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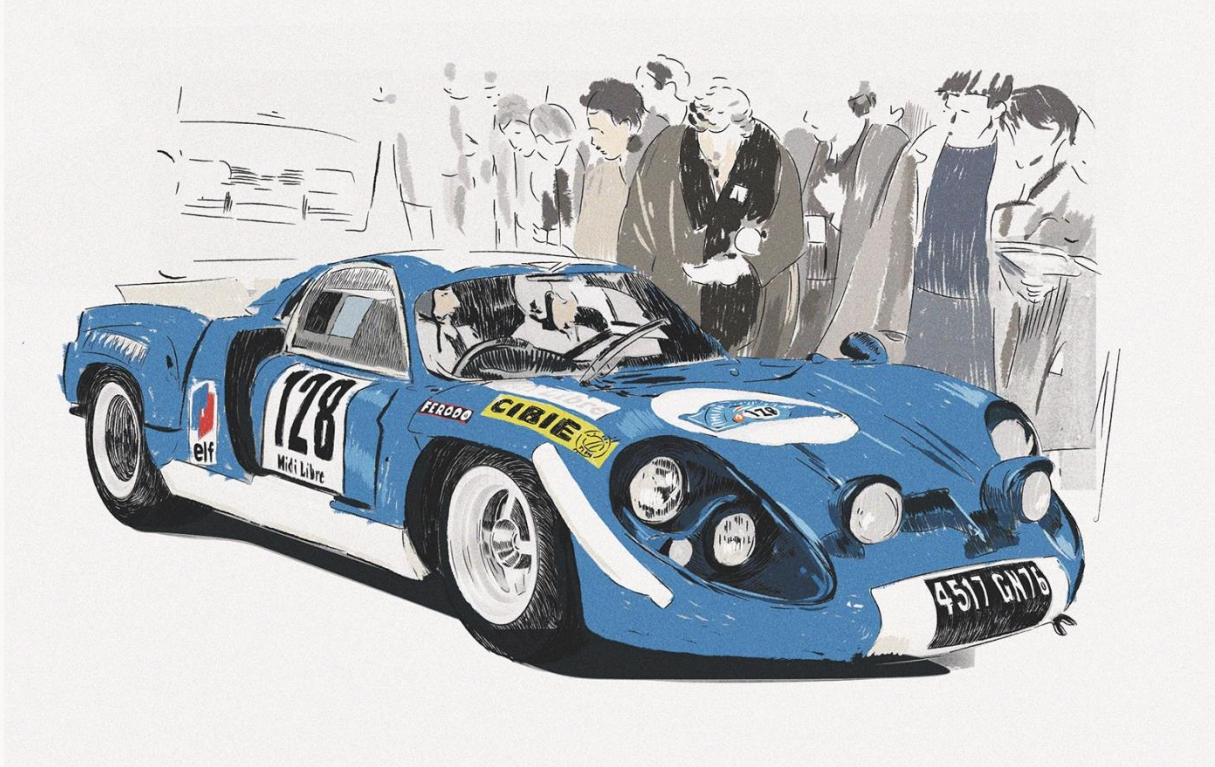
TRIBUTE TO LE MANS



INSPIRATIONS
AND FACTS

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SHORT CIRCUIT

THE STORY OF ALPINE A220 #1731

Not every motorsport icon is decorated in trophies. This shorttail Alpine has an interesting story regardless of its record.

Words: Stephen Dobie, Images: Alpine Archive, Illustrations: Katarzyna Szawińska

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It's a curious phenomenon that many of the most iconic racecars in the world didn't actually win. Quite often they stopped short of the victory their makers craved or missed the ambitious targets that inspired their creation. But that's because they were born of dreamers, of engineers and designers taking a flight of fancy knowing they'd whip up a frenzied crowd of spectators whether their car took the chequered flag or not.

Sexy beasts

The Alpine A220 is one such icon. It's the final fling from Alpine's first endurance racing era, when the kudos of competing at the 24 Hours of Le Mans proved irresistible to company founder Jean Rédélé. Alpine made 25 sports prototypes across the 1960s, but the squat, muscular body of A220 chassis 1731 is among the most arresting.

One goal

After numerous "efficiency index" successes in the mid-sixties, Rédélé and his team were hungry for outright Le Mans victory. Development was focused on a 3-litre V8 and the mighty A220 racecar that would house it. Four cars debuted in 1968 but amongst the thunderous engines and enormous budgets of Ford, Ferrari and Porsche, the meticulous craft of Amédée Gordini couldn't quite compete. His V8 was beset by troubles.



Big side intakes were later removed, and replaced with one big intake behind the engine cover. The front of the car was also redesigned. To no avail: the car was still uncompetitive and troublesome. But the weakest point was the engine – unreliable and underpowered.

If you fail once – try again

French national pride was still behind Alpine and the team made tweaks to the A220 for its home race. Le Mans 1969 saw three cars debut new bodywork while chassis 1731 retained its older design with side radiators. The cars performed well in testing, but all four failed to complete 24 hours, causing tension between Rédélé and Gordini.

Cut it off!

The fallout posed an interesting question, however: what if the A220 would perform better on shorter circuits, away from the intense demands of endurance racing? The older design of #1731 made it the ideal candidate

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for a redesign, one which saw the rear section of its bodywork dismantled, shortened by 30cm and replaced with moveable aerodynamic components.

*#1731 Alpine A220
(Jean Guichet/Henri Grandsire) finished 4th
in the 1000km of Paris race in 1968.*



Failed promises

One month after Le Mans, this reborn A220 finished third at the Chamrousse Hillclimb in southeast France, its shorttail body making light work of tight hairpins. Three weeks later it diced with Porsches for a second-place finish at Circuit de Nogaro. High on its success, the team road registered #1731 to enter the Critérium des Cévennes rally, with improved cooling, higher ground clearance and more dazzling lights fitted ready for its new terrain. Reliability issues denied the A220 success once more, but a point had been proven. Alpine moved to the rally stages soon after.

The survivor

Eight A220 racecars were built, only half of which survived, but happily #1731 is among those. It was acquired by Alpine chassis designer Jean-Pierre Buiette in 1978 and he spent the following two decades restoring it to full glory. It's changed owners several times since, winning numerous concours prizes along the way.

Underrated beauty

A new taste for rallying, plus Renault's acquisition of Alpine, led to the lighter A110 road car entering the World Rally Championship in 1973. With immediate success. The A110 nameplate remains the backbone of Alpine and an instantly recognisable bridge between its past, present and all-electric future. This short-tail A220 isn't often referenced in its legacy, but perhaps someday the lightweight berlinette we can buy today will get the chance to nod reverently to the hopeful failure – but striking racecar – that laid its path.

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Short lived

Out of eight A220s ever made, two were destroyed during their racing tenures. The rest of them – with the exception for one – were converted to a new specification which saw their radiators moved to the back of the car. When engineers in Dieppe decided to try short-tail configuration, they had no choice but to use chassis no. 1731 – the only example with its radiators still in front of the rear wheels.





THE TRIUMPH OF PERSEVERANCE

THE ALPINE STORY

Nearly 300 kilometres separate the seaside town of Dieppe from Le Mans. And yet an invisible thread stretches between these cities, like a power line transmitting great emotions... not to mention ambition, determination, tenacity, the bitterness of defeat and the joy of victory.

Words: Kuba Kozal, Images: Alpine-Renault archive

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A man with cheerful eyes, a mischievous smile and a fancy moustache looks out from a black and white photograph. He is wearing pilot goggles on his forehead, sitting behind the wheel of a powerful Renault car: Ferenc Szisz has just won the first-ever French Grand Prix, held on the roads east of the city of Le Mans. Among the team servicing his car was Emile Rédélé – a talented mechanic and personal chauffeur of Louis Renault. After World War I, Emile opened a Renault dealership in Dieppe and memorabilia of his participation in the success of the Hungarian driver could be found in his office. Perhaps that was the photo his eldest son Jean was looking at while absorbing knowledge of cars, mechanics and the achievements of legendary racing drivers.

The dawn

In 1952, Jean Rédélé had a lot to boast about: after completing his studies in economics in Paris, he returned to Dieppe, started his first business (renovation and selling of surplus American equipment) and rebuilt his father's garage, which was bombed during World War II, becoming the youngest Renault dealer in France. He also made several successful appearances in rallies, and now, he was going to take part in the legendary 24 Hours of Le Mans race. Rédélé and Guy Lapchin took turns at the wheel of the a small Renault 4CV. Even in the high-performance version, the 40hp '1063', it was not a car that could compete with the frontrunners. In 24 hours, Rédélé and Lapchin completed 178 laps: 99 fewer than the winners of the race, Hermann Lang and Fritz Riess in a Mercedes 300SL. The Renault 4CV crew found itself in 17th, the last position in the race; had it not been for the breakdown in the 22nd hour, they would have been ranked higher, first in their class. It was then that Jean decided that one day he would win this prestigious competition.



Alpine M63 powered by 93hp Gordini engine – first racing car from Dieppe

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First, however, the organisers of the 24 Hours of Le Mans had to create rules and regulations that would give French manufacturers a chance to achieve some success. The automotive industry from the region of the Loire had great traditions but no answer to the supercars from Italy, Germany or the UK. Therefore, an additional competition was created based on performance and efficiency ratios. The classifications were based on complex mathematical formulas. The travelled distance, average speed in each hour of the race, fuel consumption, the weight of the vehicle, etc. were all taken into account for the calculations – each one multiplied by arbitrarily selected coefficients that changed every year. Thus, what mattered was the highest

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possible efficiency: cars equipped with small, economical engines had to be reliable, light and aerodynamically efficient.

A Lightness

Lightness, efficiency and the use of the most accessible components. Jean stuck to these ideas when he started redesigning his Renault 4CV. That idea quickly evolved into an attempt to create his own car. In 1955, the Alpine brand and its first car – the A106 model, based on 4CV parts – were born. In 1958, Rédélé presented the A108, a relative of the Renault Dauphine, while the A110 model debuted in 1963 based upon the latest Renault 8. The combination of proven Renault parts, a longitudinal central frame and a lightweight, sleek fibreglass body turned out to be a hit. The sporting success of the A106 and later the A110 strengthened the brand's position in the global market. As a result, Alpine cars were produced in Brazil, Spain and Bulgaria as well as France.

Alpine A210 was Alpine's most successful Le Mans contender in the 60s.



Chapman's revenge

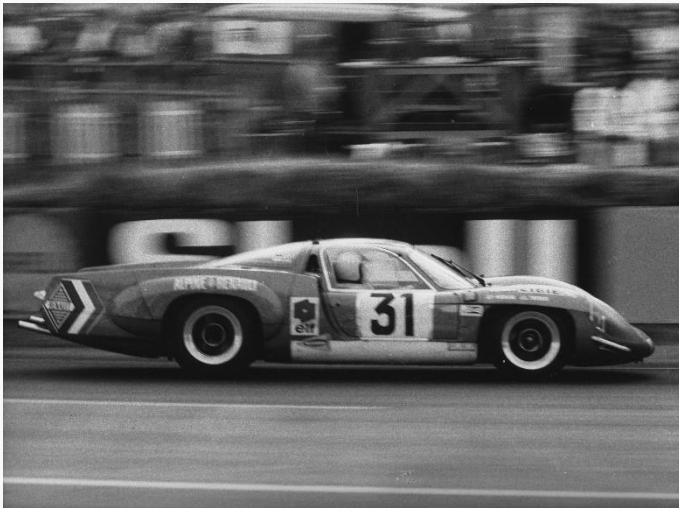
In 1962, the organisers of 24 Hours of Le Mans felt that a sensational entry from the UK which threatened French dominance would be inconsistent with, if not the letter, then definitely the spirit of these new indexed regulations. Therefore, the pre-race scrutineering of the Lotus 23 lasted as long as it took to find a reason to exclude it from the competition. Colin Chapman was furious and announced that he would never again let his team take part in the race. To get revenge on René Bonnet's team, who, according to the Briton, was responsible for the whole farce of the scrutineering, Chapman decided to support his rival who was getting ready for his 24-hour race debut. The founder of Lotus recommended his designer, Len Terry, to Alpine, and also agreed to the use of some elements of the Lotus 23 design including its suspension. The Alpine M63, powered by a 1-litre Renault Gordini engine, made its debut at Le Mans in 1963.

First step

The first racing Alpine weighed just 600kg, had an aerodynamic, water droplet-like body and peak power of 93hp. Its debut at Le Mans race was not successful. One of the team's drivers – Christian „Bino“ Heins – died in a dramatic accident, and the remaining cars were withdrawn before the end of the race. However, the M63's performance was so promising that the plan was continued. The M64 model, with a larger 1.15-litre Gordini

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engine, reached the finish line of the Le Mans 1964 as first among the prototypes up to 1150cc and it achieved the highest efficiency factor. The following year saw decline in the team's form, but everything was made up for 1966. Three Alpine A210s, with 130hp 1.3-litre engines, took over the whole podium in the performance classification, allowing Alpine to advertise itself as the 'fastest litre of petrol in the world'. Henri Grandsire and Leo Cella also won in the 1300cc prototype category and finished ninth in the overall classification of the race. In 1967, this success was repeated by Henri Grandsire and José Rosinski, once again behind the wheel of the A210.



Despite many improvements, Alpine A220 could not achieve success in sportscar racing.

Stumble

After a decade in the Alpine business, Jean Rédélé could look back on his achievements with satisfaction. The Alpine A110 brought him commercial success – the car was popular all over the world and its reputation was confirmed by numerous victories on the rally stages. Alpine also dominated the Le Mans performance classifications, exceeding the set targets. Rédélé was busy expanding the company and acquiring new markets with the sports department the responsibility of a well-coordinated team of designers and engineers who coped without the intervention of the company's boss perfectly well. Therefore, it was time for the next step. The impetus was given by Amédée Gordini. Renault's tuner-in-chief also had big ambitions: his design of a new V8 engine was submitted to the group's authorities, who were enthusiastic about the idea. The organisers of 24 Hours of Le Mans planned to change the regulations to make things difficult for the current favourites, meaning the 7-litre Ford V8 and 4-litre Ferrari V12 were becoming obsolete. Renault, with its 3-litre V8 engine, could suddenly jump into the lead. Gordini was given the green light and Alpine was advised to design a car suitable for that unit. Sadly, the Alpine A220 and Gordini's V8 engine were a failure. The unit was unreliable and much weaker than that of the competition, and the cars struggled with numerous problems. Consequently, the best result at Le Mans was 8th position in 1968 – far from the frontrunners. The failure was so severe that Renault, which had previously generously financed Alpine's racing programme, turned off the money tap.

Under the care of Paris

It seemed that fortune turned its back on Jean. The end of the A220 programme meant that his chances of winning the 24 Hours of Le Mans were none. On top of that, the whole company faced difficulties: Rédélé had

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invested heavily in developing the successor of A110, the A310. He also built a new factory in Dieppe with a view to producing the new car. The fuel crisis in the early 1970s significantly affected Alpine's sales, however. The situation became so difficult that R d l  had to ask his long-time partner – Renault – for help. The takeover of Alpine by the state-owned company lasted two years, from 1973 to 1975. In the first year of that operation, Renault's team quickly took over the reins in Dieppe. R d l  remained with the company for some time, although his function was only symbolic.

Alpine-Renault A440 from 1973 marks the first step on the road to Le Mans victory.



Steadfast spirit

However, the ambitious spirit of Alpine survived the departure of the brand's founder. After recovering from the defeat in the late 1960s, Renault began planning a return to the battle for victory in the Le Mans race. The 1973 Renault-Alpine A440 was a completely new vehicle, albeit with its designer as Marcel Hubert, the man behind the brand's previous race cars. The French brand's new V6 engine had promising performance, which was confirmed by strong results in local races. A year later, the Renault-Alpine A441 dominated the European sports car racing series. In 1976, Alpine (now Renault-Alpine) prototypes returned to the World Sportscar Championship and to the Le Mans racetrack. The V6 engine, equipped with two turbochargers, was installed in the upgraded A442 body. However, victory at the 24 Hours of Le Mans did not come easily; the 1976 and 1977 races were a failure, the car proving itself to be fast but unreliable at the same time.

Now or never

In 1978, a clear message came from Renault's headquarters – we either win or close down the operation. The team entered three versions of the prototype in the race – the A442 (now A442A), the A442B with a Plexiglas cockpit cover and the new A443 model. The latter proved highly competitive, leaving the then-dominant Porsche cars behind. On Sunday morning, Patrick Depailler's A443 stopped on the side of the track with its engine smoking and gearbox blocked. Earlier, the older A442A was eliminated, its gearbox also having failed. Only Pironi and Jaussaud's car remained on the battlefield. The Renault-Alpine wearing number 2 took the lead and maintained the position until the end of the race. Didier Pironi, who was behind the wheel during the last shift, did not have the strength to get out of the car after reaching the finish line. The team members poured water over the exhausted driver while his co-driver collected the trophy for victory. For Am d e Gordini and Jean R d l  – who were present in the Renault garage as guests – it must have been an extremely

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emotional moment. Their greatest dream of winning the 24 Hours of Le Mans came true. Gordini died less than a year after this success. Soon afterwards, R d l  left the company he had founded and focused on running several Renault showrooms. He avoided attending official Alpine ceremonies, choosing to sail and play with his beloved dogs instead. He died in 2007 at the age of 85.



*Victory! At last!
Renault-Alpine A442B driven by Didier Pironi and
Jean-Pierre Jaussaud crossed the finish line first in
the 1978 24 Hours of Le Mans*

Rebirth

In the first decade of the 20th century, Renault started considering bringing Alpine back to life. The first step was a return to the racetrack. In 2013, a partnership was established with the Signatech team. In 2015, team Signatech Alpine made its debut in the FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC) series with the Alpine A460, a prototype based on the old Oreca 05 chassis. The car achieved victories in the LMP2 category at Le Mans and in the WEC LMP2 title standings. In 2018, Nicolas Lapierre, Andr  Negr o and Pierre Thiriet, taking turns at the wheel of the Alpine A470 (Oreca 07), won the LMP2 category of the 24 Hours of Le Mans. In 2021, Alpine fought for outright victory in the race once again. The Alpine A480 prototype – based on the LMP1 Rebellion R13 design – competed in the LMH (Le Mans Hybrid) category. The first performance in that class was a success Lapierre, Negr o and Matthieu Vaxivi re finished in third while the Alpine team finished the entire FIA WEC season in second place. This success was repeated in 2022, although there was no luck at Le Mans, where the Alpine A480 finished 23rd.

*After two victories in LMP2 class, it is time to fight
for the outright victory again!*



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Another step forward

In 2023, old LMP1 prototypes could no longer compete in the LMH category meaning the Alpine team returned to LMP2, awaiting for the debut of the new Alpine A424_β. The new vehicle is being created under the LMDh (Le Mans Daytona hybrid) technical regulations. They were developed for the needs of American IMSA SportsCar Championship races, but in agreement with the FIA and the organisers of Le Mans, they correspond to the LMH category regulations. The purpose of the regulations was to ensure that vehicles of both categories were comparable in terms of performance. Thanks to this, Alpine will be able to fight for outright victory at La Sarthe again. The futuristic-looking Alpine A424_β was presented at the 2023 24 Hours of Le Mans with testing of the new car beginning shortly afterwards.





THE LEGEND OF LE MANS

THE MOST THRILLING 24 HOURS

No other race in the world has given us so many heroes, such fierce duels or sparked so many myths and legends. For a hundred years, the 24 Hours of Le Mans has aroused emotions incomparable to anything else.

Words: Stephen Dobie, Images: Michał Grabowski, DPPI, archives of Ferrari, Ford, Mazda and Porsche

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Dum dum, dum dum, dum dum, dum dum. You'd be mistaken for thinking it's your heart thumping in your chest. Or the collective hearts of a whole pitlane as the moment of truth arrives for its hundreds of drivers and crew. It's actually the thumping timpani drums from Johann Strauss's rousing entrance music as the Rolex clock on the Le Mans pit straight strikes 4:00pm and over 60 cars come hurtling past the hundreds of thousands of spectators crowded around you. Hopefully you've caught your breath from the French military jets almost grazing the top of your head from their dramatic flypast moments earlier.

The one to have

The finely orchestrated rolling start is quickly substituted by the nail-biting moment a dozen Hypercars pile into the historic Dunlop Curve underneath one of the most iconic bridges in motorsport. One that will later link you between your spectating spot and the music stages and makeshift bars that'll see a blazing Saturday sunset blur into the mesmerising sunrise of Sunday morning, the blissful kind of night those operating tools, pit boards or the controls of a 670hp racecar can only dream of. The 24 Hours of Le Mans is truly an event like no other.



Phil Hill was one of the five F1 World Champions to win 24 Hours of Le Mans. The others were Mike Hawthorn, Jochen Rindt, Graham Hill and Fernando Alonso.

Its 100-year history helps it outstrip even Formula 1 for history and prestige, too. Drivers the world over desperately crave a Le Mans trophy in their cabinet – regardless of how packed it may be with silverware from other race series. Only one driver, the late Graham Hill, lays claim to the Triple Crown – a win at Le Mans, the Monaco Grand Prix and the Indianapolis 500. Plenty of others still chase his record.

Shared glory

This is the oldest active endurance race in the world and unequivocally the most famous. It began in 1923 and heralded a new challenge in motorsport's ascendent years, one which put as much focus on reliability and fuel efficiency as outright speed. Making a car race quickly was something many folk were already mastering. Making it go quickly for an entire day, with little rest for those driving or maintaining it, remains a significantly greater demand. Until the 1980s, teams commonly ran two drivers. A rare handful of stories involve drivers attempting the whole 24 hours solo, British driver Eddie Hall achieving it in 1950 behind the wheel of his

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Bentley despite a perfectly willing co-driver waiting patiently (or perhaps impatiently...) in the pits. Heroic? Idiomatic? Sometimes the line drawn between the two is very faint.

Of tales and legends

Le Mans boasts countless more inspiring tales. In 1967, racing icon Dan Gurney sprayed his victory champagne rather than drinking it, a move now synonymous with motorsport success and replicated thousands of times since. In 1988, a Peugeot-powered WM hit 407km/h to set what remains the peak speed at Circuit de la Sarthe, the mighty Mulsanne Straight punctuated by chicanes just two years later as a safety measure. Still not enough to stop the Mercedes CLR of Peter Dumbreck flipping through the air with the grace of an Olympic gymnast in 1999 for one of the most arresting images yet captured at the race. Then there's the quintuple stint of Fernando Alonso in 2018 to secure the Le Mans victory he so desperately craved, leaving him an Indy 500 win away from coveted Triple Crown status.

Mark Webber was lucky to walk away from this scary accident in qualifying for the 1999 race. His teammate Peter Dumbreck had similar accident during the race – he was also unhurt.



That one dark moment

For all its highlights, Le Mans lays claim to a heart-breaking lowlight. This strand of motorsport has claimed the lives of competitors much like any other. But 11 June 1955 is the nadir, when driver Pierre Levegh was thrown from the car and killed as his Mercedes collided with a crowded grandstand, over 80 excitable onlookers lost to an appalling episode that perhaps changed the course of motorsport history. An official enquiry absolved any drivers of guilt and instead focused on the sheer speed of cars racing at a circuit now over 30 years old whose layout was looking mismatched to the pace of this now legendary race. Despite gruesome scenes far beyond the realm of any horror film – and a magnesium fire that burned for hours afterwards – the race continued and was won by Mike Hawthorn, whose last-ditch move across the circuit to the pits had preceded the disaster.

It was a crushing low point for motorsport but, like many tragedies, it proved a catalyst for crucial change. Many countries suspended all competition until their venues could be improved or their rulebooks strengthened, while Automobile Club de l'Ouest (ACO) – the organising body of the 24 Hours of Le Mans – refigured the circuit and built a much more accommodating pit complex. Since its conception, the sheer peril of motor racing has felt almost central to its allure. Its competitors feel compelled to dance with danger, dazzling spectators with their heroism as they do. But it was time for motorsport to wise up and continue to

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entertain with a much clearer sense of duty to those driving the cars and watching from the stands. The legacy of awful days like 11 June 1955 lives on in the relative safety of motorsport today.

The clash of giants

The only way was up, and boy, did Le Mans really forge its legend in the decades that followed. The lows of '55 were countered by the highs of '66 and a race since committed to books and a Hollywood film. It's the year of Ford v Ferrari, and the first of four consecutive wins for the mighty Ford GT40, one famously taken by Bruce McLaren and Chris Amon, the latter aged just 22 when he won. "I don't think Formula 1 had ever really seen an effort on that scale that Ford produced," he told me back in 2016, just a few months before he was sadly claimed by cancer. "The number of people involved, to us at the time, was quite mind-boggling." His win was tinged with its own controversy, though. Ford planned a formation finish to really milk their public humiliation of Enzo Ferrari, but a quirk of the sport's iconic standing start – drivers running to their cars, parked diagonally along the pits – handed victory to McLaren and Amon due to their Ford being sat almost 20 metres further down the grid, ensuring they'd covered a longer distance than their fellow GT40 drivers once the chequered flag flew.



Three Ford GT40s finishing in formation in 1966. It looked stunning, but this set-up cost Ken Miles and Denny Hulme their well-deserved victory.

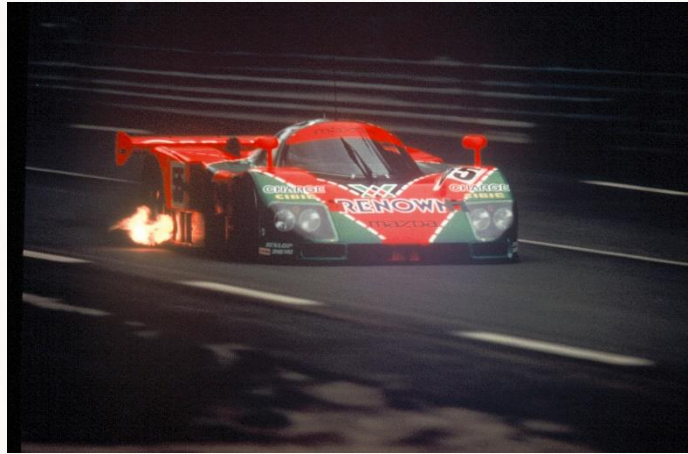
One stubborn Belgian

The standing start wouldn't live much longer, though not because of infighting at Ford, rather thanks to a suave protest by Jacky Ickx in 1969 on the grounds of safety. Le Mans' conscience grew yet further when Ickx walked to his car rather than run, upset that the pressure of a perfect standing start meant several drivers not fixing their seatbelts until the brief respite of the Mulsanne Straight – or perhaps not at all. Moments later his protest proved prophetic as John Woolfe died in a multi-car crash having left his belt undone. Ickx effectively relegated himself to last place with the gesture, yet still gave the GT40 its final win 24 hours later. The ACO dropped standing starts from 1970. If the loss of the iconic Le Mans start caused heartache for purists, then the introduction of chicanes to the Mulsanne in 1990 must have really stung. Two years after the circuit's speed record was broken, that 407km/h figure was carved into stone as the 6km straight was split into 2km sections by a pair of curves to ensure it complied with new FIA rules. The tears of fans surely dried pretty quickly if they managed to get to the apex of these chicanes during the race, however. Sipping a drink during nightfall, as brakes glow orange into the turn and exhausts spit flame on the way out, each

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punctuating the dark as brightly as the other? Unless you've stuck your head through a garden fence on Bray Hill during the Isle of Man TT, few moments at a motor racing circuit are quite so intoxicating.

*In the 80s and early 90s
Group C prototypes were setting
new records at Le Mans.*



True to itself

The 13.6km layout of La Sarthe serves up a diverse range of viewing spots that vary wildly depending on how mischievous you feel and how muddy you'll allow your shoes to get. With 24 hours to explore them, you've a good chance of getting between famed spots at Arnage, Indianapolis and Porsche Curves all in the same race – even if you plan on bookending the whole race with the pomp and ceremony of the start/finish straight. And don't forget a ride on the Ferris wheel... The race has grown in stature over the decades and is now a colossal commercial enterprise, with 325,000 fans watching the centenary event in 2023. Yet it's stayed true to its roots, with almost exclusively French PA announcements and your mid-race sustenance options usually restricted to the crisp combination of salty fries and an ever so slightly warm beer. I doubt you'll complain.

French rules

Yet after dominating Le Mans' inaugural years, wins haven't always come easily for French teams competing in their own back garden. The introduction of 'performance index' trophies in the 1960s allowed the home side to score some wins during the thunderous Ford vs Ferrari era despite the diminutive engines of the Alpines that frequently took the podium. This early precursor to the equality targets of current 'Balance of Performance' rules ensured tense competition up and down the grid, however, while ensuring arguably the most diverse and beautiful grid of cars in any race series the world over. Aerodynamics could often prove more important than outright power. Matra's successful run in the 1970s, a resilient journey to 1978 victory for Alpine and Peugeot's early 1990s efforts are France's most iconic wins from a constructor perspective, while race seats in Audi's unstoppable diesel era for Romain Dumais, Loïc Duval and Benoît Tréluyer – not to mention Yannick Dalmas winning with Porsche, McLaren and BMW in the 90s – brought victories on the driving front. From 2024, though, both Alpine and Peugeot will fight in the top tier of the World Endurance Championship to freshen up the French Le Mans leader board.

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Almost 60 years have passed since Ferrari last celebrated a win at Le Mans. And now it's back, repeating its success with state-of-the-art hybrid race car.

Electric impulse

Alongside Porsche, Ferrari and even Lamborghini they're assembly what is perhaps endurance racing's most golden age of all, a lower cost of entry and more tangible links to the electrification that's now so prevalent in road cars making a Le Mans trophy even shinier and more irresistible than ever. Thankfully hybrid Hypercars bring electrical power to La Sarthe with no loss in the visceral noise and thrill that's lulled spectators to sleep at night then punched them awake at sunrise. We currently have some of the fiercest competition in decades, the storied names of Le Mans past combining with modern technology and safety to give us all the glorious highs with, we must hope, none of those crushing lows. You needn't look far beneath the surface to find emotive stories up and down the grid. Le Mans is the place where retiring F1 greats go for once last dance just as much as exciting young drivers confidently place their racing boots on an exciting new ladder. It's where wild new ideas shake the establishment with the curiosity of Garage 56. It's where a car now so iconic and valuable as the McLaren F1 was deemed a humble, underdog hero upon its improbable 1995 win. It's where diesel and hybrid technology both proved their mettle, just like the PDK gearbox many years before. And it's where hearts can burst with pride or break with misery – often in short order. It's where fans crave drama, intrigue, and an escape from routine. How else would you explain the cheers in 2023 each time newly returning Ferrari passed the cars of long-reigning Toyota, to eventually take the flag on Sunday afternoon? With the capacity crowd intact, eyes still wide, all 325,000 of their hearts beating just as intensely as 24 hours earlier? You can bet they're already counting down to the thumping drums of Strauss in 2024. I know I am.

24 HOURS OF LE MANS IN NUMBERS:

100 – YEARS FROM THE FIRST RACE (2023)

91 – RACES

13.626 KM – CIRCUIT LENGTH (2023)

38 – TURNS (2023)

251.881 KM/H – FASTEST AVERAGE SPEED ON ONE LAP (TOYOTA TS050 HYBRID IN 2017)

407 KM/H – HIGHEST TOP SPEED (WM P88-PEUGEOT IN 1988)

397 LAPS – MOST LAPS COVERED IN 24 HOURS (AUDI R15+ TDI IN 2010)

20 M – SMALLEST WINNING MARGIN (BETWEEN TWO FORD GT40 IN 1966)

19 – WINS BY PORSCHE

9 – WINS BY TOM KRISTENSEN

3 – WINS IN THERMAL EFFICIENCY INDEX CLASSIFICATION BY PORSCHE, FERRARI AND ALPINE

6 – WINS IN INDEX OF PERFORMANCE CLASSIFICATION BY PANHARD AND PORSCHE





THE QUESTION OF LENGTH WHY THE LONG-TAIL?

The distinctive silhouette of long-tail cars captivates with its elegance. But behind the aesthetic experience are practical solutions. This body shape brings several advantages, especially on the race track.

Words: Kuba Kozal, Images: Alpine, Pagani, Porsche

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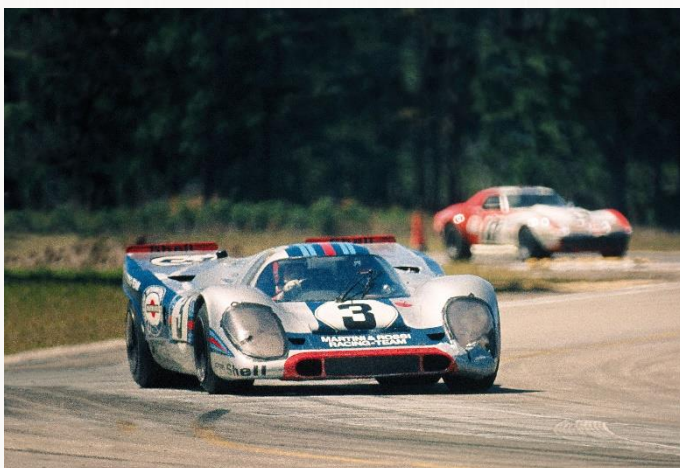
Long-tail cars had already appeared on race tracks before the First World War. The tapering and drooping rear of the 1914 Peugeot L45 made it possible to slightly reduce the air resistance of its massive bonnet – this was confirmed by its victory in the Indy 500 race in 1916. In the 1930s, car manufacturers – led by the Czech Tatra – began to experiment with streamlined shapes. Considered extremely modern and avant-garde, the vehicles were beginning to resemble the shape of a drop of water. However, it was not until the 1960s that aerodynamics became firmly established in motorsport.

Perfect shape

The experience of the aerospace industry and increasingly advanced research in the field of fluid and gas dynamics brought solutions that could be carried over to the race track. Those with high-powered engines could afford wings that increased downforce but also generated drag. Others – such as Alpine and Panhard – opted for an aerodynamically optimised half-drop shape. The car's rounded silhouette and long, gently sloping and almost flat-ending rear allowed it to reduce drag and make more efficient use of the power of small engines. Designed in this way, the Alpine M64 and A210 were successful at Le Mans.

That's just theory

The use of a long tail body, however, was not as obvious a recipe for success as it might seem, as Porsche engineers found out in the late 1960s. The Stuttgart-based designers believed – like many others at the time – that the key to success in the legendary Le Mans race was the speed on the straights. At the time, the nearly 6 km long Mulsanne Straight accounted for almost half of the track's total length. Extending the tail offered several advantages. First and foremost, it allowed the centre of mass and the centre of pressure to be shifted closer to the rear axle of the vehicle, increasing its load. The longer body also meant a longer floor and a more effective diffuser – creating downforce without increasing drag. It also meant a more favourable flow of air over the upper surfaces of the car, reducing the drag of the car. Despite these advantages, the Porsche 917 LH (lang heck or long tail) turned out to be a flop – the car was handling horribly.



It took Porsche some time to develop a shortened version of the Porsche 917, which was successful in the 24 Hours of Le Mans.

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Nothing comes for free

Shifting the downforce to the rear of the car reduces the load on the front axle, and this worsens its grip and the vehicle's handling – in extreme cases it can even lead to the vehicle losing stability and the front wheels pulling away from the road surface. It took the German team several years to work out a suitable compromise – during this time Porsche succeeded with the short version of the 917 K (kurz or short tail). Alpine also faced similar problems with the A220 – minor, makeshift adjustments were needed to stabilise the car at high speeds.

Short does not mean worse

Contrary to the intuition of the designers of that time, cars with short bodies performed just as well, and sometimes even better, than their long counterparts. This was especially the case on the more twisty tracks, where grip on bends was more important than speed on the straights. Short tail has its advantages here: the centre of gravity is closer to the centre of the vehicle and the front and rear overhangs are much shorter. This improves dynamics on bends: short cars are more manoeuvrable and easier to drive. Interestingly, cutting the sloping rear of the car with a vertical plane does not result in a dramatic deterioration in aerodynamic performance – the discovery of this phenomenon gave rise to a whole range of sports cars with a Kammback rear (including the Ferrari 250 GTO, Ford GT40, Citroen GS and many others).

Pagani Huayra Codalunga is a modern interpretation of the style of racing cars from the 1960s and 1970s.



Recurring wave

By the end of the 1960s, long tail was almost a mandatory style at Le Mans. Long-tail versions of their cars were developed by the designers of Ferrari (512 S coda lunga), Ford (GT40 Mk. IV) or Porsche (908, 917). The more practical, shorter body form dominated the later years, but long-tails had their renaissance in the 1990s and at the dawn of the 21st century, in the GT1 class: the McLaren F1 GTR Longtail, the Porsche 911 GT1 or the Maserati MC12 GT1 are now classics. Today, the long-tail is making a comeback mainly as a stylistic accent and a tribute to motorsport history. Specially elongated hypercars from McLaren or Pagani are a reminder of how much elegance and character the racing machines of 60 years ago used to have.



MASTERS OF HAMMER AND STEEL

THE STORY OF COACHBUILDERS

Coaches, berlins, cabriolets, phaetons... The art of building horse-drawn vehicles and automobiles has been intertwined for decades. Today, coachbuilders are just a niche of the automotive market, but they make it possible to fulfil your dream of a unique and one-of-a-kind vehicle.

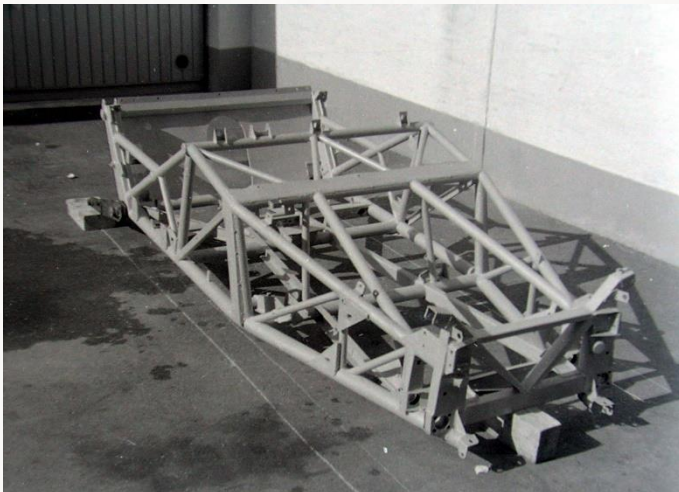
Words: Kuba Kozal, Images: Wikipedia Commons

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It was not without reason that the first motor cars were referred to as 'horseless carriages,' for the well-known horse-drawn vehicles were the starting point for the first experiments with the internal combustion engine. As the automotive industry developed, automobiles became separate constructions, but the era of carriage builders was not yet over.

As you wish

Anyone who wanted to produce and sell motor cars in larger quantities quickly grasped that the cheapest and most efficient solution was to bring the whole process together under one roof—coachbuilding included. However, customers buying automobiles were no different to those buying carriages and coaches. Many expected something special, unique, and tailored to their needs and expectations. They turned to coachbuilders who could meet their requirements. The early 1900s saw the flourishing of companies such as Mulliner, Walter M. Murphy Co., J. Gurney Nutting & Co., Carrosserie Gangloff, Figoni & Falaschi Carrossiers, Stabilimenti Farina, Carrozzeria Ghia and many others. Some specialised in luxury vehicles whose design was intended to provide comfort and indulge every whim of their wealthy owners—and, naturally, to underline their prestige. A whole group of factories emerged in Italy that achieved mastery in manufacturing lightweight, rigid bodies for sports cars. Scaglietti, Pinin Farina, Touring or Zagato gained experience and fame on the racetracks.



The Jaguar C-Type spaceframe was intended to house the engine and drivetrain, provide suspension mounting points and to hold everything together. Finally, the whole thing was wrapped in a stylish body.

Sturdy frame

The prosperity of the coachbuilders was ensured by the vehicle construction technology of the time. The longitudinal frame was usually the component keeping the vehicle rigid and holding all the wheels and drivetrain together. This allowed almost unlimited body shaping. This was exploited to the hilt by Ford, backed by an entire range of bodies on a single Model T frame: from roadster to van—a total of 307 variants. However, the American manufacturer mass-produced all the bodies in its factories; even unskilled workers could make them thanks to automation. The position of the hammer-and-steel artists came under threat. The second blow came in 1934 with the development of the monocoque. Citroën introduced the mass-produced Traction Avant with a body that maintained rigidity through its structural design without the support of a heavy frame.

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Only for the chosen few

The automotive market had been largely industrialised before the Second World War. Mass production, standardised bodies and components were the future. However, there was still room for small manufacturers offering exceptional motor cars: exclusive, luxurious, original, or super sports cars. Many manufacturers, including Ferrari and Maserati, continued to use coachbuilders for years. They allowed their customers to order vehicles that satisfied their need for uniqueness and originality. However, the market for coachbuilders and designers was rapidly shrinking. Many small manufacturers have gone bust, and others have been absorbed by car manufacturers: Mulliner by Rolls-Royce, Scaglietti by Ferrari, and Ghia by Ford... However, some have survived: Pininfarina, Bertone, or Zagato have developed their business, become design studios, provide consultancy services and also manufacture cars themselves. Their contribution to the modern automotive industry is invaluable.



Andrea Zagato, Jakub Pietrzak

THE TIME IS NOW

ZAGATO AND LA SQUADRA COLLABORATION

In the time of the dramatic technological and cultural shift in the automotive market, the cars as we know them and the emotions spurred by them are to be lost forever. However, there's one way to save them: by the old art of coachbuilding. Andrea Zagato of Atelier Zagato and Jakub Pietrzak of La Squadra plot a plan how to do this.

Words: Matt Żuchowski, Images: Andrzej Cieplik

Coachbuilding is one of the most ancient branches of the automotive business. Is there still a place for its principles in 2024?

A.Z.: The car is 120 years old. Coachbuilding is 500 years old – it’s a profession which has been known in the Milanese region since the end of the 1500s. Cars have substituted horse-drawn carriages, but this didn’t change the merit of coachbuilding. Since its founding in 1919, Zagato has been constantly innovative in this field: 100 years ago, the company introduced light substructure technology, transferred to the automotive industry from aeronautics; 70 years ago we played a substantial role in shaping the concept of the Gran Turismo car (slotted between the Corsa class of cars, pure racing, and the Turismo class, everyday cars). Thirty years ago we once again introduced the aeronautical technologies to the automotive sector, this time in the form of the CAD-CAM-CAE designing processes. 15 years ago, we replaced aluminium with carbonfibre, following the footsteps of the lightweight aircrafts once again. And we’ll continue to innovate, possibly drawing further inspirations from the aeronautical design or the new 3D stamping frontier, to make the future of Atelier Zagato safe and secure.

J.P.: Paradoxically, the current challenging situation in the automotive industry presents more opportunities for coachbuilding than ever before. The shift towards electromobility means the cars are increasingly similar to each other; their key components, like their chassis or the engine, are shared among many cars, and come only from a few biggest suppliers. In the end, the only field in which the car makers can compete are performance numbers, which grow to absurd levels as a result. If there are any other factors differentiating electric cars, like the sounds which they emit, then they are mostly generated artificially. Apart from one trait: design. I believe that it’s the design that will take over the decisive role in creating the characteristics, desire, and thus the “worth” of the new cars coming to the market. It’s a historical chance for the coachbuilding industry. Zagato has been offering limited production bespoke car creations for more than 100 years now, making it the oldest and most prestigious company in the coachbuilding business. Virtually all of the other Italian coachbuilders have either gone bankrupt or were incorporated into other companies.

Which traits allowed Zagato to stay independent to this day?

A.Z.: Zagato is and always has been unique even for the coachbuilding standards. The company has never designed or produced large series models – something which Bertone, Pininfarina, Heuliez or Karmann resorted to before their eventual demise – but instead focused exclusively on bespoke creations manufactured only in strictly limited series. Due to the stylistic consistency with the idea of our founder Ugo Zagato and the refusal to follow the passing trends of the moment, all of the Zagato versions of the coupes or Spiders have become collectors’ items. Zagato’s design has been always inspired by function and technical rationale; if you browsed through our historical designs, you’d never find one car with some lavish ornamentations or any other unnecessary body parts. As Enzo Ferrari put it, Zagato’s designs were beautiful thanks to its successes in racing, a unique attitude which was later transferred into the “essential beauty” slogan. Today Atelier Zagato is 105 years old and collaborates continuously with the historically significant brands, such as Alfa Romeo, Aston Martin, Ferrari, ISO Rivolta, Lancia, Lamborghini, Maserati, Porsche, et cetera.

What exactly can Atelier Zagato offer that the big and technologically advanced car manufacturers can't do alone in 2024?

A.Z.: The Atelier Zagato is not perceived by the car brands as an external alternative to the work of their designing centres, and therefore as their competitor, but as a complementary opportunity to create collectible models with the greater value sustained over long time. Thanks to this, Zagato currently enjoys a unique position in the automotive world, where it is a low volume assembler allowed to put its own badge on the cars manufactured by other companies.

J.P.: In fact, the bigger the car manufacturer is, the less tools and means it has to produce small batches of special models, limited to let's say 10 or 20 cars. Meanwhile, the coachbuilders like Zagato are developing new manufacturing technologies and methods of processing innovative materials like carbonfibre. This makes them a valuable option for the car makers, which can, with the help of such carrozzerias, outsource the development and assembly of their halo cars, which could be used for shaping the future of their regular product line-ups.

One of the strongest arguments for the Zagato-bodied cars is their stellar performance on the collectors' cars market. How do you achieve this?

A.Z.: It's a matter of consistency and focus; our projects celebrate the Zagato milestones from the past and are coherent with 105 years of history. This way, the value of the most recent creations is directly connected with the most revered cars from our past.

J.P.: At the end of the day, the price of the product is always determined by the brand and values it represents. Right now, it's technically possible for anyone to find a designer and a carbonfibre manufacturer and introduce their unique car body to the market – but that still doesn't determine the worth of such a product. It's one thing when a unique car is done by a random person, and a wholly different one if it comes from a company dating back to the year 1919, whose position is supported by its rich heritage, repeated successes, and other virtues which makes us believe in this product.

If market demand for coachbuilding is so tremendous, why has it been sidelined for so long?

J.P.: It hasn't been sidelined; it has always been present, it's just that it has changed its form. Right now, some of the "innovative" services of the most luxurious car brands are exactly what coachbuilding has been for the last 100 years. In some cases, its makers may use different words to describe what they're doing, but recently we've been observing an increasing use of the coachbuilding terminology, and by that, also the resurrection of the coachbuilding's traditions and all the magic surrounding it.

What are your plans to further grow the importance of coachbuilding and explore the opportunities it brings?

J.P.: What puts our project apart from most of the options currently available on the market is the fact that we're creating authentic personal bonds with our clients and thus we're able to design truly bespoke creations for them. By being small and thinking exclusively in very limited production numbers, we're able to reenact

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the same spirit of creativity and agility in responding to clients' needs as the carrozzerias in the nascent times of the coachbuilding services.

A.Z.: Car manufacturers are designing their products with a certain fixed marketing vision and only after they finish do they push the product from the management down to the dealers. They don't participate in the designing process, and yet they're the ones who talk with their clients and try to sell the product to them. What we as Atelier Zagato came up with is an idea of reversing this pyramid: in 2024 we'll introduce the concept of Domus (portal) to our company. In order to enter it you'll need to go through the gate. There, the client will have an ability to decide on a certain car, and the Domus will have the tools to bring this energy from the bottom up and translate the wish of the client to the designer.

This is the old way of creating cars, before the introduction of marketing teams and consumable goods. The history of automotive has always been from the bottom up, like Stirling Moss asking the company for a certain type of car he believed he had most chances of winning with. One of the 10 Domuses which we plan to launch will be operated by Jakub Pietrzak, who is one of the first to attend this programme and possibly the quickest to understand it. We'll cater to the desires of the affluent buyers who seek exclusivity and personalised vehicles and we'll push design boundaries further, incorporating futuristic aesthetics and novel design elements that combine form and function in unique ways. It's a challenge which we both look forward to very much!



THE NEW ERA STARTS WITH A Z HISTORY OF THE ATELIER ZAGATO

In the days of fake luxury and passing fashions, qualities like long-standing craftsmanship and artisanal beauty have become only more valued and sought-after. That's how the new Golden Era of the car coachbuilding companies has started – especially for the most important one of all.

Words: Matt Zuchowski, Images: Zagato archives

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Somewhere far away from the world of fast consumption obsessed with tackling costs and appeasing poor tastes, there are still companies following the same work ethic as they did a century ago. One of them is Atelier Zagato. There's a fair chance you know what it is – or rather, that you think you know it. You'd be happy to point out it's one of the most special names in automotive history as one of the most renowned Italian coachbuilders. All of this is true, but then there's far more to Zagato's unique appeal. The Milanese studio is the last of the great Italian coachbuilders that is still the same family business which it was in the Golden Age of such in the 1950s and '60s; it's been running continuously since its inception in 1919, meaning no blank pages in its history books and no need for revivals or acquisitions. For the last 30 years it has been led by Andrea Zagato, only the third custodian in the company's 100-plus years of history, preceded by his father Elio and grandfather Ugo.

The Z story

It's Mr Zagato who around a decade ago gave me the key to understanding the true weight of his company's uniqueness and the reason for its long-lasting success. In the nascent years of the motoring industry, he argued, the first coachbuilders originated from equestrian activities, just like basically everything in the car culture, from the names of car body types (limousine, coupé, spider) through the terms used in racing (pits, paddocks) all the way to the tradition of concours d'élégance. Even the name itself – coachbuilding – suggests the profession of constructing horse-drawn carriages. This is where the first makers of car bodies came from, carrying over their classic work methodology of utilising traditional materials, like wood, and heavy, bulky forms, which often needed steps to climb aboard. Milan's influence on carriage design and manufacturing during the Renaissance era contributed to the evolution of horse-drawn vehicles, setting standards for craftsmanship, design, and comfort that influenced carriage-making throughout Europe. The expertise and innovations of Milanese artisans from 500 years ago left a lasting impact on the history and development of horse-drawn carriages. Ugo Zagato wasn't coming from the carriage business, though. As an expert in metallurgy working in a foundry, during World War I he was assigned to Ansaldo Pomilio, once S an Italian manufacturer of small and fast reconnaissance planes. This four-year tenure at the aeronautical industry had changed not only Zagato's life.

When after the conflict's conclusion he set up a new carrozzeria responsible for "the construction and repair of bodies for automobiles and aircraft", he applied the recently learned skills of designing light-yet-stiff aluminium bodies over steel structures to the world of cars. This was the eureka moment which changed the face of automobiles forever. Gone were the horse-drawn coach references along with their baroque Louis XVI ornamentations, succeeded by the radical idea of form following function. This revolutionary approach instantly attracted many an important client from the area to the newfound Milanese business, most notably Fiat, Bianchi, Itala, Diatto, Lancia, Chiribiri, and Milan-born Ettore Bugatti. However, none of these collaborations were as effective as the one with Alfa Romeo. When one of the brand's top brass and Zagato's friend Antonio Ascari (father of the two-time World Champion Alberto) introduced him to the likes of Ferrari – even before the founding of Scuderia Ferrari in 1929 – Campari, Varzi, and Nuvolari aboard Zagato-bodied cars soon became frontrunners in various legendary races. In the 1930-1931-1932 yearbooks of Scuderia Ferrari there is the list of their exclusive partner-suppliers among which Zagato is always mentioned, plus a page where the Carrozzeria Zagato advertises its work. Zagato's bodyworks can be easily recognized: they were made in Milan, the city where the two men had met at Alfa Romeo's headquarters and where Enzo chose – perhaps rightly in 1923, after that win – his first Partner for his incredible automotive adventure. Over the

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eight years (1929-1937) of the first incarnation of Scuderia Ferrari, Alfa Romeo and Zagato developed 23 different models with 6-cylinder and 8-cylinder engines of different capacities: 1500, 1750, 2300, 2600 and 2900cc.

For the 1938 Mille Miglia, the company prepared no less than 38 cars. Grand victories inevitably ensued, which naturally brought interest of the wealthy clients who dreamed of manifesting the same bravado and ahead-of-its-times style on public roads. Zagato was happy to oblige, but on his own terms. His constant striving for progress – joined by an unwavering affection for aeronautical science – turned his attention to the secrets of aerodynamics. Late 1920s and early '30s Alfa Romeos, Fiats, and Lancias were among the first cars in the world to adopt inclined windscreens, headlights incorporated in the bodywork and perforated disc wheels. Many of these cars were unfortunately lost over the decades of turmoil. However, more recently, some of them have been recovered thanks to the company's patrons through the "Sanction Lost" programme. On the philosophical level, though, Zagato cars maintain the same spirit to this day which can be observed in the 1989 Alfa Romeo SZ (Sprint Zagato), which owes its unthinkable shapes to the fact it was the first car designed using the early CAD and CAM technologies – another innovation brought over from the aviation industry.



Zagato bodied Ferrari, Fiat and Maserati, protagonists of The Gran Turismo Class in Monza.

The Z effect

This unique mix of engineering pragmatism and purely artisanal craftsmanship allowed Carrozzeria Zagato to achieve results which go beyond the usual understanding of car design. It may sound complicated but fortunately Elio Zagato, who took over the reins after his father's death in 1968, coined a much simpler way of describing what the company's work is about: "You see that car? Is it different from all the others? Then it's a Zagato."

Indeed, Zagato cars are different. As Andrea Zagato pointed out to me on another occasion, the reasons for this are heavily rooted in the history, tracing back to as long as 150 years ago. It's only then that Italy became one country after functioning for centuries as a nation of separate cities. They differed greatly in their cultural DNA, which was manifested not only in the dialects used or the food eaten, but also in architecture and design in general. As the west of the Apennine Peninsula was affected rather by French culture, the northern part – including Lombardy – was more under the influence of the Germans. Tourists can still see that for themselves by comparing Paris-like Turin, with its more baroque, art nouveau landmarks, and Milan, whose nature is dictated by the rules of Bauhaus and Ulm School. Automotive historians would find a similar analogy between

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the Turin-based carrozzerias Vignale or Stabilimenti Farina, known for conservative design with rich ornamentations and weakness for chrome, and the minimalist Zagato.

After Ugo Zagato, the company has had numerous talented designers and engineers who have shaped its identity and contributed to the creation of many iconic and distinctive automobiles over its long history in the automotive industry, such as the engineers (and designers) Fabio Luigi Rapi and Gianni Zagato, and in the early 1960s the designer Ercole Spada, responsible for creating several iconic designs, including the Alfa Romeo Giulia TZ and TZ2. The company took this cultural advantage to new heights with the appointment of Architect Giuseppe Mittino in the '70s, who introduced it into a new geometric era. In the times when most of the greatest car design houses ceased to operate, the once again surprising and visionary designs of the Cadillac N.A.R.T., Ferrari 3Z, Lancia Beta Spider, Maserati Spyder and Aston Martin Vantage and Volante took Zagato back to front pages and led the company to a new level of industrial success, growing its production output to 15 cars per day and introducing one of the first electric cars to the market under the brand Zele.

Today this extremely rich heritage of Zagato's history and the nuanced nature of Italian design are obviously best understood by none other than... the Japanese. There's an inexplicable yet deep bond between Japan and Italy when it comes to passion for style. Possibly it could be explained by Anna dello Russo, the celebrity ex-creative director of Vogue Japan, or the tailors of Ciccio, one of the most respected representatives of the Italian sartorial craftsmanship, coming straight from Shibuya, Tokyo. Or by Norihiko Harada, who in the '90s played a key role in transforming Zagato from an automotive industry supplier to world's most exclusive boutique Atelier.

A special parade: Alfa Romeo Giulia SWB Zagato, together with TZ3 Stradale and Corsa at the 2023 Le Mans Classic.



The avantgarde designer, now in his sixties, is still active within the company as its vice-president. Currently the Zagato cars come in strictly limited numbers (most often 9, 19, or 99, in reference to company's founding year), but it's far more than that which builds the long-lasting value of Atelier Zagato's works, frequently increasing by as much as 100% soon after leaving the gates at Rho. This success can be assigned as much to Zagato as to its customers. The selected few understand the significance of the carrozzeria's history and the quality of its designs so well that they very rarely decide to part ways with their cars. Thus, the market appearance of any model bearing the Z logo is an event, which indeed makes any opportunity to become the owner of one very special vehicle.

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Especially today – in a world in which the objects born out of passion and tradition are more unique and special than ever before. Just when you thought the history of coachbuilding might come to an end, it has just entered its new Golden Era with some very special news lurking just around the corner.



LA SQUADRA: FAMILY BUSINESS

Max Hoffman, Luigi Chinetti, Ben Pon: for every legendary car there was a dealer who turned it into a commercial success. In 2024, the market performance of the biggest names in the ultra-luxury car segment is taken to new heights by the Pietrzak family. Here's how it happened.

Words: Matt Zuchowski, Images: La Squadra archives

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Since its inception in 2016, La Squadra has grown to become Central Europe's authority on exceptional cars. With its bold vision, efficaciously fuelled by authentic passion for cars and professional execution, the company is aiming high, right at the very top of the global luxury, performance, and classic car market. The dealership located in Katowice, Poland, serves as the regional representative of virtually all of the most iconic car brands in the world, including the Italian legends of Ferrari and Maserati, hypercar manufacturers Bugatti, Koengisegg and Pagani, Formula 1 stars Alpine, and, most recently, the American restomod celebrity Singer. And yet the La Squadra concept means much more than that, being a cultural hub incorporating an action-packed events calendar for like-minded enthusiasts, a clothing line, and a quality restaurant.

Youth and tradition

What makes this place even more special is that only 30 years ago the same address, then belonging to the industrial part of the mining city in the Silesia region, was home to an inconspicuous body shop led by the Pietrzak family. In 1994 the business was taken over by Bogdan, only 28 at the time, who soon became the youngest Renault concessionaire in the country. Combining his youthful vigour with the technical background of his father, the Pietrzak family went on to become one of the leading car dealers and fine car collectors in the region. When Bogdan's son Jakub reached mid-20s, he had quickly proven to be an adept heir to the growing dealership network and took the family's proven recipe to a wholly new level, attracting the attention of none other than Ferrari itself. The fabled Italian company was impressed by the young Pole's novel approach to the supercar market and soon awarded the Pietrzak family its official dealer status. The Polish showroom challenged the status quo set by the usually conservative brand's representatives of yore and was included among the top three Ferrari dealers in the world in only its third year of operation.

For connoisseurs and enthusiasts

Since then the family has carefully expanded its portfolio to reach a comprehensive range of brands which appease the tastes of virtually all of the automotive connoisseurs. Having a great understanding of each of the represented companies and enjoying unwavering trust from its clients, the Pietrzak family have been able to achieve groundbreaking success with each of its partners. As Jakub reveals, the key to their success is a "long-standing and honest relationship with our clients. With us, they know they'll receive the standard of service they expect, which is expressed in our full commitment going far beyond the working hours and usual needs, and the confidence needed for the investments in the unique automotive projects brought by our selected partners".

The bridge

The Pietrzak strategy focuses on creating a meaningful bond with clients rather than merely selling them cars, a principle which led Jakub to create the La Squadra concept; a space for clients and enthusiasts alike in which they can fully experience and understand the micro-worlds of all of the brands gathered under one roof. As the Pietrzak family are working hard to bring the La Squadra emblem to global attention, the big question is what's next to expect from their business, providing jobs to no less than 350 people? Jakub's head is bustling with the next bold ideas, and he has just been joined in the company by his younger brother Piotr. Bogdan

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insists though that one thing which will never change is the service quality. "My father spent years on building a solid team with which he could achieve the best results repeatedly. He believed there are no shortcuts to achieving customer satisfaction. By sticking to this principle, he was able to enjoy a long queue of clients thanks solely to word-of-mouth recommendations". Nearly 30 years on, La Squadra remains faithful to this spirit of honest craftsmanship and still bases its success on a community of satisfied long-standing clients.



