

Helmut Marko – the doctor in the cockpit

A doctor of law, Helmut Marko partnered Gijs van Lennep to victory in the 1971 24 Hours of Le Mans. In one of the fastest Le Mans performances of all time, they recorded an average speed of 222.304 kilometres per hour in their Porsche 917. Injury then brought a premature end to Marko's career in 1972.

Helmut Marko did not have a particularly long career as a racing driver, only entering the cockpit after completing his law degree and obtaining a doctorate in 1967. Officially known as Dr Helmut Marko, he partnered Gerold Pankl in a Porsche 906 Carrera 6 at the 500 km Zeltweg in 1968 before taking on the same course in a Porsche 910 the following year.

By 1970, he was starting races for the Martini Racing Team as a Porsche works driver. The racing doctor took fifth place in the 1,000-kilometre event at the Nürburgring with his partner Gérard Larrousse and subsequently came third in Le Mans together with Rudi Lins.

Marko and Gijs van Lennep entered the 1971 edition of the Le Mans race in the new 917 KH, which boasted technical upgrades such as a magnesium frame and perforated brake discs. Of the fleet of Porsches that started the race, only two 917 models remained at the head of the pack after the first few hours – one was that of Marko and van Lennep, the other a Gulf Porsche driven by Richard Attwood and Herbert Müller. Worrying about his cars, engineer Ferdinand Piëch urged that 'one of the two should drive more slowly'. Hearing of this, Marko commented drily: 'Good idea, but I won't be the one taking my foot off the gas!' After 24 hours, Helmut Marko and Gijs van Lennep had covered a distance of exactly 5335.313 kilometres at an average speed of 222.304 kilometres per hour in their Porsche 917. This record performance was only bested in 2010.

The 1971 season saw Marko driving for McLaren and BRM. In 1972, he started sixth on the grid in the French Grand Prix at the challenging Clermont-Ferrand circuit. He was on course to finish in the points when a stone thrown up by Ronnie Peterson's March pierced the visor of the BRM driver. Helmut Marko sustained a severe eye injury that ended his career as a racing driver.

After that, he is still active in motor sports in different positions, among others with his own racing team and for Red Bull in the last 15 years.