



History

Wake-up Call

After a Rip Van Winkle-like sleep of 36 years, the 917 Gulf Porsche, which had been relegated from the racetrack directly into the museum's collection in 1971, was finally reawakened. The treasure house of classic cars was shaking with the reverberations of the twelve-cylinder engine. This magical machine, which set a record that stands to this day, has been revived.

By
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Photos by
Christoph Bauer; Porsche archive

A simple note is entered on the data sheet: "Average: 249.069 km/h" (154.764 mph). The sheet of paper on the blue Porsche is marred by orange streaks from the windshield wiper. That number with its three decimals is a telling memento of a fantastic race: 249.069 km/h, the average speed in a race of more than 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) driven by Pedro Rodríguez and Jackie Oliver on May 9, 1971, at Spa-Francorchamps. It was perhaps the

fastest race ever—including refueling, tire changes, and driver replacements. By comparison, the fastest Formula One Grand Prix on the books so far was won by Michael Schumacher in the Grand Prix of Italy 2003 at Monza. The average speed of that Ferrari was 247.585 km/h. Without a driver change, well understood.

Klaus Bischof, the guardian of Porsche's treasury of famous cars, never raised a lot of fuss about this Porsche with its great history. The 917 "Gulf" Porsche is now slated to claim its proper place among the exhibits in the new Porsche Museum. After its eventful racing history, "Chassis Number 15" was retired 36 years ago. It began to collect dust. At some point, its tires went flat. But in the spring of 2007 the vehicle was spruced up again. Initially, it received a fresh paint job and the starting number "2"—the one Rodríguez and Leo Kinnunen had driven to victory in 1970 in the 24 Hours of Daytona race. But this historical race car didn't truly come back to life again until its engine was started.

"Why don't we just try to start her up once," Bischof suggested boldly. This request brought some advice from two members of the Porsche racing department who had looked after this 917 in its glory days: engine specialist Gerhard Kühle and assembler Dieter Leibold. Like Bischof, the two racing veterans consider the 917 the most exciting racing sports car in history. Twelve ▶

Masters at work: Gerhard Kühle (left) and Dieter Leibold resuscitate the historic racer



cylinders, 4.5 and later 5.0 liters displacement. Winner at Le Mans in 1970 and 1971, and Manufacturers' World Champion in those years as well. With turbocharging, the 917 attained up to 1,200 horsepower in the American-Canadian CanAm Series.

"This is a very thrilling moment for me," says Kühle as he and Leibold remove the 917's hood. Then they sort their tools on the wheel housing as carefully as surgeons about to operate. This is going to be quite an invasive procedure: they've got to get to the

**No one has ever gone faster yet:
249.069 km/h was the average speed of the
917 Gulf Porsche during the 1,000-kilometer
race in 1971 at Spa-Francorchamps.
Even a Formula One hasn't kept up with that.**

**Triumphant run: The two 917s during their race in 1971
at Spa-Francorchamps, Belgium**



**The operation is a success: The twelve-cylinder engine has
survived its long hibernation without apparent ill effects**

very heart of the engine—24 times in a row. That's how many sparkplugs are mounted among the cooling vanes, deep within the cylinder rows, to drive the flat twelve-cylinder engine. On the right side of the 917, Kühle grumbles, "I bet those design engineers never thought of the fact that we assemblers have to work on installed engines." On the opposite side, Leibold is reaching behind the oil tank as he adds, "When you can't see what you're doing as you're changing sparkplugs, it's sort of like a woman having to apply makeup without a mirror."

All through the "operation," Bischof keeps recalling details from the 1971 Spa race. With Siffert and Rodriguez on the ultra-fast racecourse—then 14.1 kilometers (8.8 miles) in length—in a duel between two equally hot cars, it was the most breathtaking thriller of that entire sports-car era.

The race started in light rain on intermediate tires, but somewhat later the pavement dried. Both the Swiss and the Mexican factory driver soon left their other rivals far behind. More than once, their two Porsches actually made contact. When the Porsche team saw those lap times, everyone began to wonder: Was this 1,000-kilometer race going to be won in less than four hours, thus breaking the 250-km/h "speed barrier"?

Meanwhile, the 24 sparkplugs of the old 917 have been cleaned with compressed air, and Kühle calls for the next step: "We've got to make the slide valves work." He picks up a hammer, his face betraying that this isn't an engine specialist's favorite tool: "Only if there's no other option." Evidently the slide valves can sense what's about to happen: they submit swiftly without great inertial force. But what's going to happen when the ignition fires? Kühle firmly grips the fan wheel on top of the engine and gives it a crank. It moves: "Great! The engine can be turned over okay."

At Spa in 1971, the Porsche mechanics used a tall scaffold to pour 112 liters of fuel into the two leading 917s in less than four seconds. Rodriguez was in the lead, but Siffert made the fastest lap time in 3:14.6 minutes—for an average of 260.842 km/h! Once Derek Bell took over from Siffert, Rodriguez pulled away from him. And he remained clearly in the lead when Oliver took over behind the wheel. While Siffert's partner Bell was definitely faster than his British compatriot, he nevertheless remained in second place. The two Porsches crossed the finish line a mere 0.4 second apart—after exactly four hours, one minute and 9.7 seconds.

Four hours—that's about how long it takes Bischof, Kühle, and Leibold to start up the Porsche again after more than three decades. Then Nicole Nagel from the public relations department gets into the 917's cockpit to hit the four switches that initiate the standby mode of the ignition and fuel pumps. What follows when she boldly presses the ignition button is an eruption of noise, smoke, and even flames. Yes! The twelve-cylinder Porsche is alive! Kühle, though, declares some of the vital signs still sluggish: "Not quite on all cylinders yet." Then it gets very quiet again in the shop. Everyone understands that this is almost a historical moment. Several seconds pass before a very pleased Bischof declares the end of this extraordinary trial: "Well, that's enough for today." Of course, he is contemplating a thorough restoration of the drivetrain. And on the day when this engine gets a chance to run smoothly again, it won't have to make do with oil left over from 1971. That's a promise. ◀