MOLSHEIM
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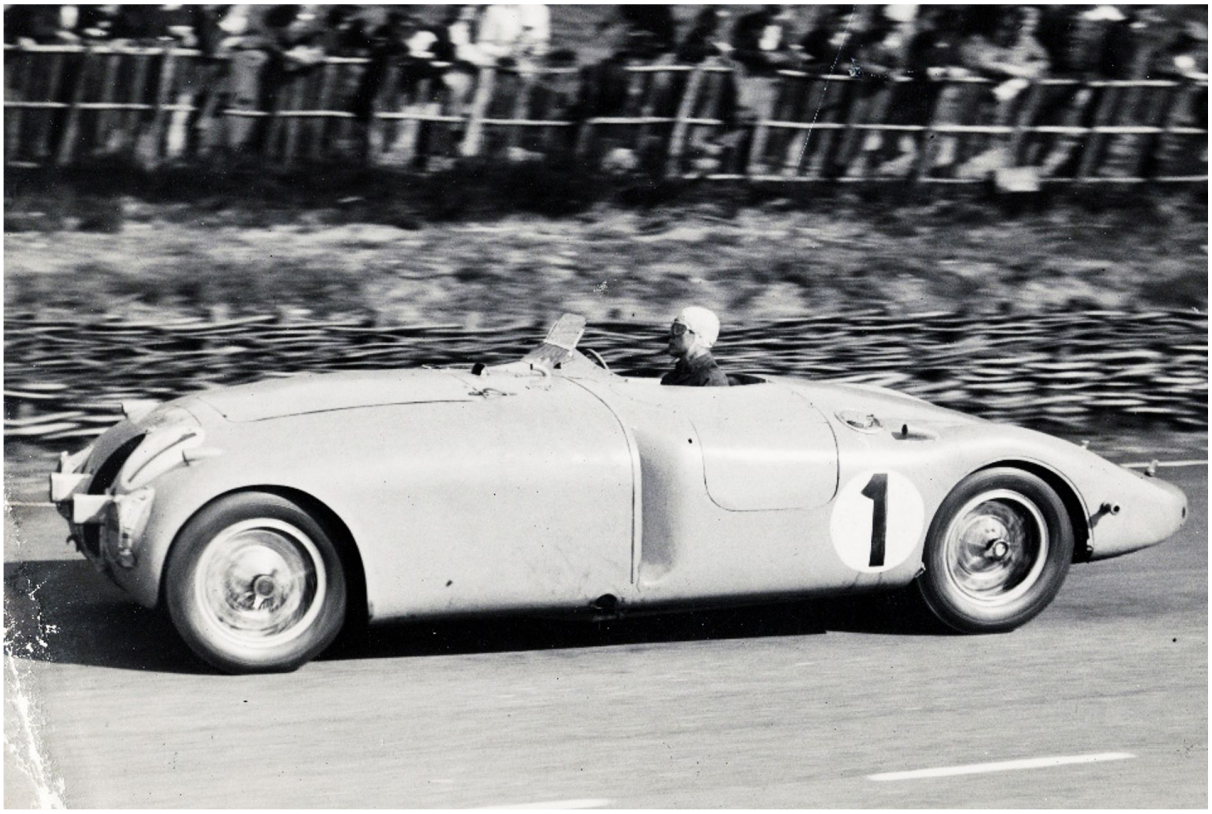
80 YEARS AGO — BUGATTI WINS 24 HOURS OF LE MANS



It´s one of the most famous and toughest endurance races in the world: the 24-Hours of Le Mans in France. It is the birthplace of legends. Exactly 80 years ago, on the 18th of June 1939 two Frenchman were victorious with their French race car: Jean-Pierre Wimille and Pierre Veyron in a Bugatti Type 57 C Tank. Incidentally, Bugatti would remain the reigning champion for the next ten years.
50 drivers entered the race in eight different categories, but only 42 would actually start the race. 80 years ago, the 24-Hours of Le Mans were already an outright manufacturer's battle, although the race did not belong to any racing series back then. The competition was tremendous: 25 vehicles alone came from France, with famous brands like Delahaye, Delage and Talbot. On the starting grid were Adlerwerk and BMW from Germany, Great Britain was represented Aston Martin, Morgan, Riley, MG and Singer and from Italy Alfa Romeo.

2026 BUGATTI AUTOMOBILES S.A.S.

Bugatti went to the race with great enthusiasm. The previous year, the French car maker had had to renounce their start in the prestigious race due to technical problems. This year, however, with the 16thedition of the Type 57, everything was working. Under the streamlined body of the Type 57 race version there was a nearly series production chassis of the Type 57 C, developed by Jean Bugatti, the brilliant engineer and son of l Bugatti founder Ettore. By charging a compressor, the 8-cylinder engine with 3.3 litre capacity and two overhead camshafts produced around 200 bhp. This allowed for speeds of over 255 km/h on the straight. Through additional upgrades, Bugatti managed to reduce the weight of the round, pontoon shaped bonnet. The rear axle, crank shaft and other parts were also optimized.

BUGATTI IN THE CATEGORY OF KINGS

Winners aren't necessarily always the fastest drivers, but rather the most tactical ones with the most reliable racing car. Jean-Pierre Wimille knew the circuit well: two years earlier, the Frenchman won with a Type 57 G tank with an average speed of 136 km/h. This year, starting in the Category of Kings, where engines ranged from 2 to 5 litres, it was also looking good for potential victory.

But from the start on, things went quite different. The favourite: two-time Le Mans winner Raymond Sommer with a new Alfa Romeo. He lead the race from the start and widened the gap with the other drivers, including Jean-Pierre Wimille. But the Bugatti pro drove exceptionally, taking clean lines in the curves while preserving his tires and brakes. Until late at night, the cars were driving with more and more speed. Sommer and Wimille's fierce fight for first place was soon joined by Louis Gérad and Georges Monnert, drivers for Delage. But their race car could not withstand the strain: on Sunday morning, an engine problem forced them to stop in the pit lane. Meanwhile, Pierre Veyron drove on, pushing his Type 57 C Tank lap after lap. The company's patriarch would later claim that during the race, the mechanics never once had to open the bonnet, since the 8-cylinder engine was so reliable.

BUGATTI FINISHES THREE LAPS AHEAD

With a track distance of almost 13,5 kilometres per lap, Wimille and Veyron covered 3.354 kilometres — 248 laps — in 24 hours. The sports car achieved an average speed of 139 km/h. The runner-up car of the race was three laps behind and the third car nine laps. Of the 42 cars that started, only 20 crossed the finish line.

This victory at the 24-Hours of Le Mans 80 years ago in 1939, marked the last great success of Bugatti in motor sports — only two months later, the second world war started. Bugatti had to cease production shortly afterwards, evacuate the factory and could only restart the production with great difficulties after the war had ended. The 24-Hours of Le Mans were resumed only in 1949. Although without Bugatti, who still kept the record of covered distance of 3.354 kilometres until 1950. Yet another record for Bugatti.