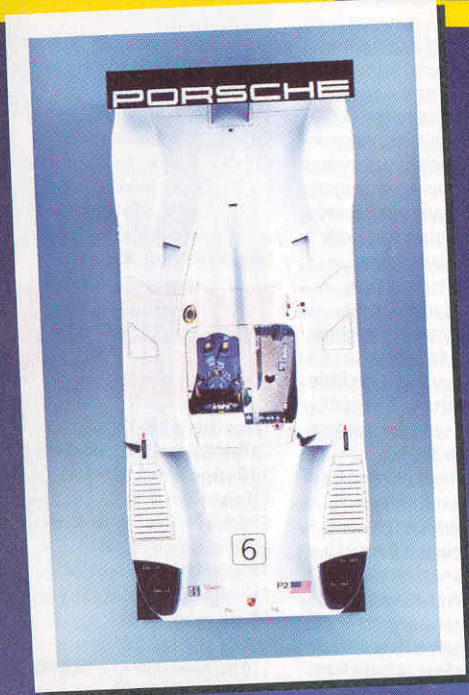


# IS PORSCHE BACK W OR IS IT BUSINESS\$A



**T**his car will shortly become the first all-new purpose-built Porsche racing car to hit a pukka circuit in more than seven years. For that we should rejoice. Yet whether we should close the streets and put up the bunting, or just crack open a bottle of something nice, remains to be seen. The existence of the Stuttgart manufacturer's prototype became real last week with the release of these pictures, but we still don't know if it marks the beginning of a return to top-line sportscar racing for a marque that has won the Le Mans 24 Hours no fewer than 16 times.

Or to put it another way, is the Porsche LMP2 the spiritual successor to the 917, the 936 and the 962 – all multiple winners at Le Mans – or the hundreds of 911 GT3s that have bulked out the grids in just about every long-distance series over the past half dozen seasons? The evidence, unfortunately, suggests the latter.

Porsche has been missing from the pinnacle of a branch of the sport it dominated through the 1970s and '80s since the end of 1998. It pulled out for one year – “to plan a future-orientated, long-term motorsport policy” no less – and has been absent ever since. An all-new prototype was produced for 2000, but this car never made it beyond the test track at Porsche's Weissach R&D and motorsport facility.

The 2000 season was a significant one in Porsche's

motorsport history, though. The new road-based 911 GT3-R, a car built to take advantage of the then-new class we now know as GT2, went on general sale. Six years on, this car and its successors – the RS and the RSR – have been sold in huge numbers. Up-to-date figures aren't available, but to the end of 2005 well over 100 had been sold, and that doesn't include the hundreds of Cup cars that race in Porsche's one-make series and elsewhere around the world.

The GT3-R has been good business for a marque that has always placed great emphasis on what it calls “customer sport”. Porsche boss Wendelin Wiedeking has seen the programme evolve into a major profit centre for his company, at the same time as maintaining a presence in sportscar racing. For a man who doesn't like spending money on racing, it was manna from heaven. The car even managed to score overall victories, albeit in unusual circumstances, in the 24-hour endurance at Daytona and Spa-Francorchamps in 2005.

The LMP2 project has grown out of the phenomenal success of the GT3-R. Many of the customers who have populated the lower ranks of championships such as the American Le Mans Series, Grand-Am and FIA GTs with these cars began to think there might be something beyond a quirky road-based GT car with an engine slung out behind the rear axle. The problem was that to move up they had to step out of the cosy world of racing a Porsche and the cradle to grave

