

CARROLL SHELBY LOOKS BACK AT 1959 LE MANS WIN WITH ASTON MARTIN

Gaydon, 5 June 2009. Fifty years ago, American racing legend Carroll Shelby formed one half of the Le Mans-winning Aston Martin DBR1 team, together with Englishman Roy Salvadori. In his own words, Shelby describes the historic experience that he defines as the highlight of his racing career.

“It was an amazing time with Aston Martin, which I will always have a huge amount of affection for. In particular, I’ve got so many memories of 1959 and they’re actually all very different memories. We went through gallons of oil, for example. At the end of the race [Aston Martin’s then owner] David Brown got in the car for the victory lap. It meant so much to him; I guess he had wanted to win Le Mans all of his life. When he knew we were going to win, he’d dressed up in all of his finery with a new sports coat and everything. But after he got into the car at the end, he sat in about an inch of oil! I felt quite sorry for him, all dressed up like that and covered in oil! But I guess that under the circumstances he didn’t mind too much...

Back then, our racing budget was £150,000 for the whole season. A bit like the case back then, Aston Martin today has managed to achieve a lot with limited resources. I still have a lot of respect for the team and I’ll be thinking of everyone there at Le Mans.

It’s all so different though. These days I guess I would hardly recognise the place. Now Le Mans is more like a 24-hour sprint. Back then it was very different; everything was a series of compromises. There was no automatic rev limiter – only our feet – and the gearbox and clutch were not very strong. It was much more about endurance then. One slip and you could blow the engine.

But actually it’s impossible to compare 1959 and 2009. I always break racing down into eras, and you can’t say that one era was any easier or more difficult than the next era or the one before. It’s like comparing apples to oranges. The feeling of winning though: I’m sure that’s not changed much!

Physically it was very tough as I had dysentery during the entire race in 1959; something I ate I think! That was one of my main problems, but at Le Mans you just rise above any discomfort and forget everything else. That’s because when you

have a chance to win Le Mans it's the chance of a lifetime. Looking back on it though, it must have been really tricky as I didn't eat anything for 24 hours apart from dysentery tablets. Then we won the race and - oh my God – they suddenly stuck a champagne bottle in my mouth and it sent me a bit loopy! I was so tired I could hardly stand or think. I reckon I just collapsed afterwards and slept for about 12 hours.

Times change but I'm sure I would have enjoyed driving the modern LMP1 car too. Racing drivers just adapt to whatever machinery they have and learn as they go along. That's always been the case and always will be. We didn't do that much practice before the 1959 race, for example, as we didn't need it. We already knew the circuit and besides, you've got a whole 24 hours to answer any other questions you might have. Our priority was getting through the race and not making any mistakes. Believe me, there was plenty of potential to get it very badly wrong. Or for someone to get it wrong for you.

Back then, it probably rained at every race in Le Mans. Then you had the fog at night and the slow cars doing around 80mph on the right hand side of the track – that was the rule – and we were doing 160mph to 165mph on the left. You just had to hope it all worked out. And in 1959, it certainly did.

One thing that's still the same between then and now is the fact that Le Mans is so very different to anywhere else. The 24 Hours is legendary because it presents a whole new and different set of problems compared to other races. I'm sure that's still true now.

My personal message to the Aston Martin drivers before they start the race next weekend would simply be - carry the flag. Roy Salvadori and I are both really proud of you. Let's hope that this wonderful team goes on for another 50 years and the very best of luck to you all."

Aston Martin would like to thank Carroll Shelby for his kind participation in this interview. For more information about Carroll Shelby please visit www.carrollshelby.com