

History

Champion's Time Travel

Reunions can be magical: Jochen Mass, one of the most successful race-car drivers in the history of the Porsche factory team, meets old companions among the classic cars in the Porsche Museum's vehicle hall. This racing driver brings history to life.

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Some racing drivers can talk faster than they can drive. Fortunately, Jochen Mass isn't one of them. He expresses his passion for motorsports in other ways. Through his body language and facial expressions, and especially by using his hands, he enlivens his words and his memories. Admonishing, pointing out, underscoring, reaching out to the past. Jochen Mass holds the pole position here in the vehicle hall, which is replete with the most beautiful and successful race cars from Porsche's history. And wherever he looks, old friends among these museum pieces bring exciting memories back to life. His glance rests most intently on some of the classics that will be on display in the new Porsche Museum next year—some that he had personally driven and that continue to move him to this day. Here at the Porsche Museum, Mass, now 61, encounters his own history as well.

Mass was synonymous with dependability and success in the long-distance world championship, and Porsche was his brand. Nobody has driven the 956/962 sports car to more victories than he. On a recent night, the world-traveling racer was roaring home toward Monte Carlo along the Italian "Riviera of Flowers." When he made a quick stop to refuel along the Autostrada, the cashier did a double-take when he noticed the name on the credit card. He was suddenly wide awake. After a searching look at the customer's face he grinned broadly: "I just knew it had to be you."

The career of a born racer is never over. There's always a new life cycle waiting to begin.

The man knew his stuff when it comes to the grand epoch of sports cars: "Bella epoca!" Jochen Mass nods in modest agreement: "Well, that was a long time ago." The attendant doesn't agree: "There's always a new cycle about to start in a racer's life."

Mass recalls exhilarating times as he discovers the 935 in the vehicle hall—the car known as "Baby." Or the 804, the Formula One speedster. He pats a fender here, takes hold of a steering wheel there. These historic treasures mean a lot to him. His curiosity, his ambition, his keen appreciation of what's going on remain undiminished. Museum Director Klaus Bischof doesn't have to try too hard to persuade Mass to sign on for a stint with the "museum on wheels" in the near future. Mass and Bischof, the racing driver and the racing engineer, share an illustrious history—so they don't need many words. Each trusts the other. A warm relationship that dates back to a time when one couldn't ▶

take it for granted that one would survive a racing weekend. They have shared tough times, too. With this thought Mass becomes pensive, he opens his hands, his shoulders rise a little, and the twinkle in his eye disappears. This hardcore racer has a sensitive side!

“It was a very intense experience,” Mass admits, as he sums up his years as a factory driver for Porsche from 1976 to 1987. “Your attitude to your job as a driver was shaped by respect for what you were doing yourself, and for what the others were achieving.” In those days, speeds attained on the straightway at Le Mans topped out above 400 km/h (250 mph). But the thrill of speed wasn’t the only experience that fascinated Mass: “The only thing that mattered to me was the next curve—and the fact that you never knew what awaited you beyond it.” Challenges that separate the men from the boys. In the turns it became evident, irrespective of engine power, who was really fast.

Clearly, Mass has an adventurous bent. And, as an experienced sailor, he also caters to it off the racetrack—even attempting an Atlantic crossing in a balloon. But what matters most, on or off the track, is staying in control, calling the right shots. Endurance races were lonely affairs—with plenty of time to develop a relationship with a vehicle. Both drivers and cars had distinctive personalities. “Today, in retrospect, the kind of driving where the driver could still make a big difference strikes me as an aesthetic experience,” Mass muses, “and that’s also why I still enjoy driving in historical rallies so much.”

It would be nice to spend more long evenings with Mass and all those museum cars. Reminiscing, recognizing, explaining. Even an old racing poster on the wall in the car storage area evokes instant memories of the action at the time. When he recalls some of his most thrilling experiences, Mass’s hand movements underscore the story, and his sonorous voice imitates the drone of the engine—much like a little boy might, imitating a race car. And as the story plot thickens, Jochen Mass grasps an imaginary steering wheel, reaching for moments he wants to hold on to. ◀

Personalia

Date of birth: September 30, 1946, in Dorfen (Bavaria)

Nationality: German

Place of residence: Monte Carlo

Family status: Married to Bettina, two daughters (Sydné and Jessica); two sons (Innes and Quentin) from his first marriage to Esther

Career highlights as a race driver:

1968: First hillclimb race, first circuit race

1971: Formula Super Vee, Formula 3

1972: Formula 2

1973 to 1982: 106 Formula 1 races for Surtees, McLaren, ATS, Arrows, and March; 71 world championship points, one victory

1976 to 1987: Factory driver for Porsche

1988 to 1991: Factory driver for Sauber-Mercedes

