

Early Chrysler Racing, 1924 – 1931

In 1924, Walter P. Chrysler introduced a remarkably advanced new American automobile. It featured a high-compression, high-revving six-cylinder engine that could propel it to a breathtaking 70 miles per hour. The appropriately designated Chrysler 70 was also the first large-scale production car in the world to offer the outstanding stopping power of four-wheel hydraulic brakes. Motor racing enthusiasts both in America and abroad were impressed with the car and its capabilities. Among these were two Frenchmen, Henri Stoffel and Lucien Desvaux. Both had competed at the inaugural 24-hour endurance race at Le Mans west of Paris but with different co-drivers. Le Mans records show that in 1923 Henri Stoffel and E. Labouchere completed just 50 laps after starting in the 31st position in a six-cylinder Lorraine-Dietrich. They were one of just five in a field of 35 cars that did not finish the race. That same year, Lucien Desvaux and George Casse won their class in a four-cylinder Salmson.

In 1924, Stoffel was more successful, co-piloting another six-cylinder Lorraine-Dietrich to a class victory, starting and finishing second overall to a four-cylinder Bentley Sport driven by Captain John Duff and Frank Clement, both of Great Britain. Lucien Desvaux did not compete.

How the Stoffel and Desvaux came to team up as drivers in 1925 and to select a special-bodied Chrysler Model 70 is not known, but they were no doubt impressed by the new Chrysler's early motor racing successes. In 1924, famed American racecar driver and Indianapolis 500 winner Ralph DePalma piloted a Chrysler 70 to victory in the Mount Wilson (California) hill climb and set a record in the process. The next year, he won the 1,000-mile stock-car speed trials held at a one-mile board track in Fresno. The only modifications made were the removal of the car's windshield, fenders and headlights. DePalma covered 1,000 miles in 786 minutes.

An automobile that went fast over long distances with little or no modification and experienced few if any problems — it was just what Stoffel and Desvaux needed to successfully compete at the 24 Hours of Le Mans. A number of firsts marked the 1925 running of Vingt-Quatre Heures du Mans.

This, the race's third year, marked the first time for the so-called Le Mans start in which drivers sprinted across the track to their cars before starting them and driving off. It was also the first time that this 24-hour event was a truly international race. No fewer than

six cars each came from Italy and Great Britain and three from the United States. Stoffel and Desvaux and their Chrysler performed well against this international cast. Unofficially, they finished seventh overall by completing 2,031 kilometers (about 1,260 miles). Because they went off into a ditch to avoid another car, the two Frenchmen were unable to complete by just two laps — the set distance required under race rules for their size engine. Still, they acquitted themselves well in a field of 49 cars. Only 16 cars finished the race.

Less than three months after Le Mans, another Chrysler won at the famed Brooklands track in England. A London Chrysler distributor, Captain Malcolm Campbell, piloted a special-bodied Chrysler 70 to victory over a field of 14 starters. Campbell's average speed was 99.61 mph.

Not until 1928 were Chrysler racers to be seen again on European race circuits. The only American representation at Le Mans in 1926 was the entry of three cars bearing another (future) Chrysler Heritage Brand — Willys-Overland. Three Willys-Overland Sixes were entered in the race. It was a less-than auspicious appearance. One did not start due to an accident in practice. The other two did not finish.

The most successful year for the Chrysler make in European road racing — before the late 20th-century arrival of the Viper — was 1928. Four Chrysler cars were entered in the 24 Hours of Le Mans. These Chrysler 72 models were powered by the Company's renowned six-cylinder, 4.1-liter side-valve engines and featured standard three-speed gearboxes. Two of the Chrysler racers started in the second and third positions, just behind the favored Bentley and an eight-cylinder American Stutz Blackhawk. The other two Chryslers started 22nd and 32nd. All four Chryslers were entered by a consortium of Belgian and French enthusiasts and drivers. Among the drivers were old friends Henri Stoffel and Andre Rossignol (the third-position car), Jean and G. Ghica Cantacuzino (the fourth-position car), Cyril De Vere and Louis Chiron (the 22nd-position car) and Goffredo Zehender and Leduri Ledure (the 32nd-position car).

The race started at 4:00 PM on June 17. A dropping flag signaled the drivers to run to the 33 cars positioned across the track. The 24 hours soon devolved into a fight between a team of Bentleys, a Stutz, and two of the Chryslers. The "Bentley Boys" and the Stutz came in first and second, while the Chryslers piloted by Stoffel and Jean Ghica Cantacuzino finished a distant third and fourth. Only 13 other cars finished the race. The motor racing correspondents and fans were quite impressed with Chrysler's

performance. W. O. Bentley himself remarked how quietly and consistently the Chryslers ran. Chrysler began to be referred to as "the Poor Man's Bentley," and Malcolm Campbell offered Chryslers for sale in London that were advertised as identical to the ones that ran at Le Mans.

Among the 30 cars competing at Spa from July 7-8, 1928, were five Chryslers and one other American racer, an Auburn. The Spa circuit was more hilly and twisting than Le Mans, making it better suited for small, light cars with four-speed gearboxes. Both of the favorites, Alfa-Romeo and Bugatti, fit that description with their supercharged entries. Larger, heavier, three-speed cars like the Chryslers were not expected to do particularly well.

The Alfa-Romeo built an insurmountable lead over the last four hours of the 24-hour race. The hot-in-pursuit George-Irat of drivers Burie and Rost begin to experience tire problems, and the two lead Chryslers passed it to move into second and third places. De Vere and Zehender managed to hold those places until the yellow flag dropped. The Alfa was the overall winner, but De Vere's Chrysler had won its class.

Chrysler racers performed admirably in other European long-distance competitions in 1928. At Italy's famed Mille Miglia (1,000 Miles), Chrysler 72s finished second and third in the five-liter class. Another Chrysler finished second in the Burgundy four-hour race and the first-in-class at the Spanish Grand Prix.

At Le Mans in 1929, Bentley entered five cars, Stutz three, and the American luxury make Dupont one. Two of the Stutz racers were supercharged. The two Chryslers entered had their work cut out for them. Henri Stoffel and fellow Frenchman Robert Benoist drove a 1929 Chrysler 75. The other Chrysler entered was a 1930 (midyear introduction) Model 77, which featured Chrysler's first four-speed gearbox. It was driven by Cyril De Vere and Marcel Mongin.

At the end of the 24-hour race, the Chryslers had managed to finish sixth and seventh overall, fourth and fifth in their class. After the somewhat complicated Le Mans "Index of Performance" was applied, the Chrysler racers had risen to third and fourth behind two of the Bentleys.

For the 1929 Spa race, Henri Stoffel teamed up with Rossignol in the Chrysler 75. De Vere and Mongin again drove the Chrysler 77, while Hommel and Desvaux drove a third Chrysler. After 24 hours on the twisting, hilly course, the Chryslers finished sixth (Stoffel/Rossignol), eighth (De Vere/Mongin) and 11th (Hommel/Desvaux).

The results were quite a bit better at the 1,000 mile race up and down the boot of Italy, as a Chrysler 75 driven by Leonardo and Barbieri finished first in its class (five liter) at the Mille Miglia.

For the first time since 1927, no Chryslers ran at Le Mans in 1930. Spa, however, was a different story as two six-cylinder Chrysler 77s competed. Two eight-cylinder DeSotos were also entered. One of the Chryslers crashed during the night. The other Model 77, driven by Stoffel and De Costier, ran well but could not keep pace with the fast and nimble supercharged 6C Alfa-Romeos, which swept the first three places. Stoffel and De Costier came in fifth, while the two DeSotos finished eighth and 15th. Leonardo and Barbieri again added luster to the season for the Chrysler brand racers by turning in their second straight five-liter class victory at the Mille Miglia in 1930.

Back in America, Chrysler Imperials set 12 Class B stock-car records at Daytona Beach, Florida, in 1931. On the opposite side of the Atlantic, two Chryslers were entered in the 24 Hours of Le Mans — an eight-cylinder Imperial driven by De Costier and Lussan and an eight-cylinder CD Series driven by Sommer and Delemer. Both retired with radiator problems, the CD-8 on lap 14 and the Imperial four laps later.

Thirty-three cars lined up for the 24-hour race at Le Mans on July 4, 1931. Only 17 took the flag at the end of the race. Zehender's Mercedes finished four miles ahead of the Alfa driven by Pesalo and Felix and 51 miles ahead of the lone Chrysler, driven by Sommer and Delemer. In addition to finishing third overall to its two supercharged European rivals, the Chrysler won its class by 46 miles over the British Hotchkiss.

This was the last European racing appearance by a Chrysler for a generation, until the Chrysler Hemi V-8 burst upon the scene in 1951.