



Of Gymnasts and Boxers

The world's most successful rally driver in the world's fastest one-make cup: Sébastien Loeb has distinguished himself in the Porsche Mobil 1 Supercup as well.

By Markus Stier Photos by Daniel Roeseler

The great champion has opted for “scruffy casual” today: a T-shirt, sneakers, tattered jeans, and a pair of large sunglasses hiding the crinkles in his laugh-lined face. Here, in the Royal Park of Monza, Sébastien Loeb is pushing a rolling suitcase before him. For a change, he is smooth-shaven; his hair has never been so short. The nine-time World Rally Champion is making a nonchalant entrance.

He’s just come straight from a GT race, and is actually just stopping by on his way to Rally Argentina. After that, the famous Pikes Peak mountain race is on the agenda, followed by other sports-car races. You’d

never guess Loeb is, in fact, semi-retired. He is gradually pulling out of professional sports, participating in exactly four 2013 World Championship rallies. Despite his busy calendar, the all-round talent has made room for two guest starts in the Porsche Mobil 1 Supercup—in Barcelona and Monaco—which is why he is in Monza: to test the brand-new 911 GT3 Cup.



“To me, the Supercup represents quite a challenge,” Loeb says, and explains why: “It’s the fastest one-make cup in the world, everyone is driving the same model, and the world-class drivers in the starting

First drive in Monza: Loeb tests the high-speed track from behind the wheel of a VIP Porsche featuring a Martini Racing design



lineup leave no doubt: competition is very tough.” Which is just the way he likes it. His first two Supercup races, which will be part of the Formula One Grand Prix in Barcelona and Monaco, will at the same time be the debut for the new 911 GT3 Cup. The 338 kW (460 hp) motorsport version of the new GT3 is based on the current 911 generation, and in 2013 it will be raced exclusively in the international top series of this one-make cup. Loeb heads for the pit, where he shakes hands with each of the technicians and mechanics. They are always pleased to see him. And the world champion has never been the diva type.



Briefing for the champion: There's strong competition in the Porsche Mobil 1 Supercup

Formula One world champions are usually the better-known superstars, and yet most racing aces would agree that when it comes to mastery of the vehicle, rally drivers rule. Reigning Formula One world champion Sebastian Vettel is an avowed Walter Röhrl admirer. Former champion Kimi Räikkönen devoted two years to the World Rally Championship (WRC), but never quite made it to the podium.



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car and came in second at the 24 Hours of Le Mans. Loeb could well be described as a real-life counterpart to Michel Vaillant, the French comic book hero. Loeb, a former gymnast, has taken nine consecutive WRC titles. Now 39, Loeb has racked up 78 victories over the course of twelve years. His competitors would have to pool their wins in order to surpass that. He's won the renowned Monte Carlo Rally seven times in all.

You'll find Loeb's name at the top of nearly every list of World Rally Championship records. Loeb and his WRC cars have

made him an icon for Citroën, his long-term employer. But the French driver has a close relationship with Porsche, as well. An electrician by training, as soon as he had earned enough money to buy a fast car, that's what he did: a Porsche 911, model series 993.



That was ten years ago, and since then Loeb has periodically tried his luck in the French Carrera Cup—just for fun. And having fun is his top maxim at the moment. After twelve years of the WRC, even a champi-

on can view the job as somewhat wearying. “All those long weekends, the never-ending liaison stages, two days of training at 80 km/h—the luster can wear off,” he says.

The eternal champion wants to have time for other, new endeavors. Since 2012, these endeavors have included his own racing team. His friend and former sponsor Dominique Heintz had a rally team in mind, but Loeb was more interested in a circuit project, which would include a two-car team in the French Carrera Cup. His driver Jean-Karl Vernay promptly seized the 2012 title. The Pau street circuit was the scene of an



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Unfamiliar territory: The rally star in Monaco's guard rail canal

exciting duel between Vernay and the team principal. Loeb just managed to win the qualifying and both races. "Jean-Karl is really fast, but passing is not really an option in Pau," says Loeb with a grin.

On the high-speed racetrack in Monza, Loeb spends two days homing in on the new 911 GT3 Cup. "Seb knows what he's doing," Porsche factory driver Nick Tandy says approvingly. By the end of the first day, Loeb is just two-tenths of a second behind the German Carrera Cup champion. Loeb is not deceived, however: "The Supercup standard is very, very high, and the others are more experienced than I. My chances are small, but I have nothing to lose."



The man who normally races at 200 km/h over gravel roads surrounded by trees doesn't have a problem with the high

speeds: "At Le Mans, you take a swig of water at 370 km/h and tighten your seat belt." And he's happy to dispense with the familiar all-wheel drive as well: "When you're on the racetrack, rear-wheel drive still gives you better grip than all-wheel drive at a rally."

It's not the end of the world if you mess up a test in a rally car or stall at the start of the race—you can still catch up. That's not so on a circuit, where you can make or break your weekend during a qualifying lap or at the starting lineup. For a long-distance specialist, it calls for a mental switch. Sébastien Loeb's new motto is, "If it's unfamiliar, it's probably good." That's why he drove in the GT Championship this year and plans to compete in the World Touring Car Championship in 2014. As in the Supercup, these races are around a half hour in length—scarcely longer than a 40-kilometer gravel test in the WRC. Isn't that a bit on the short side? "Not in the

slightest," says Sébastien Loeb, "that gives me more time to chat with friends, and in particular, I don't have to wait so long for a cup of coffee." At which point he again presses the button on the vending machine in the Porsche pit.

By the time he heads for Barcelona and his first race in the Porsche Supercup—immediately after the rally championship in Argentina—he has chalked up yet another big gravel victory in South America. He eagerly hits the circuit in Spain. In the qualifying, he advances to 13th place. "I'm getting to know the car better and better with each lap," he comments about the VIP 911 from Porsche, painted in a Martini Racing design. In the race, he continues to advance, this time to 11th place. Loeb takes a critical look at his performance: "I was too cautious in the early laps. It's difficult to pass other vehicles when there are so many strong drivers ahead of you, all moving at the same speed."

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On the narrow circuit in Monaco, where Loeb delivers his second guest performance, he really gets stuck in traffic. The statement he makes after the qualifying (16th place) becomes an immediate classic in Monaco: "It was enough to drive one to despair; I couldn't get a single free lap." During the race itself, he doesn't manage to improve his standings, but that doesn't affect his enthusiasm: "It was great fun. I knew that it was going to be hard competing against the Supercup specialists. Well, we'll see what hap-

pens—maybe one of these days, I'll be back in this fantastic series."

Here, on an unfamiliar track, Loeb met up with a familiar face: VW factory driver and rally rival Sébastien Ogier, who started in the Supercup race at the millionaires' playground. Ten years Loeb's junior, the talented Ogier came in 13th place. For him, too, there's no question about it: the Porsche Supercup is clearly the most challenging one-make cup in the world. ●

Sébastien Loeb

was born on February 26, 1974, in Haguenau, Alsace, France. He now resides in Lausanne, Switzerland, with his wife Séverine and their daughter. Loeb made his World Rally Championship debut in 1999. In 2004, he began his unparalleled winning streak; as of 2012, he has won nine WRC titles in a row.