

MARK BATES

SC GD

IN THIS SPECIAL FEATURE, we talk to Mark Bates who, alongside his brother James, has been a long-time supporter and a regular face in the Masters paddock. The brotherly duo have been a competitive pairing across the Masters Sports Car Legends and Masters Gentlemen Drivers in their Porsches. Find out more about their racing story and what led them to race with Masters....

“FROM AN EARLY AGE WE WERE MESSING AROUND WITH CARS ON RACETRACKS.”



INTRODUCING MARK BATES

In their Porsches, Mark Bates and his brother James have been Masters drivers for well over a decade, today racing a 1974 Porsche 911 RSR in Masters Sports Car Legends and a 1965 Porsche 911 2.0 in Masters Gentlemen Drivers. Their spectacular sideways style has marked them out as crowd favourites in every series they've competed in while they have been Masters class winners on numerous occasions. We talked to Mark ahead of the 2023 Spa Six Hours meeting.

“COULD I JUST TURN UP WITH THE CAR? DID WE NEED A PIT CREW? THEY (MASTERS) SAID, YOU CAN TURN UP AND DO IT AS A SELF-PREPARER, SO THAT’S WHAT WE DID.”



HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN HISTORIC MOTOR RACING?

“We were doing a lot of track days for a long time. I always fancied an early 911, so I bought one – a restoration process started and then it was really a question of restoring it back to its road car roots or making it into a period-correct race car. So we ended up building a 2.5 ST race car. Then I asked one of the guys I’d met from the track days where he was racing. I knew he raced in Europe and he put me in touch with Masters. I remember going to Race Retro at Stoneleigh Park, back in the mid to late 2000s, and had a conversation with Masters. Could I just turn up with the car? Did we need a pit crew? They said you can turn up and do it as a self-preparer, so that’s what we did!”

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST-EVER MASTERS MEETING?

“We ended up doing the Masters Top Hat series in that ST, and the first race meeting was at Snetterton on the old circuit. I remember turning up and having teething problems with the car, but we did okay and ended up winning the race, which was a bit of a surprise for me because the car had to be towed back... It kind of snowballed from there. At the same time, people would come and ask us where the parts came from. So we started evolving our parts production and grew our business out of historic motorsport. The guys I worked with back in the early days to build the first car did a lot of rally preparation, and the panels they were getting weren’t very good, so that was a good market opportunity for us. The first year was me doing my own thing, and then I thought, well, we’ll use this to promote the business. From then on, it’s been a hobby that’s become a business!”

SO THE RACING CAME BEFORE THE BUSINESS?

“We had go-karts as kids and were always fascinated by cars and race circuits. I was 15, 16 years old when my parents booked myself and my brother on a Jim Russell race school day down at Donington. And years ago, car manufacturers used to invite you down to test cars on circuits if they wanted to sell you a new car. We used to go and do that with my dad, so from an early age, we were messing around with cars on racetracks.”

AND IT’S ALWAYS BEEN PORSCHE?

“We like all cars, but it was really James, my brother, who, as a kid, had a toy 911. He was really into 911s, and I used to joke with him about it, but it’s become what we’re known for. So in 2009, we did the Top Hat series with the 2.5-litre ST. It was called Stars of the 70s at the time, and had GTs and touring cars on treaded tyres, and then they had another series called the Touring 70s which was slick tyres with Batmobiles, Mk1 and Mk2 Escorts and Cologne Capris. So early on, I thought I want to work my way up to the Touring 70s series. In the final race of that season the car ended up in some contact with a backmarker and I used that as an excuse to evolve the car into a 3-litre RSR. We did that over the winter, got the papers for it, and then we actually took two lots of tyres and raced it in the Touring 70s and in Masters Sports Cars on treaded tyres with Paul Howells, Peter Halford in the Corvette and a few more RSRs and Panteras in a race series that was all over Europe. Then the Touring 70s disappeared and the Masters Sports Cars series evolved into the FIA series before morphing into today’s Masters Sports Car Legends. Then, after we were coming here to Spa to race in the Touring 70s, another guy on the Porsche side, Steve Winter, rang me last minute and said, do you want to come and race my 1965 911 in the Six Hours with me? That was in 2011, I think, and I loved it. So we went out to find a pre-66 911 ourselves, purely for the Six Hours. But once we had the car, we thought we might as well do Gent Drivers... We had a lot of luck and a lot of success in the early days and were young enough at the time, so we’d fill our boots as much as we could.”

“WE HAD A LOT OF LUCK AND A LOT OF SUCCESS IN THE EARLY DAYS AND WERE YOUNG ENOUGH AT THE TIME, SO WE’D FILL OUR BOOTS AS MUCH AS WE COULD.”





“WE DO LIKE DRIVING SIDWAYS. IT IS A LOT OF FUN, ESPECIALLY IN THE WET.”

IN IT TO WIN IT – OR JUST FOR FUN?

“I’d be lying if I said we didn’t like winning but I’m disappointed if we don’t place well. So yeah, from my point of view, I’m in it to win it, but I think if you ask my brother, he doesn’t have the same competitive side. Sure, he’s upset if we don’t do well, but in the early days, I was the one who’d have probably lost sleep over it.”

YOU DO HAVE A VERY SPECTACULAR SIDWAYS STYLE THAT COULD LOSE YOU A COUPLE OF TENTHS, SO THAT LOOKS MORE LIKE YOU’RE OUT THERE TO HAVE SOME FUN...

“Yeah, we’ve got a bit of a reputation for that... We do like driving sideways. It is a lot of fun, especially in the wet, and in the early days I had a thing where if it was the last lap of a race and we were placed well, I’d just try and send it round every corner – for the spectators and for my own enjoyment. Then, with the ‘65 911, we spent a long time trying to tame the chassis on that, so people thought we drove like that, but actually, the thing would not go in a straight line!”

YOUR BEST DAY IN MOTOR RACING?

“That’s a difficult one because over the years we’ve had some great success at various circuits, winning the first race we ever entered was a real surprise but very nice, the World Sports Car Championship back to back in 2011 and ‘12 – who wouldn’t want to win a championship? – but then it was always the next event. We came to Spa and won the GTS11 class in the Six Hours in 2015 and then we also won the Nürburgring 4 Hour Trophy race the same year – all I ever wanted to do was race on the Nordschleife, and we went there in the second year and won. Getting to race at Le Mans for the 24 Hours support race – there are lots of bucket list things that we ticked off. So our best day in racing so far? All those events are sort of mixed into one. And now, it’s if we can get the car home in one piece without any incidents and place well – that’s a good day in racing for us.”



“AT FOUR O’CLOCK IN THE MORNING, WE’D GOT THE ENGINE IN A MILLION PIECES, REBUILT IT AND NEGOTIATED WITH THE ORGANISERS TO START LAST.”

AND YOUR WORST DAY?

“We’ve had a couple of real shockers, but in 2019, we came to the Spa Six Hours meeting, and the distributor cap came loose on the ‘65. As a result, we missed both qualifying sessions. At four o’clock in the morning, we’d got the engine in a million pieces, rebuilt it and negotiated with the organisers to start last. So we started dead last in 113th, next to Nick Swift, who also had had problems. Two hours in, we were 60th and first in class, and after six hours, we finished second in class. So it went from being the worst weekend to one of the best... Today, any race meeting that we don’t finish is bad. And any time we’ve got to rebuild the car is not a good weekend either.”

THE BEST CAR YOU EVER DROVE?

“I do like the little ‘65. We’ve driven lots of things over the years, but I think for fun, it’s the little ‘65. It’s not the quickest round here by any stretch but it’s just a lot of fun to drive. James hated it when we first put it together and now I think it’s his favourite car!”

AND THE WORST ONE?

“I think the worst car I’ve ever driven is probably a Morris Marina when I was doing automotive studies at a night class. That was a real shitbox. The worst race car was the ‘65 when we first put it together...”

YOUR FAVOURITE CIRCUIT?

“Well, that’s a tough one, that could be anywhere. I could be predictable and say Spa and the Nordschleife but the street race at Vila Real in Portugal has got to be up there, the track where they used to do the World Touring Car Championship. It felt a bit like doing the Targa Florio – loads of blind corners, you’ve got to have a lot of commitment around there. And Zandvoort – it’s always been a favourite. It’s difficult to pick just one; I’m greedy!”

WHY DOESN'T MASTERS GO TO...

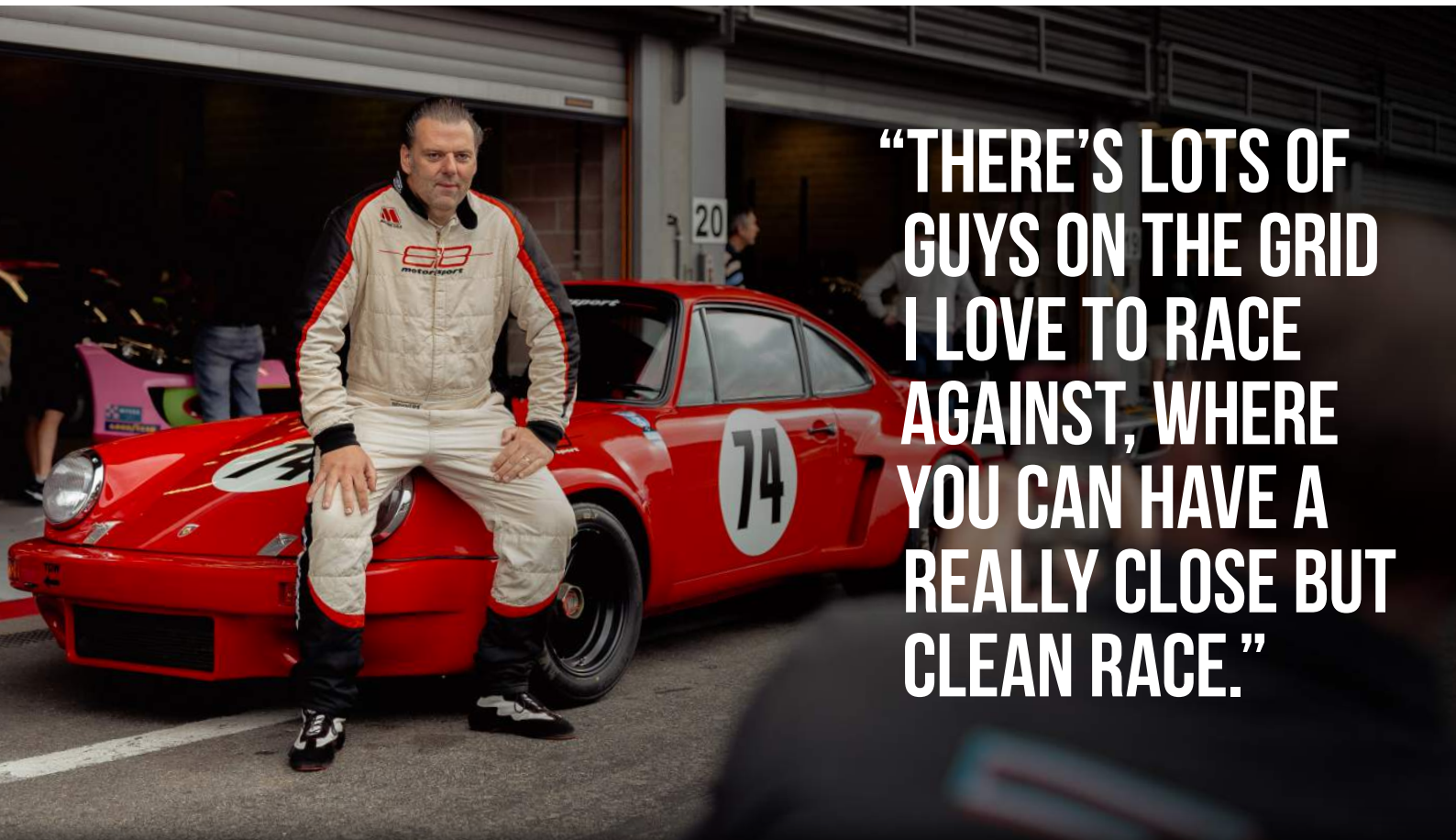
"That Portuguese street circuit, and the Nordschleife, but I don't know if that'll ever come back. But I think Dijon. That's a nice circuit; we don't race there enough. Any of that type of circuit with the undulations. The thing is, when you get a circuit like the old Zandvoort, Oulton Park, Donington Park or Dijon, the layout of the circuit helps us compete, especially when we're racing things like Peter Hallford's big Corvette. He'd nail everybody on the straights but then a corner would come up and we would have the advantage. So it's those circuits where in the back of your mind you know where you've got to make your time up."

WHO IS THE RIVAL THAT YOU FEAR OR RESPECT THE MOST?

"If there were a lot more 911s racing, I suppose that would be an easier question to answer. But the ones we love racing against are Keith Ahlers and Billy Bellinger in the Cooper Monaco King Cobra. We're not in the same class but it's always been a bit of a personal thing when we were on the same bit of tarmac. Billy and myself have had some proper fun battles, to the point where Keith won't let us both do the opening stint! And then there's Mark Owen when he and his dad had the old Elva in the early days. We'd always have some fun against each other – different class, but yeah, same piece of tarmac... There's lots of guys on the grid I love to race against, where you can have a really close but clean race."

AND FINALLY, WHO'S YOUR BEST MATE IN THE PADDOCK?

"That would be James – we're brothers aren't we? Since kids we've always done a lot of things together, and it's always nice to be together on the grid."



“THERE'S LOTS OF GUYS ON THE GRID I LOVE TO RACE AGAINST, WHERE YOU CAN HAVE A REALLY CLOSE BUT CLEAN RACE.”