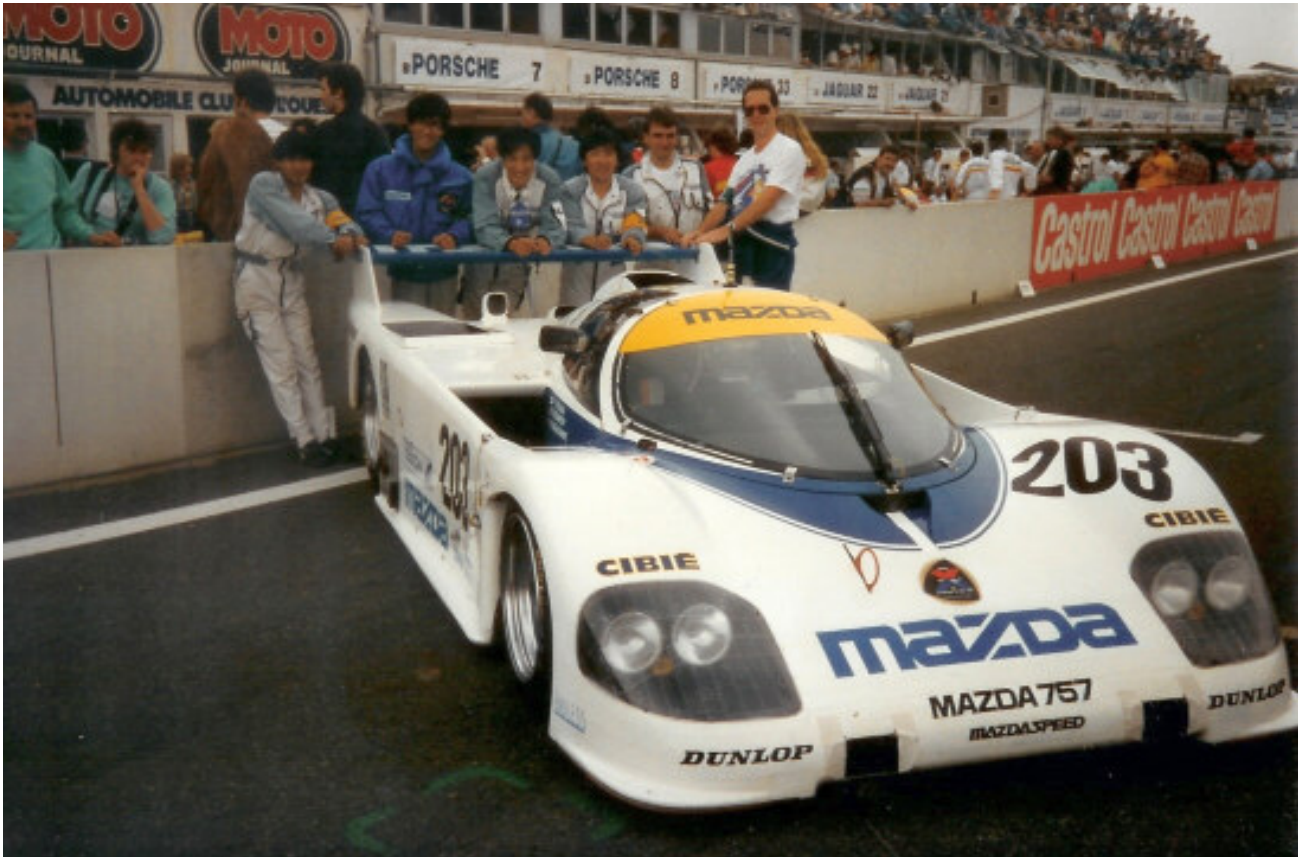


## Racing Birthday.

June 2008 saw a milestone reached. Jaguar Cars celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its first-for-30-years Le Mans win (on the 12<sup>th</sup> June 1988) and in the same month the sale of the business by Ford to Tata of India.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> June 2008 an old friend of mine from the UK sent me a picture; one which I thought had been lost to the mists of time. Apparently not.



The image (seen here – and, yes that is your writer on the far right...) is a reminder of that glorious day in June 1988 when the XJR9-LM led convincingly to record Jaguar's first Le Mans 24 hours win since 1957.

What is not so well known is that Mazda won the Class II category with a 1 – 2 – 3 result also placing their cars 15<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> overall. A scant 4 years later in 1991, Mazda won the Sarthe Classic outright – the first and to date the only Japanese manufacturer to win the race.

Some parts of that 1988 weekend (11/12 June 1988) remain firmly etched in my memory.

Back in the 1980's my business was providing travel and logistic support to motor racing teams. In 1986 we won the hard fought contract to supply UK support to Mazda Racing. By 1987 Nissan (then managed by the late Howard Marsden) had awarded us a similar contract.

By 1988 Toyota Racing Developments had joined us, along with Dunlop Japan and Bridgestone Racing. We arranged transport on the ground, European airline bookings and, the most important part for the 24 hours, the ferry crossings for the transporters.

On the run up to the 1988 event, Jaguar contacted us as their sponsor Sealink FerryLines was suffering a strike. Jaguar was in danger of not getting to Le Mans. Calls were made and finally we squeezed all six Jaguar Racing trucks onto an overnight P&O ferry.

I arrived at le Mans on Thursday afternoon as practice was commencing – the drivers need to qualify twice, once in daylight and once at night – I spent a good three hours checking on all our clients. Then night practice commenced.

Dinner was at the small Les Hundieres restaurant situated on the Mulsanne Straight – the café sits next to the road where, in those days, the cars flew past at over 200mph – and we enjoyed the spectacle of them braking from 200mph to 50mph, brakes glowing red hot. These were the great days before the chicanes that blight the current Mulsanne were installed. Practice stops at 11.00pm, leaving a short few hours sleep.

Friday dawned grey and miserable – I know this as I recall feeling like a drowned rat as the morning went on. Just after lunch I came across Gloria Docking, wife of Mazda's UK based team boss (actually an Australian, Alan Docking) she was looking for me. Warning bells should have rung...

Mazda had some problems; the number 1 car (race number 203) was struggling as some of the support crew had been injured in Thursday nights practice. Mazda was, to put it succinctly, without a re-fueller. And, apparently, I was it.

First job was to seek out the other Japanese teams and check it was OK with them for me to do this – we have always, as now, prided ourselves on neutrality.

Both Nissan and Toyota were happy. So to the MazdaSpeed team I went, happily oblivious that I was only to get 5 hours sleep out of the next 65...

The fuelling rigs are large hoses with a two handled grip that has to be thrust into the filler in the side of the car. Each fill takes about 40 seconds. From the instant the car stops the hose has to be attached. A tap on my back from the car manager was the signal to pull the hose clear.

Sounds easy.

Except for two things: the hose rig weights around 35 kilos and the hose must go over your shoulder so you can hear (and feel) the fuel flowing. Second the filler sits behind the cockpit meaning you have to lean over the side of the car to insert and extract it. By your left leg is an exhaust glowing cherry red. Before you do anything, an asbestos blanket has to be thrown over the exhaust air outlet.

Mazda gave me a single dummy run in the pits before final qualifying and practice. It was about the time that I struggled to pull the nozzle clear did it dawn on me that this was not as easy as everyone else made it look.

During qualifying the car is kept as light as possible with carefully regulated fuel amounts going into the vehicle every three laps.

Bear in mind that a lap here is about 3 minutes 30 seconds. Roughly every 10 minutes that 757 came in for a refuel. After 2 ½ hours and 12 refuels I had found back, leg and stomach muscles I didn't know I had...

Around 8.00pm qualifying stops and preparation for the race the next day starts. Finally at 11.00pm I made it back to my hotel – having been briefed that to get to the circuit on time meant a 5.30am alarm and leave for the pits by 06.15am. Or not get there at all due to the crowds flocking to the great race...

At 06.15 I arrived in the pits to be given my pristine new race suit – and following some swapping with others found one that fitted – my shiny new helmet and a pair of gloves. I would wear this for the next 36 hours...



Highlight of the late morning – and apparently still the case today – is the pit walk about by the bikini clad Hawaiian Tropic girls. Having rummaged in my photo archive this is the only image I have left...pity really.

Cars are pushed to the line around 2.30pm and the chaos is, as I recall, staggering. Cars bump into each other, there are hundreds of people milling around, opposing team members chat to each other as this frenzied mass of people swarm around before the start.

The parade lap starts at 3.50pm for a 4.00pm start.

At 4.00pm precisely the race starts. I recall that the initial laps were a dogfight between the blindingly quick Nissans, the race bred Jaguars with a couple of aging Porsche's thrown in. At 4.40ish – and I am calculating this from memory - 203 came flying into the pits for a refuel and check. Stop # 1 was quick and painless.

As were the next half dozen while evening drew in and the race continued. By 8.00pm the sun was setting – right into the drivers eyes on Mulsanne – and we, in the pits, were developing a nice rhythm.

Around the 11<sup>th</sup> scheduled stop at about 11.30pm 203 arrived, it was here that things began to unwind.

I remember watching fascinated as the smallest mechanic on the crew threw my asbestos blanket over the red hot engine, jumped onto it and leant down the gap between engine and cockpit to fix a loose bolt. The stop cost 10 laps.

In those days it was very dark at night... very dark even in the pits.



3.00am tiredness had set in. Sleep was confined to short naps on a plastic chair at the back of the pits interspersed with grabbing food and drink – my first ever exposure to Shushi.

Dawn breaks around 5.00am during summer in France; the biggest challenge at that time was the cold and the tiredness. By dawn MazdaSpeed 203 was around 30 laps down on the leaders but still in with a chance of Class II honours.

8.00am came and with it another set of cracked front disc rotors. 8 more dropped laps later and 203 was on its way.

18 hours of racing came and went at 10.00am on the Sunday. By then eyes were red rimmed and fighting fatigue – mistakes were being made and with mistakes came pain. Excruciating, burning pain.

Remember how each refuel the asbestos blanket had to be put over the exhaust outlet? When don't pay enough attention to the task in hand and the blanket drops unseen to the floor. At this point the cherry red exhaust does two things – first it creates a heat sink on your leg, second the heat rises to the nozzle and ignites the escaping fuel vapour. An urgent and unsubtle dowsing with a fire extinguisher put paid to both – but not before the left leg of my race suit had burnt through to flesh.

First Aid from MazdaSpeed (yes they travel complete with their own medics) treated and bandaged my leg. The race team then added further protection by wrapping asbestos blanket strips around the outside of the dressing – in what turned out to be an inspirational move copied by the teams' other refuellers.

With two hours to go 203 was a mere 55 laps down on the leading Jaguar. Only two more re-fuels to go...

Time ticks down slowly in the last hour – you yearn to get the final splash and dash out of the way so you can finally start the clear up. And you want to share the enthusiasm of winning the class and seeing Jaguar win overall.



The final lap is run in slow motion, the winner being decided almost 20 minutes before the end – the teams ‘stage managing’ the crossing of the finish line.

Then; thousands of fans – mostly British – flood the circuit; the back slaps, handshakes, hugs and smiles from all at MazdaSpeed, the Class II winners. ‘203’ came first in class.



My flight from Paris back to England was scheduled to leave at 19.00 – I had two hours to get from Le Mans to Charles De Gaulle Airport to check in.

Mazda were excellent as their car designer (Nigel Stroud) was on the same flight as me they asked Philippe Favre (reserve race driver) to get us there on time...

I remember realising that my kit was locked in the transporter and I couldn't get to it before piling in the car with Nigel. I would eventually be re-united with it the following Thursday. I borrowed a pair of jeans, kept my MazdaSpeed jacket on, over a dirty T shirt, and jumped into the car clutching my passport, which Gloria had 'kept safe' for me, thankfully.

Traffic going to Paris that evening was, to put it mildly, horrendous. Wall to wall traffic meant that Philippe did 80% of the journey flying up the hard shoulder at around 170kph.

Despite Philippe's best efforts, we missed our scheduled flight out of Paris. British Airways put us on the next flight which went to Gatwick, not Heathrow where I was being met.

I called my sister to ask her to let my wife know where to pick me up – only to be greeted with a rendition of Happy Birthday... Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> June 1988 was my 31<sup>st</sup> birthday and I only realised 19 hours into it...