

Le Mans - The Film, The "V", The Place and Healey

On the 13th June 1970, the Healey XR37 bearing number 34, lined up in 33rd place, for the start of the Le Mans 24 Hours race. A Porsche 908/2, entered by Solar Productions, lined up just 2 places in front of the Healey. The Porsche was driven by professional Porsche works driver Herbert Linge and Jonathan Williams, the entrant a company owned by one Terrance Stephen McQueen – the "King of Cool" himself, Steve McQueen.

The two cars had achieved very similar qualifying times. The Healey set a lap time of 4 minutes and 6 seconds dead, with the Porsche being just 2.3 seconds quicker, over the 8.3 mile circuit.

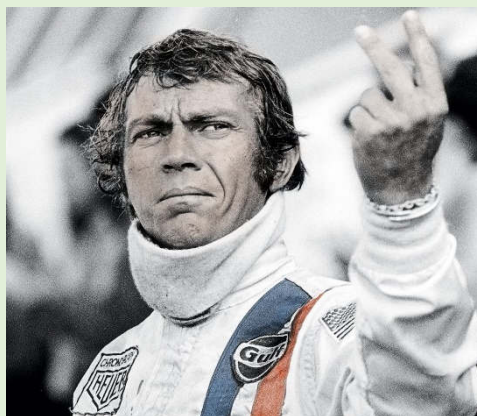
There had been some history between McQueen and Healeys, as you will probably know. McQueen, a very enthusiastic and accomplished racer, had driven for Healeys at Sebring, in 1962. He competed a Mk2 Sprite in the 3 Hour race on the Saturday (finishing a creditable 9th out of 31 entries). The following day, he co-drove a Le Mans Prototype Healey in the 12 hour race, with John Colgate. After leading the class for the first 7 hours, they were forced to retire with engine problems. Allegedly following this, McQueen was offered a professional driving contract by BMC, which he rejected.

I am sure that, like me, many of you may still have a poster, showing Steve McQueen's Michael Delaney (Porsche) showing a friendly "V" sign, to fellow competitor Erich Stahl (Ferrari), in the film "Le Mans". The film was produced by Solar Productions. It was eventually completed, only after substantial issues had been overcome - a cancellation (of the original project "Day of the Champion") by the studio, a very troubled pre-production period and also the resignation of its original Director. In the end, and in order to get the film finished, McQueen allegedly agreed to give up both his salary and his share of the profits; it meant that much to him.

Whether you have been fortunate enough to visit Le Mans or not, you will most likely understand why the film and the place are so iconic, to car people. The footage, for the film was shot between June and November of 1970 - so 50 years ago, as I write this, in Mid November 2020.

Of course, none of us can forget that the 24 Hours of Le Mans is a race of attrition and 1970 was no different. The 1970 race was also the last time that a Healey raced at Le Mans. The Healey XR37 was driven by Roger Enever and Andrew Hedges. During the race, the team suffered a one and a half hour stop, to repair the clutch and gearbox, in addition to being involved in a collision with another car. Despite these setbacks, the team ran as high as 10th place overall, but all was not to be well. Having completed more than 23 hours of the race (in fact 23 Hours and 46 minutes), and whilst lying in 14th place, the car suffered electrical problems and the engine stopped on the circuit - and retired. Of the 51 cars that started the race that year, only 7 would be classified as finishers, the list including only Porsche and Ferrari.

Earlier in that year, McQueen and Peter Revson had taken the Porsche 908/2, to second place in the Sebring 12 Hours, so he was a creditable racing driver. He was pencilled in to drive at the Le Mans race that year, with Jackie Stewart - until his life assurance company refused to provide cover for him. Despite this, McQueen's 908 was entered in the race and was fitted with heavy cameras, to record "on track" action, during race. McQueen though, did not drive. Despite having to stop many times to change film reels, the Porsche managed to cover a very creditable 282 laps (3,798 km / 2,360 miles), and actually crossed the finishing line, in ninth position. It was not classified in the results, though, as it had not been able to cover the required minimum distance, due to its greater number of stops.



Essentially, McQueen's vision for his film of Le Mans, was to use real cars, real professional drivers and not to use any special effects - so the film takes real footage, captured during the actual race, including film shot from the Porsche camera car. It also included additional footage, still using real race cars - Porsche 917s and Ferrari 512s - driven by professional racing drivers - which was gathered in the period between the race date and November of that year. The drivers employed included Derek Bell, Richard Attwood (who won the race that year), Brian Redman, David Piper and several others.

Piper, driving one of the 917s, was involved in a very nasty crash, during filming and he lost a part of his leg as a result. The car suffered a tyre blowout, resulting in it hitting barriers on both sides of the track and breaking in two. He survived and did go on to live to the ripe old age of 89 years, though, and was lucky enough to own a Porsche 917 of his own. Derek Bell's Ferrari caught fire during filming, and he suffered burns. Clearly, the film was also one of attrition.

The hero of the film, Michael Delaney, drives a Porsche but no film about Le Mans would be complete without the inclusion of Ferrari, of course. The completed film includes what look like factory backed cars. However, Enzo Ferrari would not agree to supply these - he didn't like the film including a Porsche victory. The cars, then, had to be separately supplied by a Belgian Ferrari distributor.

The film was not immediately the success, which time would judge it to be. When released in 1971, "Le Mans" - McQueen's passion project and really a cross between a documentary and a drama - was initially a disappointment, from both a critical and commercial perspective.

However, as you may gather, I love it. It is one of my all-time favourite films and I regularly watch my own copy. In fact, I might just watch it again, this evening - perhaps after Mrs. G has gone to bed - because she is usually in charge of the remote control.

- 1970 was a good year -

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