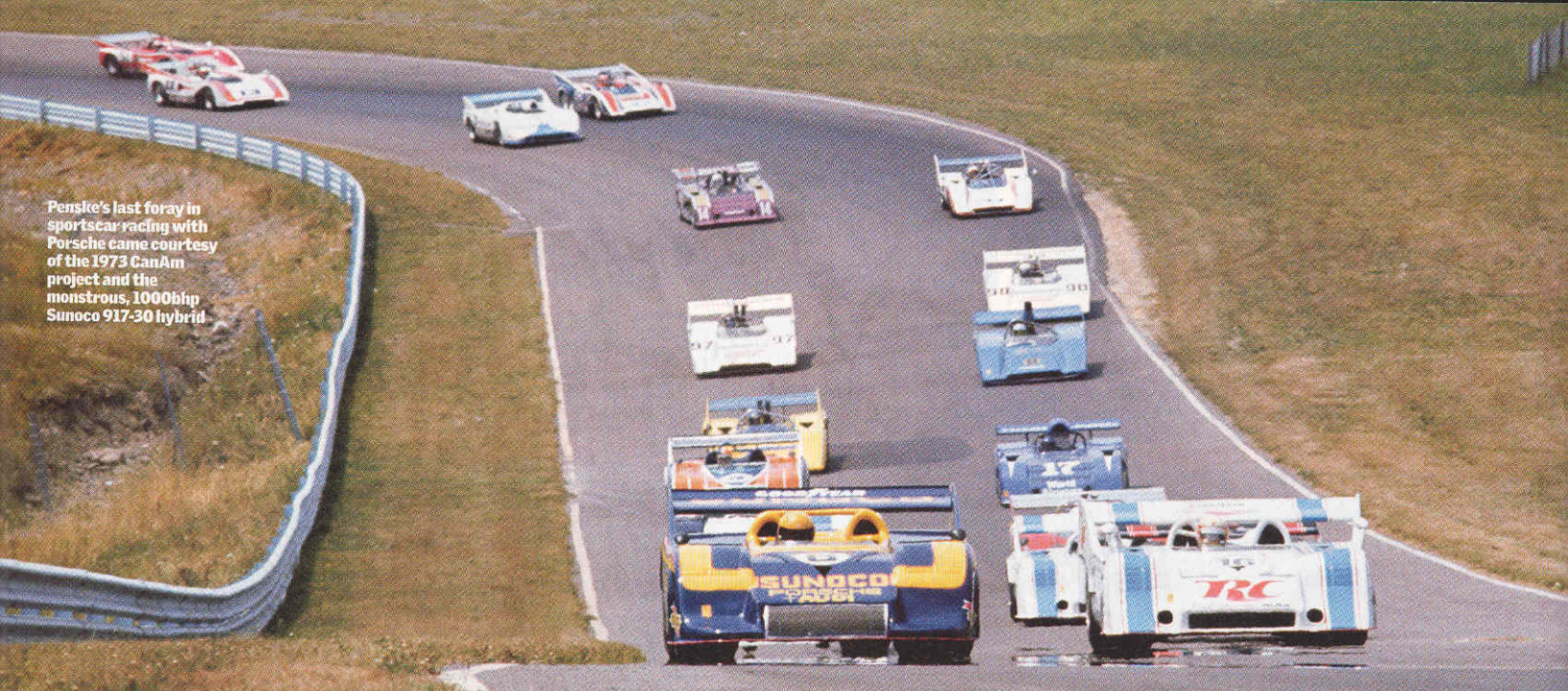


Penske's last foray in sportscar racing with Porsche came courtesy of the 1973 CanAm project and the monstrous, 1000bhp Sunoco 917-30 hybrid



"MANY OF OUR CUSTOMERS WANTED TO FURTHER THEIR TEAMS. THE LMP2 CAR IS THE SOLUTION AND IT IS A SIMPLE ONE" HARTMUT KRISTIN, PORSCHE MOTORSPORT BOSS

"We saw an area in which we could extend our relationship with our customers," says Carlsson. "We had the opportunity to offer a product for those who wanted to move up to a higher category. At the same time we wanted to showcase a bit more technology in the ALMS, too, and a prototype allows us to do that."

Porsche AG's motorsport boss, Hartmut Kristin offers the same explanation.

"Many of our customers wanted to further their teams," he says. "This is the solution and it is a simple one."

Producing a car for the LMP1 division was never an option, according to Carlsson. "Given the focus of this programme we thought it better to enter a class devised for customers," he says. "If we had built an LMP1 car they would have gone up against the factories."

Kristin also explains that Porsche evaluated producing a car to take on Aston Martin and Chevrolet in the burgeoning GT1 category. "We looked at it from a theoretical point of view," he explains, "but it was at least as expensive as an LMP2 and time-wise it didn't fit with our needs. That's a reference to the V10-engined Carrera GT, a machine that can sell itself without a motorsport programme to show off its supercar credentials."

Porsche is also known to have looked at a GT1 version of its 911 Turbo. It has never been publicly admitted, but some kind of running show car or test hack was built and presented to the board last summer. The rejection of that route almost certainly

led to the decision to build an LMP2, a project that was probably signed off in December.

An LMP2 car should be a better seller than a GT1 car. Whereas the big GT class is increasingly fought out by manufacturers, the secondary prototype division is proving to be a cost-effective category that is attracting existing sportscar teams and new ones: witness the 13 entries that turned out in the class at Le Mans earlier this month. The car, which is powered by an all-new V8, will never be sold in the huge numbers of the 911 GT3-R but it should still prove profitable.

Porsche NA doesn't hide that fact, although it does seem slightly embarrassed by it.

"This is a business and the goal of any business is to make a profit, but this isn't just another means of making money," says Carlsson. "The desire to maintain and add to our motorsport heritage was a contributing factor."

Some doubt that a customer LMP2 car, which might well have a more racy nomenclature by the time it makes its race debut in the 1000-mile Petit Le Mans enduro in October, is enough to maintain that heritage, even if a team as famous and worthy as Penske has been chosen to hone it into a customer-ready race car in the ALMS over the next 18 months.

The new car is unlikely to win races overall and, remarkably, no date has been pencilled in for its Le Mans debut. The return of the manufacturers to the top flight of sportscar racing over the next few years will leave Porsche fighting for class wins. Triumphs over the likes of Lola, Courage and Lucchini,

garagiste constructors already selling cars in LMP2, will merit only a footnote in the marque's rich racing history.

On the other hand, the existence of this project can only bring an out-and-out return to the sportscar big-time a step nearer. The LMP2 chassis rules are identical to those of its big brother and this programme will provide a wealth of information that could be utilised in an LMP1 design.

Kristin won't be drawn on the prospects of a Porsche LMP1 car in the future. "All we have decided is this programme," he says. But there are signs that Porsche is looking in that direction. Weissach is undergoing a massive redevelopment, the modernisation that former R&D boss Horst Marchart claimed a couple of years back was necessary before there could be any major motorsport comeback. The racing staff has also been bolstered by key appointments from outside, while Michael Pfadenhauer, chief aerodynamicist on Audi's R8, has switched companies. Since January he has been in charge of all aerodynamics at Porsche, but the word is that he did have some input into the LMP2.

If Pfadenhauer does ever get around to working on an LMP1 design, it will be some years to come. Penske will hone the LMP2 into a turn-key customer car over the course of the next 18 months in the American Le Mans Series and only then will deliveries start. That means a Porsche capable of adding to those 16 Le Mans wins is unlikely before 2008.

That's not just 10 years after the last triumph at La Sarthe – it's far too long. ☒

FRIENDS REUNITED

THE PORSCHE/PENSKIE TIE-UP TICKS ALL THE RIGHT COMMERCIAL, SPORTING AND HISTORICAL BOXES

PORSCHE COULDN'T have created a better storyline when choosing who to run its new LMP2 car in the American Le Mans Series. Penske isn't just the most successful single-seater squad in North America, it is also a team that added to the legend of the 917 with back-to-back wins in the 1972 and '73 CanAm series.

The tie-up was an obvious one, and not just for historical reasons. Hartmut Kristin calls Penske the "best team you can find in the US", while Penske Racing president Tim Cindric points out that the group had been eyeing a sportscar return for

some years. Factor in team boss Roger Penske's ownership of a string of Porsche dealerships in both North America and Europe, and it all adds up.

"Every few months, Roger and I would discuss sportscars," explains Cindric. "We had some other opportunities, but they weren't what we wanted. This is a good fit, because Penske and Porsche represent the same traditional racing values."

Roger Penske (right) was first approached at the Detroit Auto Show in January and the deal announced in April. Penske personnel were present at the first

shakedown runs of the LMP2 at Weissach and will be heavily involved in a European test programme due to begin soon.

After that the first LMP2 will decamp to Penske Racing's single-seater base in Reading, Pennsylvania, in preparation for its two ALMS appearances this year. The sportscar squad will then set up permanent base at Penske Motorsport's NASCAR facility in Mooresville, North Carolina, over the winter in preparation for a full two-car assault on the 2006 ALMS.

Expect the driving squad to include Porsche stalwarts Sascha



Maassen and Lucas Luhr – who have undertaken the initial runs – and young American Pat Long. Factory-contractees Emmanuel Collard and Romain Dumas both have prototype experience so must also be candidates.

Le Mans isn't on the 2006 schedule, but LMP2 customers will eventually want to take the car to La Sarthe. What price a Penske Porsche at Le Mans in '07?

"Le Mans is one of the big races Roger would like to tick off the list," says Cindric, "and we see our relationship with Porsche being for the long-term, so we never know where it will take us."