Book Review – Ford GT 40 – The Autobiography of 1075

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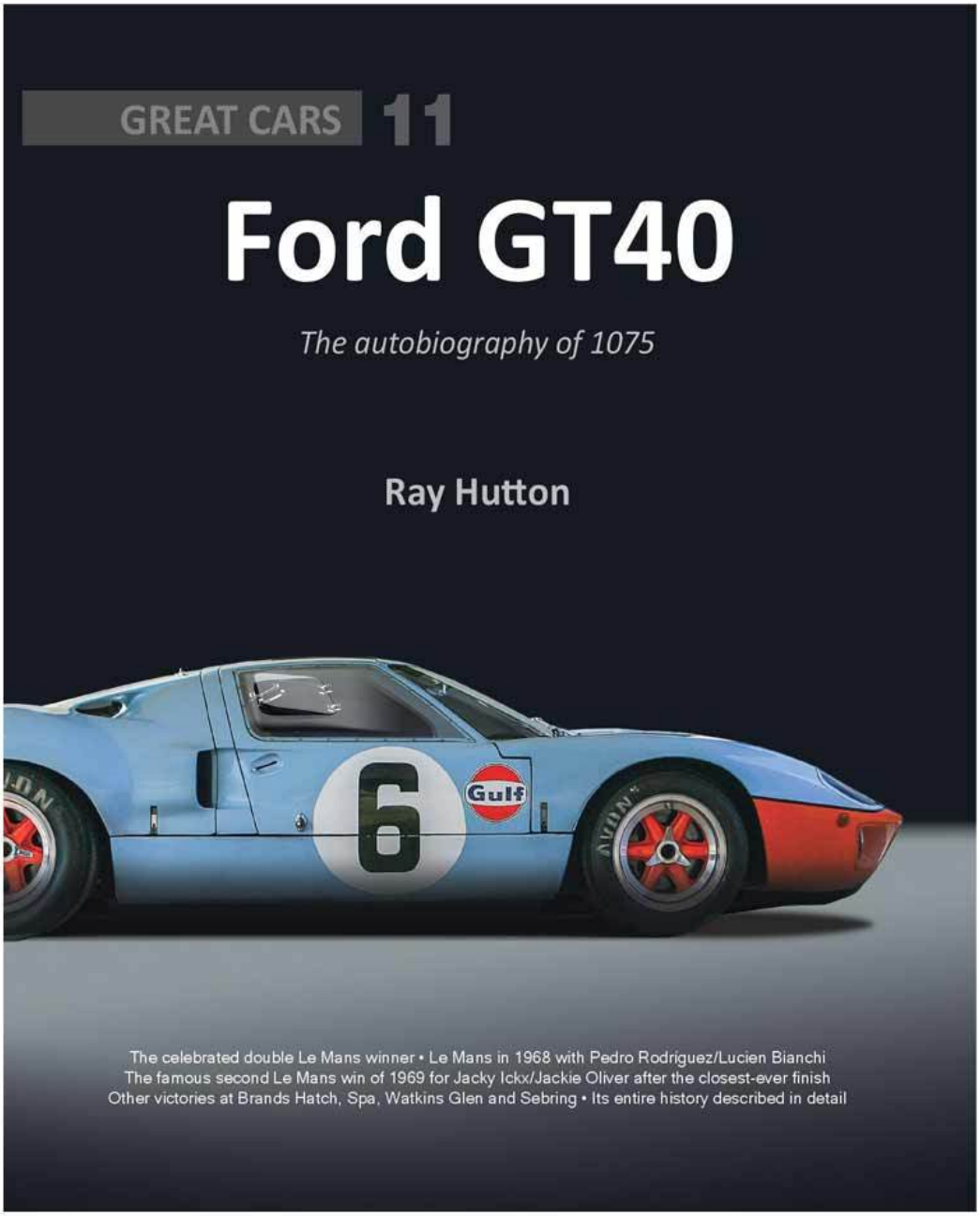

Kieron Fennelly reviews a comprehensive and fascinating new book about Ford's GT40 and in particular, the history of the famous No. 1075…

Title: Ford GT 40 – The Autobiography of 1075

Author: Ray Hutton

Published by: Porter Press International; www.porterpress.co.uk

320 pages; hardback

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The sportscar racing of the mid-1960s remains enduringly popular and has provided material for a number of authors, understandable given the sequence of events reads almost like a film script. In 1963 the mighty Ford Motor Corporation decided it wanted to buy itself some motorsport glory and sought to purchase Ferrari. When this approach was rebuffed at the last moment, Ford reacted emphatically – 'If we can't buy them we'll beat them!' So began an increasingly expensive operation to win at Le Mans and beat Maranello at its own game and take three years and countless millions of Dearborn's dollars. Then after the second victory in 1967 and their honour satisfied, the Americans went home. But Ford's departure left behind an entire competition infrastructure and a robust and proven racing car, the GT40. And one of those GT40s, chassis number 1075, conceived in 1965, would go on to win Le Mans not just once, in 1968, but again in 1969 and that after the closest finish ever seen before or since in endurance racing.

Ray Hutton tells the complete story from the evolution of Eric Broadley's Lola GT into the Ford GT 40 and how after its 1966-7 victories Ford's racing operation, Ford Advanced Vehicles in Slough, morphed into the John Wyer organisation. Formerly with Aston Martin, Wyer had been employed by Ford to run FAV, then after the 1965 season where the GT40s again failed to dislodge Ferrari, he was demoted and Dearborn put Carroll Shelby in charge. In 1968 with Ford gone, Wyer returned to managing his own team. That year the FIA had decreed a 3 litre limit for prototypes and 5 litres for GTs. As the author explains, almost by chance Wyer was able to obtain unprecedentedly generous sponsorship from Gulf Oil and he then set about building an entry in the 3 litre prototype class. The Gulf Mirage though

would not be ready for the first part of the season, so he persevered with the GT40 which his firm in any case had been building for private clients since 1965. As it turned out, the BRM engined Mirage would prove uncompetitive when at last it did materialise and the reliable GT40s became almost by default Wyer's main weapon.

As Ferrari faded from the scene, the main opposition came increasingly from Porsche and as the book describes race by race the 1968-9 seasons, it reads like a novel: Though as with the Titanic everyone knows the outcome, the build-up to that 1969 Le Mans is still enthralling. Along the way the planning and precision of John Wyer Racing becomes very apparent and it is little wonder that Porsche asked him to take over their racing for the 1970-1 seasons. Wyer himself was unusually canny: The GT40s were by then heavy, obsolete racing cars, yet he would calculate just what average pace they would need to maintain to beat the Porsche 908s and correctly predicted that Porsche's 917s, conceived with incredible speed in the winter of 1968-9, would not last the distance at Le Mans. When it came to the final hours and GT40 No. 1075 was vying with the Herrmann-Larrousse 908, he kept Ickx rather than Oliver, whose turn it was, at the wheel.

The book is enriched by extended biographies of each of the eight men who took drove 1075 during those two seasons, and while stars such as Ickx and Redman are well known, it is good to see less familiar figures as Paul Hawkins and the much admired Lucien Bianchi given comparable treatment. The author has also exhumed a contemporary track test of 1075, a fascinating piece written for *the Autocar* by the inimitable Innes Ireland. An appendix describing the Gulf GT40 in detail is accompanied by outstanding photography of a fully restored and operational 1075 today. Indeed the photography throughout the book is exceptional and commendable use has been made of continental and private collections, not just LAT.

VERDICT

This compelling piece of historical writing is clearly the result of extensive research and though the pedant may quibble about Americanised locations – 'Silverstone, England' or 'London's Heathrow Airport' which slightly jar with rest of the text, this unputdownable

account is a must for sports racing enthusiasts.