

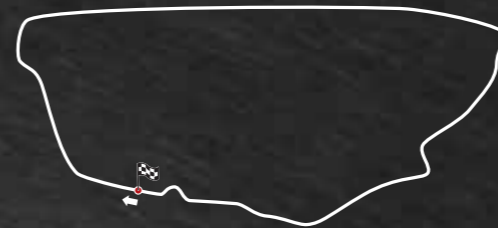
On course:
The race course on public roads around Le Mans had only a few curves back then, which were woven like small knots into the characteristic long straight stretches



RACING HISTORY

5,335 KM
397 LAPS
222 KM/H
917 K

LE MANS (1968-1971)



A record-setting victory at Le Mans by a Porsche 917 is approaching its 40th anniversary. To mark that record, we take a look back at the fast-paced decades in the life of Helmut Marko. The Austrian is now a consultant for the world champion Red Bull racing team.

By Herbert Völker

Winners all:

The Dutchman Gijs van Lennep and the Austrian Helmut Marko formed a youthful contrast on the 1972 Porsche factory team to the established drivers Siffert, Elford, Larrousse, Rodríguez, Müller, and Attwood. For both youngsters, the triumph at the 24 Hours of Le Mans was the highlight of their racing careers.

The race had been running for 16 hours, with Helmut Marko and Gijs van Lennep leading in a Porsche 917 K. Their closest challengers were also in a 917 K, Herbert Müller and Richard Attwood, who were four laps back. The Ferraris had definitely been beaten. Ferdinand Piëch had just returned from the Gulf-Porsche command station to the factory cars with a Martini look. Well? Everyone was waiting for a cathartic word, in order to let off a little steam. Those who have met Piëch, whether 40 years ago or only recently, are familiar with that play around the corners of his mouth and that light in his eyes when he makes quiet comments like “May the best one win.” Right afterward, albeit separated by laps, Marco and Müller found themselves wheel to wheel in their respective 917s before the right bend in the Hunaudières. Müller gave it everything, which meant 345 kilometers per hour (215 mph).

Marko: “We caught each other’s eyes for an instant, and I thought, He is really pushing it.”

Müller said afterward that “there wasn’t enough to pass from out of the slipstream.”

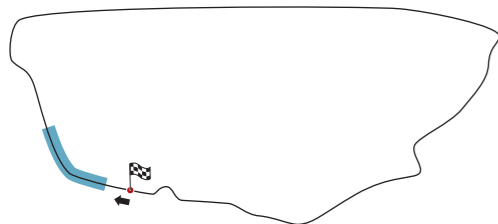
Marko: “And why do it anyway?”

Upping the speed by a good five seconds per lap was not so great for the suffering brake linings, or for the transmission synchronization system. The fifth gear was close to giving up, despite the precision hand movements that became ever gentler over the course of the race.

Memories of those hours rush back. Marko: “I had this shrill singing in my head on the long straights, at around 8,000 rpm. It was like ringing in the ears, and I was relieved when we could downshift for the Mulsanne.”

As drivers were they aware that, although at the wheel of the wildest of animals among the racing cars, this animal was at its limits, in the sense of that’s it, it won’t get any wilder?

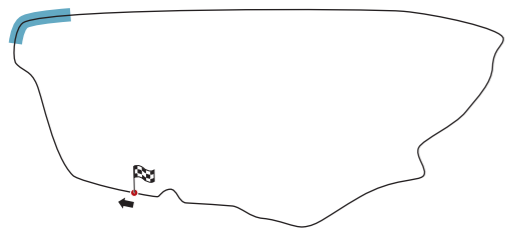
“Fear? Fear wasn’t the issue. Back then at Le Mans we were experiencing the height of Ferdinand Piëch’s drive for technical absolutes.”

DUNLOP CHICANE
A good turn

The field rushes up to the striking image of the Dunlop tire, and then to the first chicane on the long Le Mans lap. A full braking maneuver, left and right over the curbs, and then steeply down into the Esses curves.



TERTRE ROUGE
Daring curve



An aggressive part of the course that provides a lot of grip, but also dips. The right turn is tricky; the curve comes after an elevation and slopes outwards. Acceleration is then called for on the long straight.

Heading for victory:

The last pit stop before victory, with Marko having just taken over from van Lennep. Experts will recognize Helmuth Bott, the technical director on Porsche's Board at the time, behind his moustache, standing in front of future Porsche racing directors Rico Steinemann and Peter Falk. The young racing mechanic Klaus Bischof, today the director of Porsche's Museum on Wheels, emphatically points Marko to the exit; technical specialist Norbert Singer sits on the pit wall; reporters Burkhard Nuppeney and Heinz Prüller are visible as well.

Marko: "I had earned a doctorate in law at that point, but if I had started to have such thoughts as a racing driver I would have had to quit." And what about pure fear? "Fear wasn't the issue. We were experiencing the height of Ferdinand Piëch's drive for absolutes, and everyone was extremely eager to be a part of it."

At the end, the Marko/Van Lennep 917 ("Martini") was clearly superior to the Attwood/Müller 917 ("Gulf"), but the frantic pace at the conclusion had piled on kilometers that were essentially unnecessary to the outcome of the race. So many miles, in fact, that they set a record that would hold a very long time: 397 laps or 5,335 kilometers (3,315 miles) in 24 hours, which meant an average speed of 222 km/h (138 mph). Set in 1971, this record did indeed hold "almost forever," at least by the standards of racing. The total distance was not exceeded until 2010, by an Audi R15 (5,410 km, or 3,362 miles). The "almost forever" is explained on the one hand by an outstanding performance for the time, but also of course by the various changes that were subsequently made to the Le Mans course. In parallel to that, wild beasts like the 917 were tamed. A new set of regulations sent the white giant into exile in America as of 1972. Further developed there in wonderful ways as a "Big Banger," it wrote its own history in horsepower dimensions that even a Piëch would have found astonishing as well as heartily welcome during the Le Mans days. "There's no such thing as too much horsepower," he used to say.

As much as Helmut Marko loved endurance races, the Formula One was more important. He joined the BRM team, which was past its heyday. At the French Grand Prix in 1972, Marko was injured in the eye by a stone hurled back from the tire of a car in front of him. The tracks were not as clean as they are today, and the visors not yet impact-resistant. Marko lost his left eye and his future career as a racing driver. The way

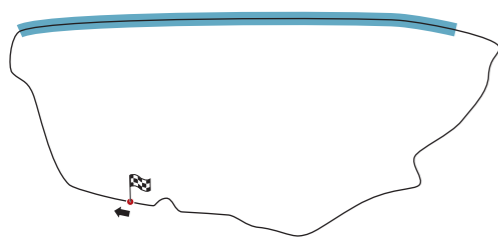
in which he entered the new phase of his life without a murmur of complaint was similar to Niki Lauda's behavior following his accident in 1976: anything but staying at home and staring at the mirror—just get out into the world. The new era became as accustomed to the slightly rusty Lauda as it did to Marko with his new look. And one has to add that a glass eye chosen with particular attention to taste evidently sharpened his ability to see through the present and spot the nuances of the future. His horizons expanded to comprise four dimensions: business, art, architecture, and racing strategy.

His interest in art dates back to the 1960s. Artists had occasionally gravitated to the racing scene as groupies, as true aficionados, long before it became chic to lead people like Andy Warhol and Jenny Holzer to racing cars. Marko met with Frank Stella and Jean Tinguely, for example (and privately with Niki de Saint Phalle—what an experience!). Tinguely collected damaged pieces of metal and incorporated them into his masterpieces of kinetic art. Off the track there were, er, let us say, "interdisciplinary" evening activities, with the artist seeking kicks from another world. Marko began to acquire art. Today he possesses a breathtaking collection of modern works, which he shares in a casual and uncomplicated manner with the guests of his hotels in Graz, both of them extraordinary places.

But back to racing. One should not forget that Marko's experiences in Le Mans and the Formula One stretch back to the time of Jackie Stewart, as well as to road races with the young Jochen Rindt. Rindt, who was born in 1942, and Marko (1943) attended the same secondary school, and were sent at the same time to a boarding school for unruly pupils, which in their case had to do with competing in essentially borrowed vehicles, complete with stopwatch and log. The respective opponent went along in the passenger seat,

LES HUNAUDIÈRES

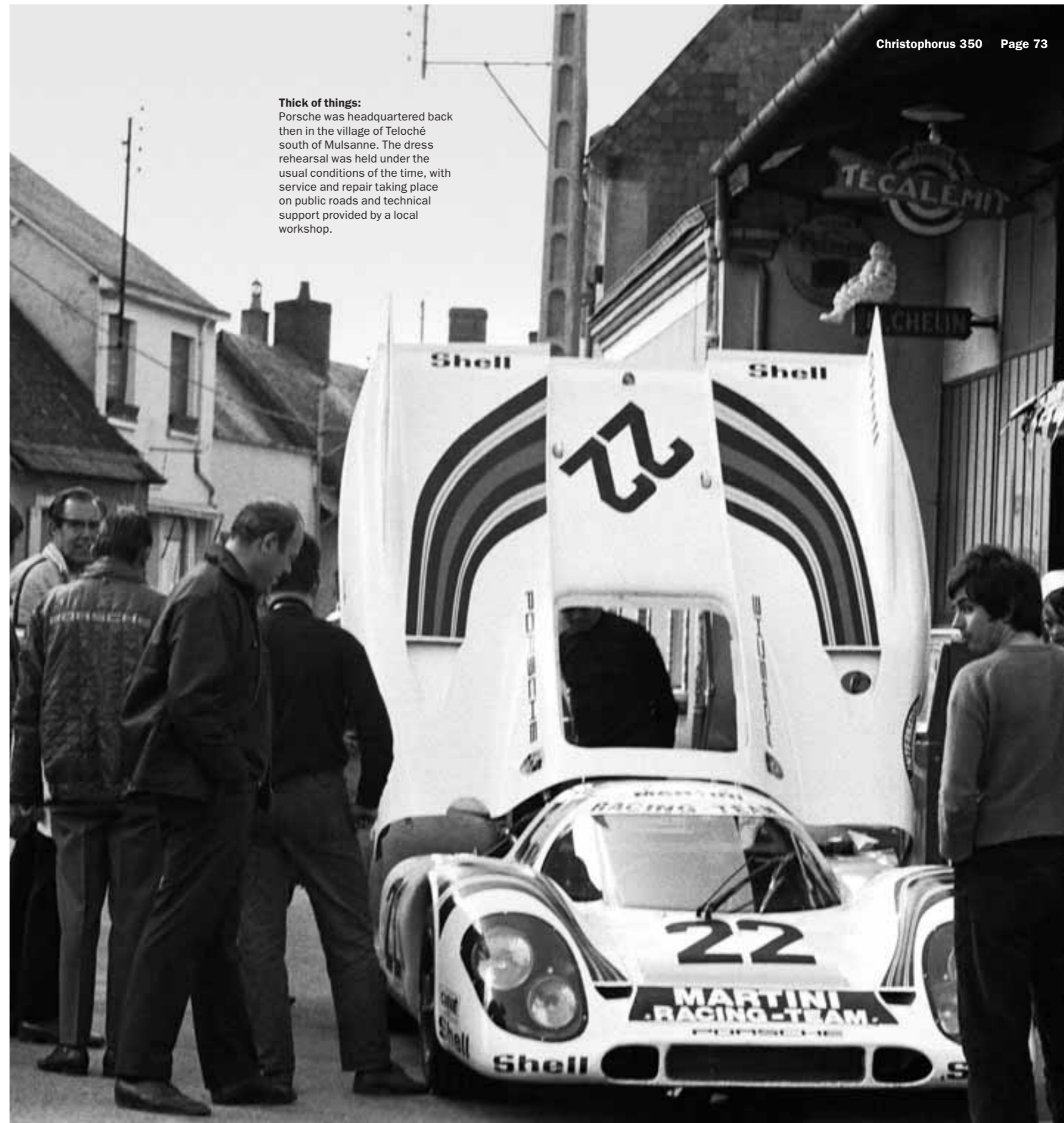
Speed kick



It's like a launching pad—the Hunaudières Straight is a paved speed trip, straight ahead to the limit. In 1971 there was no chicane to slow down the tempo, which was on the far side of 400 km/h (250 mph) back then.

Thick of things:

Porsche was headquartered back then in the village of Teloché south of Mulsanne. The dress rehearsal was held under the usual conditions of the time, with service and repair taking place on public roads and technical support provided by a local workshop.



for it was also important to take notes on style. The plaster cast on Rindt’s foot following a skiing mishap, by the way, merited no bonus points.

Following his eye injury, Marko directed teams in various Formula contests, also investing his own money to determine the sustainability of talents such as Gerhard Berger, Karl Wendlinger, and Juan Pablo Montoya. In further developing these promising drivers, Marco was helped by his tough-looking appearance. Or to put it another way, the doctor’s sunny disposition was not immediately evident. Tender young talents showed what they could do, and that was that.

Over time he turned into his own brand name, known not by coincidence as “the doctor” (or in Austria as “da Dokter”), and that in an environment that normally did not advertise academic distinctions. But one didn’t have to use the name, and everyone in the field knew that the reference was not to a medical doctor. With regard to analysis, diagnostics, and therapy in racing, however, Marko set standards for decades. It was only logical that he and Red Bull would meet up. Marko is also a natural fit with Austrian co-owner Dietrich Mateschitz’s basic formula (at least in the second half of his life): namely, generating as much as possible from one’s own juice, so to speak, with respect to both product and marketing.

In terms of appearance, “the doctor” was present at first only like a statue in the background. He could stand there for an hour like an abandoned sentry tower, and was taciturn in two languages. He would reveal the results of his observations in good time, and at the right occasion. At Formula One, a stage for spontaneous outbursts, this reticence could be perplexing. The renaissance air of head engineer Adrian Newey and the deeply ingrained casual nature



Photo: Jürgen Skarwan

Art of life: Helmut Marko (68), the “doctor” for all occasions—Le Mans winner, lawyer, hotelier, native of the Austrian region of Styria, racing strategist, and art collector—shown here with a sculpture by Jochen Rindt.

of Dietrich Mateschitz were the ideal fit for Marko’s overall approach to life as such. He enjoys a status we might describe as an expert “at large,” in the sense of playing a decision-making role without being bound to a particular desk or department.

At every race of the world champion team, Marko stands in the box with all channels open in his headphones—to drivers, engineers, team director—and his sights on all the monitors. He never meddles in the race as such, but the crucial nature of the chess moves proposed by this strategic consultant have become clearer all the time. In fact, Marko’s terse and testy insights became so much in demand that he was moved to the fore. One has occasionally had the chance to see him on television as a commentator for the team, possessed of a quite economical way with words. Every once in a while a smile races across his face, delightful instances every one. Actually, we might want to reveal here that he is no stranger to a good laugh.

MULSANNE
Glowing performance

The braking required at the end of the stretch becomes literally a trial by fire. The metal glows, which presents a magnificent show in the night. At the time of the record drive, there was a tricky elevation and the course was full of dips—a sense of relief came when the straight stretch returned.



www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rDxKCHigEs
Time travel: Scan this code with the QR reader of your smartphone to relive Le Mans history. See page 8 for more information.