jockeying to get a close-up shot of Matthias Müller (center)

performance. The racing regulations and set parameters also play a big role. Porsche and Manthey decided to field the GT3 RSR, which was completely reliable in its technical specifications. “Nobody expected a triumph like this,” says Marc Lieb. After the difficult practice rounds, the prospects for a 55th victory certainly didn’t look good. The GT3 RSR was assigned the number 18 and would start in seventh position, seven seconds behind the first car. With a course of 25.378 kilometers (15.8 miles)—a combination of the Grand Prix course and the Nordschleife—seven seconds is nothing to sneer at. The competition appeared to have the advantage.

But as the saying goes, when the going gets tough, the tough get going. The Nürburgring is practically on Olaf Manthey’s doorstep, and, according to driver Timo Bernhard, “This race is his life, 365 days a year.” Manthey draws on a quarter century of experience with the race, first as a driver and since 1996 as team manager. Hartmut Kristen also is an old hand, and drivers Bernhard (4), Lieb (3), Dumas (3), and Luhr (1) counted eleven Nürburgring wins between them. This was a team of seasoned veterans, and they were not about to give up so easily. They talked tactics and strategy and strengthened their resolve. “At first we just focused on staying ahead. Our plan was to attack after it got dark,” says Luhr. The cars would

Porsche’s Impressive Track Record: 55 Wins in 24-Hour Races

Spa-Francorchamps (6)
1967, 1968, 1969, 1993, 2003, 2010

Daytona (22)
1968, 1970, 1971, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1995, 2003, 2009, 2010

Le Mans (16)
1970, 1971, 1976, 1977, 1979, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1994, 1996, 1997, 1998

Nürburgring (11)
1976, 1977, 1978, 1988, 1993, 2000, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011

be put to the test from the very outset, but the real endurance test for the drivers would come at night, and that was when the truth would be told.

So how did they do it? The first smart move was Manthey’s decision to send his team’s green-and-yellow GT3 RSR onto the still rather wet track with slicks. “The first lap was pretty difficult,” says Lieb. “But then the racing line started to dry, and by the third lap it was perfect on slicks.” While many teams lost time with unscheduled pit stops to exchange rain tires for slicks, No. 18 stayed on the course.

During the night, Manthey relied on the experience and exceptional skill of Porsche factory drivers Marc Lieb and Timo Bernhard, who were each at the wheel for almost three hours straight. Lieb is known for his perfectionism, and it was during his stint in the driver’s seat that monitors first showed the GT3 RSR in the lead. Although it fell back again after a pit stop, the green-and-yellow race car hurtled through the Nordschleife like greased lightning and recaptured the lead at 11:25 p.m.—and there it stayed for the remaining 16 hours and 35 minutes.

The quartet had only two truly critical situations to contend with over the course of their grueling around-the-clock motor marathon in front of 220,000 spec-

tators. One time during a pit stop the gas pump didn’t work, and after forty seemingly endless seconds they had to push their car back to another pump. Apparently someone, possibly a careless fan, had inadvertently pressed the emergency “off” button. In the second instance, the driver of a car that the Manthey team had just passed misgauged the situation and swiped the right fender of the GT3 RSR. The damage was soon fixed with tape—such minor mishaps are par for the course at the 24-hour race.

And otherwise? The Porsche 911 GT3 RSR ran like clockwork, making only scheduled pit stops and one fuel stop less than its competitors until its efficiency and stellar performance were rewarded with victory.

Now the initial fever of excitement has subsided somewhat, but Hartmut Kristen is still beaming. “I’m very pleased that, after all the wrangling in the run-up, there was a clean, sporting decision on the track,” he says. Wolfgang Porsche, for his part, can move freely again now that the initial crush has abated. As chairman of the supervisory board at Porsche AG and Porsche SE, he has witnessed and celebrated many a Porsche coup over the years, but this time even he is overwhelmed: “A success like this is possible only as a team. Today, I’m especially proud because we’re small, but we’re special—and we’re big when it comes to success.” ●



Big smiles: Matthias Müller (left) and Wolfgang Porsche are happy as clams