

# 24

## Bentley grips Le Mans as Nicholas Foulkes reports



The Le Mans 24-hour race is one of the last great motor-sport events left on Earth. While Formula 1 is little more than a computer-controlled global marketing exercise, and exotic road races such as the Pan Americana or the Mille Miglia have either ceased to exist or become vintage car rallies where millionaires can race their automotive antiques, Le Mans remains as much of a thrilling test of endurance, speed and stamina as it was when it was first staged 80 years ago. Run over a mixture of racetrack, main and secondary roads, it is like no other event in motor sport.

"We found that this is a complete Formula 1 season run in one race: in terms of distance and time it is about the same," explains Dr Franz Josef Paefgen, the suave, Breitling-wearing, cigar-smoking chairman of Bentley motors. And indeed the demands that this non-stop, round-the-clock, 5,000-km marathon makes on drivers and machines are considerable. "If you go there and see the first 2 hours, it is like any other motor race. After 6 hours you see that it is different, but when it is late at night, you think it is damn long but it is only half over... you can see how it is so difficult to win over 24 hours."

It was in 1923 that this otherwise anonymous French provincial town hosted its first round-the-clock motor race, and until 1930 the Bentley boys – rich, sporty, aristocratic playboys – dominated Le Mans, winning the race five times.

This year, almost three-quarters of a century after the British racing-green Bentleys last won at Le Mans, a new generation of Bentley boys were back at the top of the winners' podium. This win came at the right time to cement the sporting reputation of a Bentley Motors no longer associated with Rolls Royce, and will, of course, be a considerable help to Bentley's

owner, the Volkswagen Group, in the launch of its new, 560-bhp, nearly 200-mph grand tourer: the Bentley GT Coupé.

However, before we get too carried away with the return of the Bentley Boys, it must be stressed that there was also an important horological dimension to this year's Le Mans.



## Timekeeping

One of the most evocative snapshots of the gritty, oil-streaked glamour of Le Mans is the eponymous film starring Steve McQueen. The film has retained a lasting appeal and Heuer, or TAG Heuer as they became, have benefited inestimably from the iconic image of McQueen in Heuer-sponsored overalls and that square-cased Heuer watch.

“They call it the Monaco, when it should be called the Le Mans,” says five-times Le Mans winner Derek Bell of McQueen’s choice of timepiece. Bell, the most charming man in motor sport, used to race for Ferrari’s Formula 1 team during the 1960s but, at the end of that decade, he made the switch to sports-car and endurance racing in time to work as a consultant on the cult film “Le Mans”. During filming, McQueen, who was something of a car freak, became friendly with Bell and gave him a particularly special Heuer timepiece. “A couple of years ago I had it cleaned and done up and then I mislaid it and I was so upset because Steve had had it engraved for me. It is the only watch I have ever lost and it really aggrieves me.”



However, Bell is not a man who needs to be short of watches – he is constantly being presented with commemorative timepieces of one sort or another. For instance, last year I was present at a ceremony where the mayor of Le Mans presented him with the freedom of the town and a specially engraved Rolex Oysterdate (with his name charmingly misspelt) as proof.

Now Bell has the opportunity to add to his collection of wrist-watches as, three decades after he worked with McQueen, he is back at Le Mans as a consultant to Bentley Motors, and also as unofficial motor-sport ambassador for Breitling.

Breitling’s collaboration with Bentley has already yielded such fruits as the Breitling-signed dashboard clock in the GT, and of course the remarkable Breitling for Bentley chronograph with a seconds-totaliser hand that sweeps round the dial, making two circuits in every minute. This feature – unique in the world – enables the user to take full advantage of the awesome precision of this Breitling calibre 25 Chronometer-certified, self-winding, high-frequency movement. This horological innovation, coupled with the enhanced visibility of a special dial configuration enabled by the clever overscaling employed by Breitling’s design studio, allows a more precise read-off of fractions of a second than is to be found on most wrist-worn analogue chronographs. In the case of this remarkable watch, the wearer is allowed to read off elapsed time to the nearest eighth of a second.

## Unveiled

And yet even more remarkable was the debut this year of the Breitling Le Mans Chronograph, with its 24-hour dial and case size that nudges close to 50 mm. It is both one of the biggest and most horologically intriguing Breitlings available today.

I am, of course, a great fan of Breitling and an admirer of Count Larosee, the German aristocrat who, though only the first member of his family to actually work for a living since the time of Charlemagne, has managed to lift the reputation of Breitling in the UK to the level where it enjoys a recognition eclipsed only by Rolex and Cartier. However, this particular Breitling holds a special interest for me as I might have played a very small part in its development.

At last year’s Le Mans I was hanging around the Bentley Pavilion when I encountered Breitling boss Teddy Schneider and his entourage. Son of Ernst Schneider, the aviator who saved Breitling from obscurity by buying the brand in the 1970s, Teddy is the man who is taking Breitling into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is he who has constructed the two new state-



of-the-art, drive-by-wire Breitling factories in Grenchen and La Chaux-de-Fonds. It is he who has decreed that every Breitling that leaves the factory should be an officially certified Chronometer. And it is he who has forged a relationship with Bentley, which was why he was in Le Mans.

As is customary with this hardworking and extremely understated man, he was only in Le Mans for a limited time, but I felt that if he were going to get involved with Bentley he should at least get a feel for this unique event. So we went on a tour of the circuit. I took him here and there, showed him the pit lane and walked out onto the track, up and down which were marching the local brass bands, cadres of upper-echelon motor company execs, gaggles of reporters, TV crews and, of course, the Hawaiian Tropic Girls – pneumatic young women who seemed to share the sort of qualities that made Pamela Anderson such a popular young lady, and without whom Le Mans would simply not be Le Mans.

At some stage during our peregrinations I raised the subject of the Breitling Cosmonaute. Featuring a 24-hour dial, this watch had made its debut in May 1962 when Scott Carpenter took it into space aboard the Aurora 7 space capsule. Breitling had entered the space age, and the 24-hour dial, although slightly confusing to use on Earth (at noon, for example, the hands adopt the position on the dial most of us associate with 6 o’clock), made perfect sense in space.

I suggested that it might also make perfect sense to use this principle to create a Breitling to accompany the legendary

24-hour race at Le Mans. There was a little polite nodding on the part of Schneider and his coterie, after which they returned to Grenchen and I returned to the terrace of the Bentley Pavilion to watch the race.

A year later I found myself once again at Le Mans enjoying a light pre-race supper in the drivers’ paddock, when Ben Palmer of Breitling stood up to present the new limited-edition Bentley Le Mans Chronograph, with a 24-hour dial. I was delighted – a unique Breitling for a unique motor race, it is a perfect companion to the Bentley Breitling. While sharing a similar appearance with its stablemate, there are striking differences. Where the bezel of the Bentley Breitling is knurled, the bezel on the Le Mans Breitling is engine turned, as were the dashboards of the original Bentleys that dominated Le Mans in the “roaring twenties”. Then, of course, there is the 24-hour dial, which is rendered even more striking by a bronze colour.

It is a stunning timepiece: outrageous yet different, taking strong design cues from one of Breitling’s most creative and innovative periods: the 1960s and 1970s. Limited to 1,000 pieces in steel and three sets of 24 in 18 ct. yellow gold, this is destined to become a collector’s piece for automotive and horological enthusiasts alike. Decorated on the back with the bas relief silhouette of the race-winning Speed 8, the car that returned the victor’s laurels to Bentley motors, it is a watch that has a particular significance to me, both as a Bentley driver and as a passionate horophile who made a small contribution to the creation of this historic wrist-worn timepiece. ●

**Further information:** Breitling: Tel: 020 7637 5167, [www.breitling.com](http://www.breitling.com)

Bentley: Tel: 0808 100 5200, [www.bentleymotors.co.uk](http://www.bentleymotors.co.uk)