

History

Triple Triumph

Seven victories in Le Mans and ten titles in the Manufacturers' and Drivers' World Championships—all with illustrious names like Jacky Ickx, Jochen Mass, Derek Bell, Stefan Bellof, and Hans-Joachim Stuck—earned the Porsche 956/962 the title “Most Successful Sports Car of All Time.” The first great triumph in Le Mans occurred 25 years ago—a triple victory.

By
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Photos by
Porsche archive



Flashback: The racetrack at Le Castellet in January 1982. After a few laps, Jochen Mass climbs out of the Porsche 956. “What a fabulous car!” he tells racing engineer Norbert Singer enthusiastically. “The 956 is a giant step forward.” In fact, the 956 marked the start of a new era, and the magic word was “ground effect.” Porsche was the first maker to consistently use this aerodynamic design, which accelerates the air below the underbody. This suction effect increases the speed in the turns without diminishing the speed on the straightways. When the downforce on a vehicle exceeds its weight, the vehicle can theoretically drive along the ceiling. This would occur whenever the speed in the Porsche 956 Kurzheck (short tail) exceeded 177.9 km/h (110.5 mph). Twenty-five years later, Mass, who had been a Porsche factory driver for eleven years, summed it up as follows: “The 956 was fantastic and very easy to drive. The 956 and its advanced offshoot, the 962, were the race cars with the best design in the sports-car world championship.”

Not until the introduction of the very rigid carbon fiber chassis in the late 1980s did the Porsche 956 encounter its limitations. Some enthusiasts may rate the Porsche 917 more highly because of its twelve-cylinder engine, but the 956/962 with its turbocharged six-cylinder engine was more successful, including seven overall wins in the 24 Hours of Le Mans between 1982 and 1994. Factory drivers Jochen Mass, Jacky Ickx, Derek Bell, Stefan Bellof, and

Three in a row: During the classic 24 Hours of Le Mans in 1982, the Porsche 956s were the first three to cross the finish line (right). They later posed for a group shot in Weissach (preceding pages)



Hans-Joachim Stuck scored ten drivers' and manufacturers' titles in the sports-car world championship with this legendary Porsche racer. Between 1982 and 1994, another statistic lists no fewer than 132 wins in major races—including the Sports Car World Championship, the American IMSA series, the Japanese Sports Car Championship, and the Supercup in Europe. We must not forget that three great race-car drivers lost their lives in serious accidents in the Porsche 956 and 962 C: Manfred Winkelhock in Mosport 1985; Stefan Bellof in SPA-Francorchamps, also in 1985; and Jo Gartner, at Le Mans 1986.

Le Mans was the most important race course for Porsche. In the triple victory in 1982 with the teams of Ickx/Bell, Mass/Vern Schuppan, Hurley Haywood/Al Holbert/Jürgen Barth, the Porsches crossed the finish line in the order of their starting numbers 1, 2, 3—and it was also the first triumph for Rothmans, Porsche's main sponsor. At the end of this sports car's busy career in 1994, Haywood triumphed again at the Sarthe with Yannick Dalmas and Mauro Baldi in a Porsche 962 built to conform to GT regulations.

In Group C between 1982 and 1987, the Porsche 956/962 had only one real competitor: the Porsche 956/962. Private teams of Reinhold Joest, Erwin Kremer, Richard Lloyd, John Fitzpatrick or Walter Brun put enormous pressure on the factory Porsches. They benefited from a fair philosophy: customers would be provided with the very best material, potentially even at the expense of the factory's own entries. “There were times when we felt like test-drivers for the customer teams,” recalls the British racer Bell.

One key characteristic of this Porsche was its reliability. “The only time the 956 really let me down was in Le Mans in 1983,” ▶

Collector's Items

The 148 units of the Porsche 956/962 that were built were a good investment for the customer teams (new price in 1990: DM 1.3 million). In the used race-car market, collectors were willing to up the ante considerably for vehicles with a successful track record. For example, private owner and racer René Herzog (Switzerland) rejoiced after placing fourth in the Daytona 24 Hours 1990: “That boosted the value of my 962 by 400,000 marks overnight.” Another case in point was the vehicle owned by Swiss hotelier Antoine Salamin. After experiencing a crash in Mexico in 1989, he learned that there is a demand even for a damaged 962: the vehicle was repaired in Weissach and sold for DM 1.2 million to a private museum in Sweden.

Birthday party: Just ten years after its first race, the 956/962 was already a legend. On April 9, 1992, the creators of the winning car gathered for an anniversary toast.

From left to right: Fritz Spingler (engine shop foreman), Valentin Schäffer (test engineer, racing engines), Peter Falk (race manager), Helmut Schmid (test engineer, racing engines), Gerd Schmid (customer sport), Hans Mezger (engine designer), Norbert Singer (project manager), Horst Reitter (suspension designer), and Eugen Kolb (body design)





Handiwork

Building the 962 was an expensive proposition. Twenty-five specialists devoted 800 hours to the construction of the aluminum chassis, requiring 3,000 rivets. No less than 10,000 different individual parts were kept in inventory. Specialists worked for three weeks on the plastic bodyshell. It took the electrician a week to do the wiring. Two more weeks were consumed in the final assembly of the various subassemblies of this Porsche. All the work was performed manually by experienced assemblers and technicians. And when all was done, Customer Sport Manager Jürgen Barth subjected each Porsche 956/962 to a trial on the rough test track of the Weissach Development Center before delivery to the customer.

**The inner sanctum:
The aluminum chassis of the 956 in 1988**



**Motorsport with special effects:
The 962 winning the Daytona 24 Hours in 1986**

Mass recalls. That was the one occasion Mass shared a cockpit with Bellof. For Klaus Bischof, now director of the Porsche Museum, that was an ideal pairing. “But there was to be no victory. The mechanics treated a water leak in the cylinder head with a sealant. But other seals disintegrated, and the cooling system failed.” After 21 hours and with a victory within reach, Mass/Bellof had to leave it to their teammates Schuppan/Holbert/Haywood to win the race.

In addition to the factory drivers, winners in a Porsche 956, 962 “IMSA,” or 962 C include Bob Wollek, Klaus Ludwig, Stefan Johansson, Paolo Barilla, Al Unser Jr., James Weaver, Price Cobb, Frank Jelinski, Kris Nissen, Jonathan Palmer, Oscar Larrauri, Jesús Pareja, Jan Lammers, and many others. Nick Mason, the drummer of legendary rock group Pink Floyd, wasn’t one of them, but this musician faced one of the toughest driving challenges ever in such a Porsche. During the 1,000-kilometer (620-mile) race at Mosport, Ontario (Canada), in 1984, the Bellof/Bell team experienced generator damage. With a drained battery, these two inevitably would have had to drop out of the race. And only one backup battery was on hand, which wouldn’t have had enough capacity to see them through. Mason, who had merely intended to drive a few laps in the backup 956 for some film footage, came to the rescue to keep their battery charged. “We just kept interchanging the batteries between his vehicle and the Bellof/Bell car. Mason had to drive nearly all of the race by himself,” Bischof remembers with a smile. “In the end, he had covered more laps than any of the other drivers. We had to lift him out of his car.” To cheer him. Just as the 956/962 is being feted today: Happy birthday!