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The Complete History Of 24 Hours Of Le Mans

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The epic, day-long race that winds through the little French hamlet in Northwest France is officially called 24 Hours of Le Mans (24 Heures du Mans in French), but those in the motoring world simply refer to it as “Le Mans.” Just as that great Tennis Championship in London is called simply “Wimbledon,” and the horse race at Churchill Downs is known only as “The Derby,” Le Mans is a name that needs no epithets nor honorifics to demonstrate its importance. It’s an event that is among the most hallowed in the world of sports. It has been called the most thrilling 24 hours in motor sports. It has been rendered cinematically in a legendary film with [Steve McQueen](#), who was so enraptured by the race that he begged his producers to let him actually compete (they said no).

Le Mans has seen photo-finishes, terrible crashes, speed records broken again and again, and plenty of unbelievable vehicles. It has long been at the forefront of automotive pioneering and innovation issuing from major car companies, spurred on by a desire to beat their rivals out for the claim to the illustrious championship, and status as the most rugged, durable super car maker in the continent – if not the world. It is a deep, and rich history, full of innovation and brilliance, wild stories, sometimes catastrophic mishaps. To understand Le Mans is to understand the history of European – and eventually American – auto racing at large; to see how the tides shifted, trends started, and how companies rose and fell from prominence like spokes on a wheel. The History of Le Mans is fascinating, and too expansive to summarize simply – still we’ve taken the liberty of condensing it into a slightly quicker rundown, so that you can get the distillation of Europe’s greatest Endurance race. Warning: don’t blink. It goes fast.

The Track

It begins with the Le Mans track, known as the Circuit de Sarthe. Named after the river that passes through the town of Le Mans, the track is comprised of private roads used exclusively for racing and in part public roads that are used for travel throughout the year. At 8.467 miles, the track is among the longest in the world. The track has undergone some modifications since the race began, but largely has remained the same.

The Circuit is divided into several sections. It starts with the Indianapolis, named for the famed American brickyard at the Indy Motor Speedway (in fact, the Indianapolis section of the Circuit de Sarthe refers to the presence of bricks under the tarmac), where the race begins. The Indianapolis leads into the Arnage, on to the Porsche Curves, added in 1972. Then, the Ford Chicane, which were created in 1968 for pit safety reasons originating from the Le Mans disaster of 1955. Its

effect is to slow cars down before the pit area is reached, to reduce the chance of crashes. The Dunlop bridge arches over the track as the Chicanes become the Tertre Rouge. The Rouge then becomes the Hunaudières straightaway, also the site where Wilbur Wright conducted some of the first tests of his flying machine. The Hunaudières is also called the Mulsanne Straight, as it leads directly to Mulsanne corner, and it's down this straightaway where drivers get to rev their engines up the highest, and speed records are sometimes broken.

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The Rules of the Race

There are two sets of rules for Le Mans; those pertaining to the cars, and those pertaining to drivers. The cars entered in the European Le Mans Series are designated in two categories, Prototypes and GTs. Those categories are further subdivided into the classifications of LMP1, LMP2 (Le Mans Prototype 2), LMP3 (Le Mans Prototype 3), then LM GTE (Grand Touring Endurance) and LMGTE AM.

The LMP1 is the top class, referring to a racing closed car with no homologated production minimum required. As of 2020, Le Mans will comply with “[Hypercar regulations](#)” for all LMP1 cars, allowing cars to have more of a road-going appearance in order to reduce costs and encourage participation from more major auto manufacturers. The LMP 2 must weigh under 2,050 lbs. and be built to hold a passenger, among other regulations. The LMP3 category is designed for entry-level and beginning racers, while the LM GTE has specifications designed to ensure that the car is legitimately production based.

Le Mans uses its regulations to ensure driver and spectator safety, a major point of focus since a terrible crash took place in 1955. Experience in auto-racing is paramount. Drivers are ranked in level of experience from “Platinum” to “Bronze.” Drivers can only participate in the divisions to which their classification corresponds. The race used to have a standing start, in which drivers had to run to their cars from a standing position to begin the race, but that was eliminated in the late 1960s when it was deemed a safety hazard. The number of tire changes allowed are as follows per category: 48 in LMP1, 56 in LMP2, and 60 in LMGTE Pro and LMGTE AM.

Photos: LeMans.org

The History

From '23 To Today

The first Le Mans race was put on by the Automobile Club de l'Ouest in 1923. The race was a test of fortitude that sprung forth as a result of the French's nationwide enthusiasm for automobiles. The 10.7 mile course was created in the streets of Le Mans, and called the Circuit de la Sarthe, for the river Sarthe.

The Le Mans remains the world's oldest active endurance race. While it is commonly associated with Formula One racing, the Le Mans format is far different. In comparison, F1 races are short jaunts, mere sprints, while Le Mans 24 Hour Endurance Race is an ultra-marathon. As the third feature in the World Endurance Championship, Le Mans is the crucial race for most dogged, tenacious drivers in the world. A test of mental fortitude for racers, no doubt. But at the time

of its creation, the Le Mans race was originally intended as a trial ground for automobiles to test their mechanical endurance.

In the early 1920s, Grand Prix motor racing was by far the most popular form of motor sport. The thrill of seeing cars defy standard beliefs about how fast a motorized vehicle could go, enraptured its spectators, and car manufacturers from all over the world participated. During the reign of GP racing, Le Mans sought to break the mold by introducing a new challenge. Rather than the rip-roaring, short burst cars that the proto-F1 Grand Prix-style races produced, the idea behind the endurance race was to see how well a company could manufacture a car that was both agile and athletic, while also being reliable, and incredibly hardwearing. A car that was built not simply for speed, but survival.

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Photos: Wikipedia

Beginnings

1923-1948

The first Le Mans race was put on by the Automobile Club de l'Ouest in 1923. The race was a test of fortitude that sprung forth as a result of the French's nationwide enthusiasm for automobiles. The 10.7 mile course was created in the streets of Le Mans, and called the Circuit de la Sarthe, for the river Sarthe which flows through Le Mans. The race was held on 26 and 27 May 1923, not on a track, but through the public roads of Le Mans, France. The race was initially going to be a three-year cumulative effort, with the car that accumulated the best overall time in aggregate after three runs taking first place. However, that idea was soon scrapped.

The early races were dominated by the French in their home country, along with teams from the UK and Italian entering the mix. The winners of the first Le Mans 24 Hour Endurance race were Andre Lagache and Rene Leonard, who maneuvered the track in their 3 liter Chenard & Walcker, which traveled a total of 1,300 miles in the 24 hours of the race. In total, 66 drivers in 33 cars took on the course, and a remarkable 63 finished the 24 hour race. The race was held each year until 1936, in which general strikes in France caused its cancellation. The outbreak of WWII resulted in the race's suspension in 1939, and the hiatus continued for a decade, until 1949.

Women At Le Mans In 1935: The 1935 race at Le Mans was truly groundbreaking. Ten women participated in the race, a record that still stands to this day. It wasn't the first time women had competed in the race; in 1930, Marguerite Mareuse and Odette Siko shared driving responsibilities of their Bugatti Type 40, and came in seventh place. Four years later, Siko came in fourth place overall – the best result for a woman in Le Mans History, a record which still stands. Many women have participated in the generally male-centric motorsports world since the '30s, including Leena Gade, chief engineer of the Audi R18, who has won the Le Mans 24 Hour Race 3 times.

Return To The Track

1949-1965

After the long hiatus following the second World War, Le Mans made a triumphant return, with more automobile companies participating than ever before. And more cars -for the first ever, Le Mans reached 100 entries to the race (though the ACO managed to trim the field by more than half). It was in the 1949 race that Ferrari claimed its first victory after years of falling short to its compatriot, Alfa Romeo. In 1953, the World Sportscar Championship circuit was formed, a series of races and endurance events in which Le Mans became a major event. As a result of the new level of competition between manufacturers, major brands like Ferrari, Aston Martin, Mercedes-Benz, and Jaguar started sending multiple cars to race in hopes of outdoing their rivals.

No longer was Le Mans a mere trial ground to test the durability of car models; it was a full blown sporting event, one of fierce competitiveness. As a result of the high tension, high stakes attitude with which the race had become imbued, there were more accidents, including the worst in motorsports history, which took place in 1955. One milestone achieved during this period was the first car to reach 300 kph, a Ferrari 330 LMB in 1963. The 330 LMB was part of a dynastic run by 1960 to 1965, in which Ferrari won six straight Le Mans races, officially establishing themselves as the premier race car manufacturer in Europe, if not the world.

Ford Topples Ferrari In 1966: The 1966 Le Mans race marked a monumental achievement for American motorsports. Not only did an American company win the European endurance race for the first time, but they did it by knocking off Ferrari, the 6-time reigning champion, and shutting them out of the top three positions. The victory was at least partially driven by spite, after Enzo Ferrari had publicly embarrassed Henry Ford II by pulling out of a 1963 deal to sell the Italian company to the automotive giant. Ford was out for vengeance, pouring \$10 million into its Le Mans program, hoping to hit Ferrari where it hurts, its point of pride: auto racing. They did so in dominant style, thoroughly whipping Ferrari. Ford got its revenge. After 1973, Ferrari withdrew from competing in Le Mans completely to focus completely on Formula 1 racing, and didn't return to the Circuit de Sarthe until two years ago. Some suggest that it was Ford's complete destruction of the prancing horse in 1966, and subsequent years that made them throw in the towel.

Photo: LeMans.org

The Golden Era Of Racing

1966-1980

The period from 1966 to 1980 is sometimes referred to as the Golden Era of Racing. The decade and a half saw a substantial amount of change for Le Mans – and the cars that participated in the race. The tide of European – namely, Ferrari – dominance turned in 1966, when Ford toppled the Italian goliath, usurping the Le Mans throne from the supercar maker with their legendary GT40. Ferrari had won the previous six races in a row. Not only did they not win the race, but they were shut out from the podium completely, with the three Ford Mk. II's claiming gold, silver and bronze in the race (with the difference between first and second place just 8 meters). Ford went on to secure first place in the next four races, officially announcing the arrival of American engineering in the European racing circuit.

As the dynamics evolved, the cars became more dynamic. Speeds soared. Porsche 917 (the car that [Steve McQueen drove in the 1971 blockbuster Le Mans](#)) won two races in a row, and another two in the late '70s. The rules changed – rather than a standing start, in which drivers had to run to get in their vehicles, the race now began in a rolling start at the Indianapolis section of the track. Famously, this rule change can be blamed on Jacky Ickx, who detested the having to rush into his car and take off (especially since the 1968 race, in which Ickx's fellow Belgian Willy Mairesse was seriously injured as a result of the standing start policy, and was no longer able to race. Mairesse later killed himself). In protest, Ickx strolled nonchalantly to his car, put on his seatbelt, and began the race in last place. He won. The rule was changed the next year. Later on in the era, privateer constructors proved that you didn't need a huge car manufacturer's backing to win the race, as Jean Rondeau won the 1980 running of Le Mans in a car he created completely himself ([a la Ricky Bobby](#)) called the "Rondeau M379B."

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The Le Mans Disaster of 1955: The worst tragedy in motorsports history took place at the 1955 running of Le Mans. Frenchman Pierre Levegh was driving for the Mercedes-Benz team. Before the race, Levegh had voiced his concern that the area near the pit-stop section and the grandstand was too narrow, and therefore dangerous.

Piloting the Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR, Levegh was trying to overtake racer Mike Hawthorn's Jaguar in that region of the track when Levegh's Mercedes bumped Lance Macklin's Austin-Healey, sending Levegh and the SLR skyward. The car launched out of the track and into the stands, exploding and killing Levegh and 83 spectators. Mercedes-Benz called back the rest of their team after the accident, and didn't participate for many years subsequently. The accident was a monumental turning point in terms of attitude regarding the safety of motorsports, and many new rules and regulations were instituted after this devastating tragedy.

Forging (Into) The Future

1981 - 2000

For the 1980s, a new class called Group C was created, placing the emphasis on fuel efficiency. In a certain sense, this period marked a return to the race's original purpose, as a playground for innovation. Car companies began straying from the diesel-guzzling, heavy duty race car bodies that marked their history, and began to move toward slimmer, lighter weight builds. Porsche largely dominated this category, eight of 10 races in the 1980s, and at one point six in a row. Jaguar returned to the track to wrest the title away from Porsche in '88 and '90, and Mercedes-Benz also made a comeback, participating in the Endurance race for the first time since the deadly wreck in 1955. In 1991, Mazda became the first Japanese manufacturer to win at Le Mans. Peugeot also entered the winner's circle for the first time, taking the gold in 1992 and '93 – and the record books, setting a new speed record by hitting 405 km/h, a record that many think will stand the test of time.

400km/hr In 1988: The WM Peugeot was never built to win at Le Mans. The engineers at WM were not so much concerned with winning as they were with speed. In theory, speed will always be secondary to durability in an *endurance* race. But that's not how WM thought. Before the 1988 race, team boss Gerard Welter definitively declared that his car would be the first to ever hit 400 km/hr at Le Mans. He wasn't wrong. Driven by a turbocharged Peugeot engine, the WM had the power to do so, though it also had a tendency to break down under strain.

As previously mentioned, WM didn't give a flying Ferrari about actually winning (or even finishing) the race. On the 3.7 mile straightway called the Mulsanne or Hunaudières Straight, the WM Peugeot achieved the glory it sought, proving Welter's prophecy true. Driver Roger Dorchy hit 407km/h, setting a record that has yet to be broken. What did break, however, was The WM Peugeot – just 59 miles into the race. Still, their name is etched forever in the record books.

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Photo: Le Mans Classic

Racing Into The Present

2000 - Today

After a number of major auto manufacturers withdrew from the running of the Le Mans in the 1990s, leaving only Cadillac and Audi. From 2000 – 2010, Audi dominated the race, winning 8 of 10 races. At the beginning of the new millennium, the American Le Mans circuit began, and Audi destroyed the competition in those races, too. All told, throughout the decade Audi won nine American Le Mans Series championships between 2000 and 2008 and two World

Endurance Championships. Audi continued its dominance in the 2010s, winning the first five of the decade, too. But since then, we have seen a slow return by many of the legacy car brands to the circuit. It has also seen a shift in fashion to electric cars with the last 6 victories going to hybrid cars. Porsche won in 2015, 2016 and 2017 with its Porsche 919 Hybrid, and last month, Toyota claimed victory for the first time with its TS050 Hybrid.

Toyota Notches First Win In 2018: This year, Toyota claimed victory for the first time in 20 attempts. Toyota has previously entered 47 cars at Le Mans, finishing in the top 3 six times. After years of near misses, the Toyota team finally won the epic endurance race. Following Mazda in '91, Toyota became the second Japanese car manufacturer to ever win at Le Mans. Their victory came one year after their 2017 entry broke down while in the lead and with just minutes left in the race. Though they may not have been opposed by Audi and Porsche (who both withdrew in 2018), their victory was still incredibly meaningful for a car manufacturer that had long sought to cement its name in racing history, and now has.

RANKED: 15 BEST CAR CHASES IN MOVIE HISTORY

The 24 Hours of Le Mans has a certain cinematic thrill to it – after all, it was depicted quite excitingly in the 1971 movie of the same name. Does the world's most real car chase compare to those in the movies – or vice versa? Does Steve McQueen riding the Porsche 917 make the cut? Check out this list of the [best movie car chase scenes](#) and find out.

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