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Book Review – Derek Bell: All My Porsche Races

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DEREK BELL

All my Porsche races

Book Review – Derek Bell: All My Porsche Races.

**Derek Bell &
Richard Heseltine**

Title: All My Porsche Races

Author: Derek Bell and Richard Heseltine



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(...and signed by Derek Bell if purchased direct).

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Derek Bell's long career divides into two parts: The teenage marshall at Goodwood who graduated through a Lotus 7 to stardom in F3, a brief stint at Ferrari - Le Mans in a 512, la Sarthe again in 1971 in John Wyer's Porsche 917, yet whose F1 career, Surtees, Tecno, resolutely failed to materialize. Indeed by the early 1970s his hopes of ever reaching motor racing's top flight had evaporated and like so many talented professional racers, he turned to sports cars, offering his services to whichever team would have him. There were high points, notably winning at Le Mans in 1975 with Ickx, but teams came and went and such successes were few. As Bell approached 40, he began to think of retirement. Then in 1980 he was invited to drive a works 924GT at Le Mans. He was never a production car enthusiast, so this prospect did not excite him. However, as a professional, he could not turn the job down - a factory team would pay more than the privateer 935 he had intended to drive. This would prove to be the beginning of the second part of Bell's career as the following year, Porsche returned to Le Mans with the hastily assembled 936 and Bell, chosen as part of the squad, found himself sharing with Ickx. This duo duly repeated its 1975 victory prompting Porsche to make a committed return to sports car racing in the new Group C. The Briton would stay with the Porsche works team until it withdrew during 1987 and his hunger for racing undiminished, he continued for several more seasons in private Porsche squads until both he, at 53 and the Porsche 962 were no longer deemed competitive.

In *All My Porsche Races* Bell looks back over a halcyon period during which he won four more Le Mans titles as well as three victories at Daytona as the lynch pin of the Porsche



team over six seasons. Author Richard Heseltine unobtrusively marshals Bell's recollections and his commentary provides historical context. This is a fascinating book: Bell comes across as an engagingly modest fellow. His observations have a freshness and balance of a man with no particular axe to grind. Porsche impressed him: "*...the sheer scale of the operation: Bott shouldered an incredible burden.*" He is rarely critical of colleagues or his employers and when he did lose his temper he readily acknowledges it. On the other hand the reader relives all the grinding frustration he must have felt when Porsche once again used his race 962 to test PDK or ABS when these technologies were far from developed and the favoured Ickx was not similarly burdened (other drivers have also commented on this). After the episode in question, Bott took Bell aside and explained with the proverbial paternal pat on the head that without the commitment race-testing he could not get board approval for his budget. Bell's generous reaction was to offer him three weeks of development work at Paul Ricard. Elsewhere one can again only sympathise when at Le Mans in 1987, Klaus Ludwig foolishly ran out of fuel near the end effectively costing Bell a sixth win there. The long hours worked and the frustrations when things were going badly affected all team members and Bell describes how he and Stuck, a very effective partnership (and still a close friendship today) nevertheless could get angry with each other; yet Bell adds how awkward and undeserving he felt when a revision to scoring made him and not Stuck 1986 champion. Neither is he afraid of admitting to emotion either, recalling how when co-driver Stommelen was killed at Riverside in 1983 he "*had to find a quiet corner to weep.*"

VERDICT

It is an utterly compelling read - one feels Bell's dismay when after Porsche's withdrawal he found himself in private squads with nothing like the same resources, yet he drove with the same determination whilst acknowledging the effort made by the team often with rather less competitive cars. A clearer picture of life in Group C is unlikely to emerge. It might have been interesting to know how much drivers were paid at Porsche - Bell does not say, but, one suspects, they were hardly spoilt and when he and Stuck found themselves without works support for 1988, they simply took it upon themselves to secure sponsorship. Such commitment and self reliance is hard to imagine in today's top level motor racing. As with



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his work on Graham Warner, Richard Heseltine has done well to allow his subject to express himself in his own words so the book flows like a long interview.

Derek Bell has become one of the most popular figures in the historic racing scene. On the strength of the personality revealed here, it is easy to see why.