

Le Mans 1982 – triple triumph on debut

Porsche entered a trio of new 956s in the 1982 24 Hours of Le Mans and was rewarded with a one, two, three finish. This was the first of eight victories achieved by the dominant 956 and its replacement, the 962, up to 1994.

The 1982 World Endurance Championship incorporated new regulations that provided engineers in Group C with a significant amount of freedom. Core regulations relating to consumption saw the engines permitted to use 60 litres of premium petrol per 100 kilometres, a limit that was subsequently reduced to 51 litres. Participating cars were also required to feature a closed cockpit and a minimum weight of 800 kilograms. The team around race director Peter Falk and project head Norbert Singer developed a revolutionary prototype. As the floor of this aluminium monocoque generated substantial ground effect, this meant that the car was increasingly drawn towards the track as its speed increased. The new model was powered by a 2.65-litre, six-cylinder engine that delivered 620 horsepower thanks to turbocharging. Jürgen Barth took the 956 on a flawless initial test drive at the Weissach circuit on 27 March 1982. The 24 Hours of Le Mans was then held in mid-June as the second race of the season. Porsche took three 956s to this classic long-distance event, entrusting them to the pairings of Jacky Ickx and Derek Bell, Jochen Mass and Vern Schuppan, and Al Holbert and Hurley Haywood. Jürgen Barth was listed as the reserve driver for all three cars.

Prior to the start, race director Falk struck a sceptical tone: ‘Our cars are too new and too untested.’ The other competitors were only strong on paper, however, and Porsche led from the word go. On Haywood’s car, a loose door had to be replaced and one of the rear wheel hubs required repairs. Haywood himself was withdrawn from the contest by Porsche’s race doctors around midnight after he experienced stomach cramps and a high temperature. Reserve driver Jürgen Barth quickly changed into his racing suit and took his teammate’s place. After 24 hours of racing, the podium proved to be an all-Porsche affair – and the order in which the team’s cars finished corresponded exactly to their start numbers. First place went to Ickx and Bell, second place was taken by Mass and Schuppan, and third place belonged to Haywood, Holbert and Barth.

Peter Falk’s take on the race was short and sweet: ‘It was my most emotional race. We were dealing with entirely new rules and a new car, but we still had our old team and a familiar track in our favour.’ The 956/962 would go on to record a further seven victories in Le Mans up to 1994.