



# Joining the rotary club

In 1981 Mazda beat heavyweight opposition to become the first Japanese manufacturer to win the Spa 24 Hours. *Motor Sport* was offered a chance to try its victorious RX-7

writer ANDREW FRANKEL  
photographer DREW GIBSON

There are many things for which Le Mans 1991 might have been remembered: the fact the entry list included cars that were never intended to race or the fact that the car on pole qualified slower than the car in 11th place, which itself was almost 40 seconds per lap quicker than the car that qualified 10th. It should be notable for the fact that the Mercedes-Benz C11 that came fifth was piloted by one Michael Schumacher or that it is marked the most recent victory to date by a car shod with Dunlop rubber or, until 2015, the most recent win by a car featuring a serving Formula 1 driver. But no; one fact has overwhelmed all the others. We remember Le Mans 1991 as the first – and to date only – time the race has been won by a Japanese car manufacturer.

It was indeed a fine performance by Mazda and its 787B, but perhaps not quite as against the odds as history now holds: not only did the driver line-up comprise one former and two current F1 stars, the rotary-engined Mazdas had an 830kg weight limit compared to 1000kg for all the others in its class – an enormous advantage when you consider its four-rotor engines now produced 700bhp. And they had Jacky Ickx as an official team consultant, plus a minute entry of 38 cars of which just a dozen made it to the end...



But 10 years previously there was another 24-hour race, also won by Mazda, its first internationally recognised twice-around-the-clock victory. And here one David really did beat a whole field of Goliaths.

Back in 1981 the Spa-Francorchamps 24 Hours was to touring cars what Le Mans remains to sports cars: the ultimate international challenge. That's one reason why 65 cars tried to qualify for just 55 grid slots over the weekend of July 26-27. There were three classes for engines below 1600cc, 2500cc and above. Of those that made the grade, 33 were from the top class including seven Chevy Camaros with vast V8 motors, 15 3-litre Ford Capris and nine BMW 530is, all with 3-litre, six-cylinder engines. And no wonder: even in its then still new and severely abbreviated layout, Spa was then what it is now: a power circuit.



Walkinshaw and Dieudonné made history with unlikely Spa victory

Ranged against such might stood three Mazda RX-7s with tiny twin-rotor Wankel engines, rated at 2.3 litres but actually displacing half that capacity, placing them in the sub-2.5-litre category with considerable space to spare. One was for Win Percy and Peter Lovett (who retired), one finished fifth in the hands of Marc Duez, Jeff Allam and Chuck Nicholson and then there's the car seen on these pages. Driven by Tom Walkinshaw and Pierre Dieudonné, it won not just its class but the entire event. Outright.

Seeing it at Blyton Park today, it barely seems credible that a car apparently so standard could even compete on a grid chock-full of more powerful American and European machinery. It looks like a second-hand road car bought out of the back of a magazine, stripped and painted for racing by a team of amateur enthusiasts. It does not look like the best effort of a team likely to win Le Mans just seven years later with a handy device called a Jaguar XJR-9LM.

The story of the race is fascinating. No one outside the team expected the little Mazda to figure, not even when it qualified in second place next to the pole-sitting Camaro courtesy of one of *those* laps by Tom and some very special Dunlop rubber. Walkinshaw had after all entered a team into the same race the year before, one with none other than Derek Bell in the line-up, and they still wound up only 21st and 22nd overall, which seemed about right given their paucity of power.

For a team-mate Tom chose local hero Dieudonné, who already had two Spa 24 Hours victories under his belt, and nobody else, despite most teams and conventional thinking pointing to three-strong crews as the way to go. "You and I are going to drive together," he told Dieudonné. "I want only two drivers per car as it gives us better control over wear as time passes. Our car will be the hare and we'll go flat out: I'm not interested in holding something in reserve just to see the finish."



Nor had the team or cars exactly sat still since their modest achievement the year before. Mazda sent over the latest versions of its 12A rotary engine and homologated new parts to replace those identified as weak links after the post-race analysis from 1980. For his part Walkinshaw equipped the cars with air-jacks to speed up the pitstops.

Race day dawned under leaden skies – a big bonus in theory for the lightweight Mazda, but the team threw it away by sending the car out on intermediates just before a characteristic Spa deluge, sending the car tumbling down the leader board. But when the track started to dry, Tom sent Dieudonné out on slicks long before anyone else, a gamble promulgated on the basis that by this stage they were so far down the order there was little left to lose.

It worked. The RX-7 performed almost faultlessly. A slight graunch when selecting third gear and an electrical failure causing the lights to fail on Dieudonné were the only issues to trouble an otherwise undisturbed night, during which the Belgian did a straight four-hour stint.

By dawn the Mazda was second, driving around a circuit littered with the bodies of dead cars. The bad news? They were nearly two laps down on the leading BMW 530i driven by, among others, Jean-Claude Andruet. When Walkinshaw came in to hand over his instructions were unambiguous: “Go flat out – 9000rpm – and push like crazy. It’s our only chance of breaking that bloody BMW...” So he did and by 9.00am to general astonishment all round, the Mazda led for the first time since the opening lap.

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But BMW was not done yet and for hour after hour the lead see-sawed between the two according to who’d pitted most recently. At the penultimate stop, Walkinshaw rejoined just one minute behind and pegged the BMW’s lead. BMW responded by putting Andruet in for the final stint and with instructions to give it his all.

With both cars effectively doing qualifying laps after 22 hours of racing, it was always possible and perhaps likely that at least one of them would wilt under the pressure. And it was the BMW that broke a rocker arm and passed the remaining 90 minutes on five cylinders, just clinging on to second place at the flag.

That win brought so many firsts: it was Mazda’s maiden success in an international 24-hour race and the first time – in a history that dated back to 1924 – that the Spa 24 Hours had been won by a Japanese car or, for that matter, one powered by a rotary engine. It was Tom Walkinshaw’s first 24-hour victory and TWR’s too. Though little known today, it was a race of immense significance.



The car here is believed to be the race winner. Neither I nor its owner Kevin Doyle can categorically state that it is, but it was bought from TWR as such and Doyle says that Paul Davis – who ran the car at Spa – has looked at it and verified its identity. It has the special front spoiler fitted for Spa to allow low-level Cibie lights to be mounted because popping up the standard headlights reputedly knocked 5mph off its top speed. It has the rear disc brakes that were allowed only at Spa because in other touring car events the standard drums had to be retained. It has beefed-up driveshafts and a propshaft with a non-standard centre bearing, a sand-cast bell-housing and gearbox casing and, rather naughtily, cleverly concealed adjustable top mounts for the front suspension struts.



Perhaps most telling of all, there is a bank of fuses between the seats for things like lights, wipers and fuel pump, and during testing that was always being knocked by drivers' elbows. So someone was told to go to a DIY store and buy enough material to create raised rails either side of the fuses. And they're still there today.

Happily for me, Doyle is not one of those owners prepared to let me have only a brief, sanitised taste of his car. I can have as many laps and revs as I like. So far as can be determined, the car is today as it was when it ran at Spa. Doyle could fit the later 13B engine and gain an instant power hike, but aware of the car's importance he wants it preserved in exactly original condition, which probably means about 225bhp. With standard steel body panels, though, there's still a tonne or more of Mazda for it to haul about.

If anything's going to remind you that it was 34 years ago that this car put Mazda on the map, it's the interior. There are some race dials that are rather hard to read, but everything from the door cards to the wind-up windows are as they'd be on a road car. There's a TWR steering wheel and a supplementary rev-counter of the kind you usually find in big old American muscle cars, but that's about it.

The RX-7's rotary engine made it unique among its peers, of course. Because there are no pistons shuttling up and down cylinder bores, it sounds completely different from any other motor. It doesn't have the ear-shredding shriek of the four-rotor 787B that won Le Mans because this is still essentially a road car engine, but its voice – like the growl of a small dog playing on a continuous loop – is never less than interesting.

The gearbox is standard, too, so a slightly sharp clutch aside, getting in and driving away is no more difficult than in the street-spec RX-7 Mazda has brought to Blyton for comparison.



Frankel was allowed free rein at Blyton. Interior's road-going roots are obvious

It feels slow at first. The steering is quite heavy, the brakes a little dead and heel-and-toe downshifts hard to arrange due to pedal position. It angles nicely into Blyton's curves but feels restless near the limit on treaded Dunlop race rubber. And had the owner only been happy for me to drive it quite gently, that's pretty much all I'd be able to tell you about it.

But increase the effort level and it becomes another car altogether. The engine needs revs, in the same way that a Cosworth DFV without modern electronics needs revs. Below 6000rpm it's really quite slothful, but row it along between there and 8500rpm and it suddenly starts to make sense. The growl becomes a howl as the engine starts to voice its enthusiasm, encouraging you in turn to push the rest of the car similarly hard. At which point the chassis wakes up too and shows the car's true balance, adopting a slightly tail-out stance at any opportunity. It responds to a technique that allows it to carry speed and use power at high revs to compensate lack of mid-range torque.



In one regard it's an easy car to drive because it's pretty viceless, but I'd want to try it on slicks before claiming I had a true impression of what Messrs Dieudonné and Walkinshaw had in their hands at Spa. In another sense, however, it might prove quite tiring over 24 hours, particularly when the brief is to go flat out. Its limited power band means you have to be very precise with it all the time to keep it percolating. If you're at all casual with your gear choice or change-up points, you'd find yourself languishing at merely middling revs, going nowhere fast and watching your lap time disappear at a rate you'd never suffer in a six-cylinder BMW or Capri, let alone a Camaro with a small-block in its nose.

Which to me makes its achievement so many years ago all the more remarkable. It must have been hard work indeed to keep the RX-7 on the boil hour after hour, all through the day and night. But the rewards were worth it, for it kept both Walkinshaw and Mazda on course for far more famous 24-hour victories in France, albeit not at the same time. TWR got there in 1988 with Jaguar, Mazda had to wait until 1991. How ironic to consider, then, the final forgotten fact about the 1991 Le Mans: Mazda won the race, but in second, third and fourth places came Jaguar XJR-12LMs belonging to Tom Walkinshaw Racing.