

24 Heures du Mans

13/14 Juin 1970



THE DAY OF TRUTH

HISTORY

IN AUTO RACING, THE 24 HOURS OF LE MANS IS THE ULTIMATE TEST OF CHARACTER FOR BOTH MAN AND MACHINE. ALMOST NO ONE EXEMPLIFIES THIS BETTER THAN **HANS HERRMANN**, WHO WON THE FIRST OVERALL VICTORY FOR PORSCHE ON JUNE 14, 1970—AND AT THE VERY MOMENT OF THAT GREATEST TRIUMPH RETIRED FROM MOTORSPORTS. **FORTY YEARS LATER, THIS MEMORABLE DAY** STILL EVOKES EMOTIONS: RACING FUEL ALWAYS STAYS IN YOUR BLOOD.

By
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At first it was pouring down rain. Then strong gusts of wind dried the pavement. Then it rained buckets again. That is not good. Especially not at an auto race considered the toughest in the world. “Rain tires? Slicks? Rain tires? What a mess! It was terrible!” Hans Herrmann, who is 82 now, still gets shook up when he thinks of it, forty years after that memorable 24-hour race in the summer of 1970 at Le Mans.

Listening to his dismal weather story makes you feel cold showers running down your back. The fact that, on this day, factory driver Herrmann drove a Porsche 917 K to the sports-car brand’s first overall victory on the notorious loop southwest of Paris is

recorded forever in all chronicles. But it was more than that: a showdown—the simultaneous triumph of uncompromising race-car design, superlative driving skills, and moral fiber. A day on which the Porsche legend began to establish itself at Le Mans.

The drama actually starts on June 11. That evening, Herrmann tells his wife Madeleine goodbye in front of their house near Stuttgart as he begins his journey to Le Mans. He intends to drive through the night, as he always does—to be there on time the next morning for the on-site training. The 850 kilometers (530 miles) is no big deal for a long-distance racing driver; more like a training run for the night shift in the race car. But something is ▶



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Hands-on with history: Hans Herrmann with “his” 917 K in the Porsche Museum—and the 908, in which he placed second in 1969 (number 64)



On the path to victory: The 917 K in Le Mans at the end of the Hunaudières Straight—and during its triumphant reception back in Stuttgart



different. “Will you promise me,” says his wife at the garden gate, “to give up racing if you win the Le Mans?” Hans looks her in the eyes and says without hesitation, “Yes.” A straight answer.

A racer’s promise. At that time, Hans Herrmann has already raced cars for nineteen years. He knows every famous racetrack in the world and has competed for various racing teams. In 1966 he returns to Porsche. His track record with Porsche includes, among others, overall victories at Sebring (1960 and 1968), at the Targa Florio (1960), and in Daytona (1968), and class wins in the Carrera Panamericana (1954) and the Mille Miglia (1954). What he—and the house of Porsche—still needs to perfect the record is the overall victory in the fabulous 24 Hours of Le Mans.

The first thing Herrmann does when he arrives at the race course on June 12 is greet his codriver, the Englishman Richard (Dick) Attwood, age 30. Then the two inspect their racing machine, the 917 K. Newly developed by the young chief engineer Ferdinand Piëch, this red-and-white race car bears the starting number 23, has a 4.5-liter V-12 engine with an output of 535 hp, and weighs 827 kilograms (1,823 lbs.). The K stands for Kurzheck (short tail), a body shortened by 64 centimeters (25 inches) for enhanced stability in tight turns compared to the longer version—particularly useful on the rather tortuous western portion of the 13.5-kilometer-long (8.4 miles) Le Mans circuit. At the time, however, the eastern portion does not have any chicanes but is an almost 6-kilometer-long (3.7 miles) stretch called the Hunaudières Straight.

“In dry conditions we’d reach speeds of 350 km/h [217 mph] there,” Herrmann relates, “but with the incessant rain we had to adjust the speed every few seconds. You can’t really see anything, because the car ahead of you raises a water curtain that trails it for 200 meters [650 feet] or more.” It’s like flying blind. Herrmann and Attwood barrel through the standing water and the spray. After an hour and three-quarters or so they are running low on gas. Refueling stops are used to change drivers. “First you get out of your wet gear, then you take a short break, maybe have some tea and a sandwich,” Herrmann describes the rest stop in the box, “but there’s no chance to take a nap.” ▶



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During the night of June 13/14, Herrmann and Attwood tenaciously fight their way forward past one rival after another. They have become almost unaware of the torrential rain. What matters now is staying the course. A year earlier, in 1969, Herrmann and Gérard Larrousse came in second at the finish line in a 3-liter Porsche 908. “Second! And why?! Because the brake linings were worn down and I didn’t pay attention to the cockpit readout! I was in an excellent position and could have made a box stop. But I didn’t.” Herrmann still gets upset. “Do you know how close we were behind Jacky Ickx and Jackie Oliver at the finish line?” He pauses for effect, then: “100 meters!” (about 325 feet). Nothing like that must ever happen again. “I kept impressing on Attwood over and over before the race: ‘Stay on the ball to the finish, Dick; we’ve got to stay on the ball 24 hours!’ It’s all about pacing your energy level and your materials. [Juan Manuel] Fangio, for instance, was a genius. He was able to calculate all actions so the car wouldn’t fall apart until it had just crossed the finish line.” Herrmann is not concerned about his own condition. In his (limited) spare time he boxes at the club in the up to 62-kilo (137 lbs.) weight class—light welterweight. Besides, he always carries his



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HANS HERRMANN has an almost mystical relationship with the number **23**. His birthday is February **23**, 1928. When he first met his wife Madeleine, she was **23** years old. Herrmann won the first class victory of his racing career on the **23rd** of a month. During that career he started **23** times on the **23rd** of a month. During his triumph at Le Mans in 1970, the Porsche 917 K bore the starting number **23**. It was Hans Herrmann’s **23rd** start in his various racing events at Le Mans. **Sheer coincidence?**

personal guardian angel in his luggage: the number 23, his lucky number. “I’ve been thrown out of race cars. I’ve flipped over. Once they used five meters [16 feet] of black electrical tape to patch up a rib fracture I had suffered.” Luck enough for several racers’ lives.

At noon on June 14, still four hours before the checkered flag, Herrmann and Attwood feel victory is within their reach. Now they are focusing totally on that objective. It is still raining, but the only cars ahead of them are those the Porsche duo overtook on earlier laps. Time seems to be dragging, even at this breakneck speed. At 4 p.m. the 24-hour race finally ends as the checkered flag signals the red-and-white 917 K with Herrmann at the wheel that it is over, after 343 laps, and 4,607.8 kilometers. What a triumph!

Hans Herrmann emerges from the cockpit and basks in the congratulations of his codriver Dick Attwood, the box crew, and the jubilation of the spectators. But suddenly his expression turns pensive. His thoughts have returned to Stuttgart. And he hears Madeleine’s voice—and his own promise. “I’m quitting,” he announces to the bewildered group of well-wishers. He has to repeat this short sentence often on this glorious day. All attempts at persuading him to keep racing are in vain.

So Herrmann ends his racing career the way he has lived it: straightforward and with no ifs and buts. Then the clouds break open and the sun pours down to help Le Mans share the joy that is in the mind of Hans Herrmann. ◀