

AVD Oldtimer Grand Prix

By Richard Batchelor

On a recent trip to Europe I visited the Nurburgring (August 12-13) for the AVD Oldtimer Grand Prix meeting, one of Europe's major classic car events. The original track, the monumental 20 kilometre plus Nordschleife (North Circuit) was built in the 1920s as an unemployment relief project and got its evocative title of "Nurburgring" as a result of a naming competition. Located in Germany's rainy Eifel Mountains, the track is also known by drivers as the "green hell" and ranks as one of only seven great circuits from pre WW2 still in use (along with Monaco, Indianapolis, Monza, Pau, Spa and Bathurst).

Most of the Oldtimer GP races were held on the "new" Nurburgring, familiar to current Formula 1 fans, built alongside the daunting old track, the latter not used for F1 since Nikki Lauda's 1976 crash. However on Friday 12 August the "green hell" was used for a three hour race for classic touring and sports cars. There were several brief showers of rain, and the fact that the very long and undulating track would have been dry in places and wet in others must have made it very challenging, in the circuit's great tradition. Saturday's racing was rain-free. (I did not attend on the Sunday, which was marred by heavy rain).

After parking my Avis Opel on the other side of an autobahn, and enduring a long walk across a bridge, past a forest and through a tunnel, I finally entered the new Nurburgring slap bang in the middle of the Porsche compound. The factory was strongly represented with the new Carrera GT and Dan Gurney's 1962 French GP winning car, and the local Porsche clubs also had marquees. Porsches ranging from 356s and tractors up to the current 997 and Cup cars had come from all over Europe - there must have been literally hundreds of cars, and plenty of factory and club merchandise, food and drink were being sold. The Mercedes, Alfa, Maserati and Ferrari car parks were almost equally impressive, the latter boasting five Ferrari Enzos parked in a row.

Qualifying for fifties sports cars was underway on the current F1 track and you could also see in the distance that qualifying for the

afternoon's sports/touring enduro was underway on the North circuit. The fifties sports cars were the greatest collection of classic Ferraris, Maseratis and Porsches I have ever seen at the one time - straight out of the original Mille Miglia race, last held in 1957. The combination of skinny tyres and 300 horsepower engines, together with the value of the cars, saw most drivers taking it easy on the wet track, but a few were really on the gas despite this. That set the pattern for the day - absolutely top quality fields in every category - GP cars from pre 1940, 1961-65 and 1966-78, Can Am cars (8 litre McLaren-Chevs etc), Le Mans cars over the ages and so on.

Races for the Revival Deutsche Rennsportmeisterschaft 1972-81 (don't those Germans love long words!) saw a flock of Porsche 3.0 RSRs take on a number of BMW M1 Procars, BMW CSL Batmobiles, a very rapid quad-cam Ford Capri and various Alfas. The former three-time winner at Le Mans, Klaus Ludwig, absolutely streeted the field in his green RSR, demonstrating how much better a top pro is than some talented amateurs. Ludwig was braking from top speed for a sharp ess bend 50 metres later than most of the other competitors, despite arriving faster than them, then flicking from fifth to fourth to third in about one second, drifting under power into the first left hander then over-correcting to set up his drift for the right hander. It was sheer artistry and I suspect Ludwig could have won in any of the first half dozen cars - he was followed by the Capri, a couple of M1s, another RSR and some CSLs.

Another legendary driver, in action in the 1961-65 GP category, was Richard Attwood (GB) in a BRM. Attwood won a rainy Le Mans in 1970, with Hans Hermann in a Porsche 917, and finished second in the 1968 Monaco GP in a 3 litre V12 BRM. Other big names at the Nurburgring included Walter Rohrl (Porsche 356B) and Stig Blomqvist (Ford Galaxie), while a young bloke in scruffy jeans presenting prizes turned out to be Heinz-Harald Frentzen, who with an ounce of luck could have been world F1 champ in 2000.

I spent quite a bit of time over the two days wandering through the paddock and even managed a stint on the pit wall with the mechanics, at least until somebody asked to see my pass ("Fritz, see who that old bugger is on the pit wall"). The sheer weight of money applied by some of the competitors was amazing. Take Dr Thomas

Bscher for example. Other sad cases like me, who devour overseas car mags, might remember Bscher from ten years ago racing a McLaren GTR at Le Mans and in other high profile events. At the time he was described as a "Cologne banker." Actually Bscher owned the bank! After selling the bank he got a bit bored and now runs Audi's Bugatti subsidiary. Bscher races a 1958 Maserati 450S sports car and a 1954 Maserati 250F F1 car, worth I suppose over a mill each. Bscher drives them very hard too, and it was great to see him drifting the 250F in the style of the immortal Fangio, who won the 1957 German GP in one of these cars on the Nordschleife.

Other multiple car entrants (with massive F1 style transporters, hordes of mechanics and no sponsorship, as this grubby practice is of course banned) included Jose Albuquerque from Portugal, who was armed with a 1956 Maserati 250F, a 1955 Maserati 300S sports racer and a 1970 Chevron B16. Jose was clearly enjoying his weekend in the Eifel mountains, but then wouldn't we all with such toys! But even he was upstaged by Irvine Laidlaw from Britain who raced FOUR cars - a 1957 Maserati 250S sports, 1965 Porsche 904/6, 1962 BRM P57 F1 car and a 1970 Chevron B8. Also impressive were the various cars raced by the Schryver family from the UK and Brazilian Abba Cogan's pair of Matras.

It was a pretty up-market show all round, captains of industry mingling with members of the aristocracy, judging by race entry lists sprinkled with "vons", "Doktors", "Professors" and even some "Prof. Drs". But there was still room for the less well-heeled competitors, such as the two Swedes sharing an old Volvo sedan and the driver of a tatty early 911 trailered from the UK. An Aussie link was provided by former Porsche design chief Harm Lagaay, who was racing his Elfin-Chev, with a discreet 'for sale' sign. Many of the competitors hailed from Grossbritannien - in some races Brits made up nearly half the field and usually took the podium spots, such is the intensity in historic racing across the Channel. In fact, far more mods are allowed in historic racing there than in Australia, resulting in silly outcomes such as pre-war ERAs and early fifties F2 Cooper Bristols beating late fifties state-of-the-art Maserati F1 cars (Fangio would be turning in his grave).

Other entertainment included some rapid demonstration laps from the pair of Bentleys which finished 1-2 at Le Mans two years ago, and a mighty Porsche 962 from the 1980s, arguably the greatest sports racing car of all time.

For results and photos from the Nurburgring visit www.ogpracing.de