

While diplomats and cartographers may technically show the roads around LeMans as French soil, Porsche has laid claim to the winding bit of pavement that comprises the track and especially victory lane. Since 1951 when a silver Porsche 356 won the very first class win at LeMans, the German manufacturer has won in class and outright more times than any other manufacturer.

In fact, Porsche has won overall at LeMans 18 times. The iconic 12-cylinder Porsche 917 will always be known as the car that got the overall winning tradition started and played a major role in enhancing Porsche's motorsports heritage.



Competition cars that were built four decades ago remain some of the most popular bits of machinery ever to emerge from the Porsche workshops or grace the race tracks of the world.

The 1970 Porsche 917 long-tail prototype certainly carries that tradition. Chassis 043, a visually striking purple and green beauty, lives today at the Simeone Foundation Museum near the Philadelphia airport. Even among the Museum's collection of historically



Hippie Porsche Power Launches a Le Mans Legacy

by Kevin Ehrlich

significant and rare vintage hardware, the 917 stands out as a crowd favorite. The Hippie Porsche Power Launches a Le Mans Legacy Museum can clearly see evidence via the clicks that the car gets on its website and on its social media pages.

Approaching the 917, the car looks like a space ship. The roofline cuts a low profile and has only modest ground clearance which makes it look glued to the concrete beneath. The curves of the front fenders embrace the headlights and complement the bubble of the drivers' compartment. Two doors pivot up and forward like wings and the spartan interior

is only accessible by climbing over a wide side sill. The minimal red fabric driver's seat sits among black tubing and basic gauges with the famous wooden knob gearshift that connects to the 5-speed transmission sitting to the driver's right.

The long-tail provides another distinctive visual feature. An enormous rear deck drapes a single piece of fiberglass bodywork over the engine and rear wheels and supports the wide and flat wing across the very back of the car. The rear deck is so large that it requires two people to lift and position it to provide access to the engine and rear underpinnings.



Looking carefully, it is difficult to find straight lines in the bodywork. Yes, there is some flat bodywork across the nose and the rear deck and the wing is flat, but otherwise the car is a continuous flow of curve to

curve to curve. By comparison, a competition Ferrari Daytona sitting alongside looks brutish and harsh.

The museum's Porsche 917 chassis 043 came in second at the 1970 24 Hours of Lemans in the hands of Willi Kauhsen and Gérard Larrousse. The flat 12-cylinder engine produced over 600 horsepower but the slippery long-tail body and green and purple swirl design is what made the car memorable. Power plus aerodynamics was sufficient to push the car to 240 mph in qualifying - with a LeMans track configuration that did not make use of the two chicanes of the modern version which slow the cars on the long Mulsanne straight.

The livery prompted the French to call the car "Le Psychadelic" or "Hippie Car," a name that has stuck. While the cultural context of the 1970s might be credited for the reference,

the hips of the fenders as they curve around the flanks and guide air towards the longtail at the rear gives the nomenclature a double meaning.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Porsche 917 history is the variety of body configurations that were draped over the chassis. The most well-known is likely the 917K short-tail ("kurzheck" in German), but six cars were built in long-tail configuration as the aerodynamics were targeted specifically for the high speed LeMans circuit known as the 917L ("langheck"). The art of aerodynamics was on its infancy and knowledge was coming in uneven chunks of understanding.

Qualifying just outside the top 10 behind a field filled with Ferrari 512 and Porsche 917K models, Kahsen and Larrouse were charged with playing the steady turtle as



other quicker and more powerful cars ran at the front. Another Porsche 917L qualified on pole position and was targeted for the win but retired with engine problems. Kahsen and Larrouse navigated through rain as the conditions and other misfortune took out or delayed other contenders. They ran in third place after seven hours before climbing to second after twenty hours. Chassis 043 finished in second behind a red and white Porsche 917K, chassis 023. The win was the first overall for Porsche and the one-two finish was an emphatic exclamation point.

Porsche clearly saw promise with the long-tail aerodynamic approach and sought to further study and develop the car. Legendary Porsche designer Norbert Singer coordinated testing and the long-tail design was further refined for the 1971 race. The refined 917L sometimes carries an unofficial "917LH" designation to indicate the additional development.



Taking over for the factory team, the John Weyer team took charge of a new and improved chassis 043 for the 1971 LeMans 24 hours in gulf blue and orange colors. Former race winner Jackie Oliver proved the car's outright speed by taking pole with the fastest lap in history at LeMans. A time of 3 minutes 13.9 seconds translated into an average in excess of 250kph and a top speed of 386kph. Despite the promise, a podium finish was not to be. After leading for eleven hours, oil pressure woes forced retirement at 5am – a cruel departure time after surviving the night and seeing dawn approach with the promise of a new day.

Six original Porsche 917 long-tail chassis that were built between 1970 and 1971, spanning chassis 040 to 045. The first two chassis (040 and 041) were damaged in testing and scrapped. Chassis 042 remains in the Porsche Museum and chassis 045 is on long-term loan to the LeMans museum. That leaves 043 and 044 which is where our story gets interesting.

A Porsche 917 with chassis number 044 was sold by Porsche to Californian racer and Porsche dealer Vasek Polak in 1975. However, chassis 044 was believed to be crashed in testing in 1970 and never raced. A restoration discovered enough clues to confirm that Polak's car was actually chassis 043. In those days, race cars were largely disposable and chassis plates were fungible. Presumably 044 did not survive but there is some thought that parts of 044 may have been used to restore or repair 043 at some point. The real story of the parts of various cars and chassis plates will likely never be known but 043 has been acknowledged as 043 since at least 1998 when the car was auctioned at Pebble Beach by Christie's after Vasek Polak's death.

What we do know is that 917-043 that currently resides at the Simeone Foundation Museum is one of only six very special race cars built, one of only three to survive, and the only one ever to exist in private ownership. It is also the only one that lives in the United States.



The Hippie Porsche 917 is the anchor to the Simeone Museum's line-up of LeMans history. Against a backdrop that echoes the older pit boxes at LeMans, the Porsche 917 is the pinnacle of a collection of several rare and significant cars with badges like Ferrari, Aston Martin, Alfa Romeo, Peugeot, MG, and Delahaye that have LeMans history in their DNA.

The Simeone Foundation Museum runs demonstration days once each month featuring four or five cars with a similar theme. These events give visitors a chance to see the cars

up close, open up hoods and bonnets, and hear more about their stories and history. In many cases, the Museum staff also fires up the cars and runs them around the wide expanse of blacktop



behind the building. In March, the Porsche joined two Ford GT40s and a 1975 Alfa Romeo Tipo 33 TT12 with a "plastic prototype" theme. The Museum also does a demonstration day each year where the participants are chosen by popular vote. As you might imagine, 917-043 is always on that list. November 23 is on the schedule for the 2017 popular vote day, so mark your calendar now.

The Simeone Museum has a remarkable collection of very significant cars that represent key hallmarks of automotive racing history. 917-043 is the only Porsche currently on display and it distills everything that is compelling about Porsche and its racing heritage in one car. Despite never having won a race, the car played a major role in advancing the understanding of aerodynamics and helped to cement Porsche's motorsport credentials.