

Le Mans 2017 – the swansong of the 919 Hybrid

After four years and three overall victories, the Porsche 919 Hybrid bowed out a winner at Le Mans. But this crowning victory had appeared a distant prospect for much of the 85th edition of the classic endurance race.

It was a case of mixed feelings for the Porsche team when the 919 Hybrid crossed the finishing line at the 2017 24 Hours of Le Mans. While there was huge joy as the team celebrated a victory they had long thought was out of their grasp, this was tempered by the knowledge that Porsche would be bringing an end to its LMP1 programme after the 2017 season. ‘As our 919 crossed the finishing line, there was a sense of sorrow but also one of enormous relief at how successful the project had been,’ said LMP1 boss Fritz Enzinger.

As in the years before, it was once again a case of Porsche versus Toyota. The Japanese team entered three hybrid prototypes, whereas Porsche decided to follow up its Le Mans victories in 2015 and 2016 with two entries: Neel Jani, André Lotterer and Nick Tandy were issued start number 1, and Timo Bernhard, Brendon Hartley and Earl Bamber took start number 2. Each of the five highly-favoured trios was hindered by technical problems during the race, with only two of these cars making it to the finish. Only three and a half hours into the contest, the number two Porsche was forced to make an extended pit stop: the replacement of the defective electric motor in the hybrid drive ultimately took 65 minutes. The number one Porsche took a commanding lead before a significant loss of oil pressure forced it to retire at around 11.00 on the Sunday morning. And the one remaining Toyota was a long way off the pace.

In light of the technical issues experienced by the five leading cars, the prospect of an entry from the slower LMP2 category taking victory became a distinct possibility. However, the final hours of this 85th edition of Le Mans witnessed a sensational charge by Bernhard, Hartley and Bamber. Despite being so far behind, the Porsche strategists in the pits remained confident – after all, the 919 Hybrid was considerably quicker than its first-placed rival and did not have to make such frequent refuelling stops. Their calculations proved to be on the money, with Timo Bernhard taking his Porsche into the lead an hour from the end and safely bringing the car home. ‘That was a rollercoaster of a race,’ said Brendon Hartley after his first victory at Le Mans. ‘Winning here with Earl Bamber is unbelievable. We’ve known each other since our karting days when we were kids, and now we’re a pair of Kiwis who’ve won in Le Mans!’