

Derek Bell

All my Porsche races



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**Derek Bell &
Richard Heseltine**



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Richard Heseltine

Contents

Introduction	8	On top of the world	140
From 917 to 935	26	7 Crowning glory	144
		8 Champion again	168
1 Racing with JWA	30	9 Endurance double	196
2 Marking time	50		
3 Victory at Le Mans	60	Swansong	216
A new dawn	72	10 Testing times	220
		11 Highlight in Florida	232
4 Group C arrives	76	12 Porsche outclassed	244
5 Father figure	94	13 Best of the rest	254
6 Stateside success	116	14 A family affair	262
		Index	274



FERODO

PART ONE

FROM 917
TO 935

A decade of change



Below left: the Porsche 935 became a mainstay of sportscar racing during the latter half of the 1970s and lasted well into the 1980s. *LAT Images*
Far right: in 1980, the Lancia works team went into battle with the Montecarlo Turbo. *LAT Images*

Sportscar racing in the 1970s witnessed its fair share of upheaval. Derek Bell's first season in the International Championship for Makes in 1971 was also the last for the charismatic five-litre 'big banger' Group 5 cars, with top-flight machinery running to three-litre regulations a year later. This had a significant impact on factory involvement, with Ferrari effectively throttling back on developing the 512 series and instead concentrating on the new 312PB, which didn't win a round of the series in 1971. It was left to privateer squads to field variants of the 512s.

Porsche, in contrast, continued to develop the 917 despite its impending obsolescence, with Hans-Dieter Dechent's Martini squad expanding its programme for 1971 and taking over the cars of Porsche Salzburg. John Wyer's Gulf-sponsored equipe, meanwhile, continued from where it left off and enjoyed a dominant season. The 917 received a displacement hike to five litres, although 4.9-litre versions continued to be used on occasion. The long-tail – or Langheck – variant now had rear bodywork that virtually shrouded the rear wheels, while particular attention was paid to improving the braking set-up. Only Alfa Romeo was a threat with its Group 6 three-litre Tipo 33/3, which foretold the transition to Group 5 – or Sports – regulations.

The five-litre sportscar era spanned the years from 1968-'71, but the move to three-litre cars didn't bring about a panacea whereby manufacturers and sponsors flocked to embrace the new formula. The world championship didn't take flight. If anything, the switch hastened the decline of sportscar racing to the end of the decade, even if lesser classes continued to thrive for many years. So much so, they propped up the category. A period ensued whereby one marque would dominate and, having done so, it would then abdicate, maybe to return at a later date. Ferrari went one step further and pulled out of sportscar racing altogether at the end of

1973 in order to concentrate on Formula One.

Matra, which had hitherto focused on its Le Mans bids, challenged for championship honours, as did Alfa Romeo, while the John Wyer-fielded Mirages also won races intermittently. And Porsche? Save for a surprise win in the 1973 Targa Florio with the 911 Carrera RSR, it was slim pickings for a while as it displayed little interest in coming up with a successor to the 917 and concentrated instead on devising ever more extreme variations on the 911 theme. This decision would reap dividends in the second half of the decade.

Outside forces also held sway. The late-1973 'energy crisis' or 'oil shock' had a seismic effect on motor racing, with events being canned or curtailed. The 1974 Daytona 24 Hours, for example, was cancelled, as was that year's Sebring 12 Hours, which by then was a standalone race rather than a round of the world series. Race distances were also considerably shorter, for the most part, while greater emphasis was placed on fuel economy. In 1975, the Automobile Club de l'Ouest (ACO) introduced a special fuel consumption-based formula for Le Mans whereby all cars would have to complete 20 laps before refuelling. This resulted in the loss of its championship status. That, and manufacturers heading for the door, with the Gulf Research Racing team facing little in the way of 'works' opposition en route to victory with Derek Bell claiming his first win of the 24 Hours.

A new Group 5 formula came into being for 1976; one that underscored the world championship in its various guises to the end of 1981. The revised category was officially known as Special Production but was referred to colloquially as the Silhouette formula. The rules were flexible when it came to homologation requirements. There was no need for firms to build a certain number of cars to assuage the rule-makers as in previous years, while racers need only be derived from their road-going counterparts. As such, they differed massively in terms of construction, layout, suspension, brakes and so on. They merely had to retain the same basic outline and configuration of a production model.

While the motor-racing weeklies of the period trumpeted expressions of interest from a raft of manufacturers, only Porsche, BMW and Lancia had any serious official involvement. Potential rivals didn't take



the bait out of fear that Porsche would dominate. After all, it had quite the head start, having developed the Carrera RSR Turbo during 1973-'74. What's more, the new-for-1976 935 model did indeed dominate to the point that it held a near hegemony over the category to the end of the decade and into the 1980s as ever wilder variants were unleashed.

It got to the point that those teams or constructors still fielding purpose-built sports-prototypes felt aggrieved, which led to the creation of the World Championship for Sports Cars (for open Group 6 machinery) – it ran in parallel with the World Championship for Makes for 1976-'77. Just to add to the confusion, the ACO wasn't above going its own way regarding regulations for the Le Mans 24 Hours.

It couldn't last. By the end of the 1970s, manufacturer involvement was virtually nil, with Porsche being happy to let outside teams continue to maintain the 935's relevance in sportscar racing from 1978. It got to the point that cars were barely recognisable as anything you might find in a Porsche dealership. Nevertheless, 935 'specials' were still appearing in major international events as late as 1986, its last major scalp being the 1984 Sebring 12 Hours.

At the dawn of the 1980s, sportscar racing was at a

crossroads. The World Manufacturers' Championship attracted little manufacturer involvement, each round being a domestic race in all but name. Local heroes in cars from homegrown series made hay against a ragtag bunch of makeweights and wannabes. Meetings held in Germany typically attracted Group 5 cars from the national Deutsche Rennsport Meisterschaft (DRM) series and little else, while grids in Italy mostly comprised two-litre sports-racers. In the USA, IMSA-sanctioned cars generally held sway while European teams sat out all bar the blue-riband long-distance races.

Only Lancia Corse proffered a works bid on the world stage in 1980, its Montecarlo Turbos being driven by established and future legends such as Riccardo Patrese, Walter Röhrl, Michele Alboreto and Hans Heyer. They owned the up-to-two-litre class against token opposition, but Lancia's title success was met with little in the way of positive ink in the media, even in Italy. The concurrent, IMSA-orientated Endurance Championship title, meanwhile, fell to former Wall Street trader John Paul Sr. The Netherlands-born Porsche privateer was a model of consistency rather than outright speed. Predictably, Lancia won the manufacturers' crown largely unopposed in 1981. It was all change for 1982, however, with Porsche in the ascendant.

Chapter 1

Racing with JWA, 1971

Buenos Aires 1000 kilometres
10 January 1971

It was a triumph stripped of euphoria. The opening round of the 1971 International Championship for Manufacturers saw Bell and team-mate Jo Siffert head home a JW Automotive one-two, but nobody felt like celebrating.

Bell: "I had barely driven a 917 prior to flying out to Argentina. I had managed a few laps at Hockenheim in the rain and fog. My abiding memory of that day is of me being saucer-eyed after a cyclist decided to cross the track just as I was fully committed to a corner. I remember him pedaling like billy-o as I wasn't about to stop, or rather I was unable to. Other than that, I had tested at Goodwood where it was between me, Ronnie Peterson and Peter Gethin for the seat. To this day, I don't know who was fastest, but I got the nod."

Matters didn't get off to a flier at the Buenos Aires Autodromo, either: "I was paired with 'Seppi', who did most of the driving in the car during practice, while Jackie Oliver and Pedro Rodríguez were in the sister car. Jackie didn't exactly endear himself by leaving the road in practice and Pedro flew in from London Heathrow with a complete front end for a 917. He had

carried it as hand baggage. Nevertheless, they ended up with pole position while we were third. We were split by the Ferrari 312PB of Arturo Merzario and Ignazio Giunti, while the Martini 917s were behind us.

"There was a lot of jostling early on, but then Jean-



■ Left: the Siffert/Bell 917 chases down the Müller/Herzog Ferrari 512M during the 1971 Brands Hatch 1000 Kilometres. The Italian machine had been used in the making of *Le Mans*. Porsche AG
Right: Derek won on his debut alongside team leader Jo Siffert. It was a one-two finish in Argentina for the John Wyer/Gulf equipe. LAT Images

Pierre Beltoise's Matra ran out of fuel just before the pits. For reasons known only to him, he then decided to push his car. Marshals were frantically waving yellow flags, but Giunti's Ferrari pulled alongside Mike Parkes' similar car at just the wrong moment and struck Beltoise's car before bouncing down the road and catching fire. It happened right in front of the main grandstand and it took two minutes to get him out, by which time he was dead. The race was a shambles, not least because there were a lot of protests afterwards. To be honest, I just wanted to get home."



■ Bell and the 917 were made for each other. Nevertheless, he emerged wide-eyed after his first-ever outing at Daytona, and failed to finish on his debut – although part of his Gulf Porsche’s gearbox made it across the line first in the sister car.

The Revs Institute/Eric della Faille

Daytona 24 Hours 30-31 January 1971

“I remember testing there for the first time more than the race itself. I had never driven on banking before and didn’t really know what to expect. When I first drove through the tunnel and into the oval area, the place was pretty much empty but what an atmosphere! The pits were quite a distance away, but then I heard a car fire up: it was the 917 I was sharing with Siffert. It was a sunny morning, and I can clearly recall standing there as Jo came past for the first time. The nose of the car

was planted, but he was struggling to clamp down the rear end. The tail wasn’t exactly stepping out, but it was moving. I thought, ‘Bloody hell!’ That, and, ‘What am I doing here?’

“The thing is, I soon acclimatised. You would fly down the back straight, which had no chicanes in those days, and hit around 220mph. Jo and Pedro were always bullshitting each other about where to go flat out and where to back off, but I just got my head down and did the best I could. I wasn’t terribly impressed with my performance at the time but had become used to slowing down when there was a corner coming up!

Derek Bell - All my Porsche races



I didn’t get much running beforehand as Jo virtually lived in our car and I honestly don’t think I ever actually took the banking flat out after the back straight.

“The sister Porsche of Oliver and Rodríguez was meant to be the hare that would goad the Ferraris into overstretching themselves. As it happens, the sister car won as the engine expired in ours early on with Seppi driving. The engine wouldn’t take an over-rev: at 8100rpm, she was fine. At 8200rpm, she blew...

“That said, much of our transmission was used on the winning car after Pedro and Oliver’s 917 was stuck in gear with less than four hours to go.”

Sebring 12 Hours 20 March 1971

“Sebring was – and remains – an old airfield circuit with enough bumps to give you blurred vision. It was tough on man and machine. I vividly recall being pitched off the track in practice after my car’s suspension collapsed. I must have slid for at least 300 metres before it finally stopped. My ‘moment’ happened in front of Mario Andretti, who was driving a works Ferrari. He stopped to check that I was OK, and we chatted about it later, openly wondering why anyone would want to spend

Bell’s Gulf car heads the 917K of ■ Elford/Larrousse, which emerged victorious after 12 gruelling hours of racing on the bumpy Sebring airfield circuit. Derek’s dislike for the venue was heightened following a high-speed ‘off’ in practice, although he subsequently grew to love the race. *LAT Images*

Part 1 - From 917 to 935