

Our first **24H SERIES** win **SPEED LOVER** Mugello, 2017

At the Hankook 12H MUGELLO in 2017,
this 24H SERIES stalwart emerged victorious in a frenetic race for the SP2 runners.
It was a result more than a decade in the making.

You can't talk longevity in the 24H SERIES without mentioning Speed Lover. The Belgian team has competed regularly with CREVENTIC since the latter's inaugural event at the Dubai Autodrome in 2006, and in that time has missed the 24-hour event only twice and has clocked up more than 60 starts with the Dutch promoter across 18 different circuits.

Quite incredibly though, following its Dubai debut in 2006, Speed Lover would have to wait another 11 years before finally breaking its unwanted duck in the 24H SERIES, André van Hoof's Belgian outfit doing so at an eventful Hankook 12H MUGELLO in 2017.

"I remember now – it was a long time ago! – but we asked CREVENTIC if we could build a car for the SP2 category," André recounts. "I'd done a lot in Porsche Carrera Cup, Belcar, and the Porsche Endurance Challenge before that, but you can't change anything on the Cup car. So everyone had, basically, the same car. There aren't a lot of series that will let you do that, but with CREVENTIC, we could."

"We took some fenders from the GT3 R – changed a lot of things, basically – and I think it was an important thing for us to do. We weren't just turning up with a Porsche and doing a good race, we were preparing the car ourselves too. So that was a very interesting few years for us."



Proof was certainly in the automotive pudding. After a fairly innocuous 2015 in the '997' class, Speed Lover secured its first 24H SERIES title in the multifaceted SP2 category in 2016 with its newly-built Porsche 911 Cup ahead of future two-time class champion, Porsche Lorient Racing.

2017 however looked set to be an even tougher challenge for the defending champion (they do say keeping a title is more difficult than winning one...). Joining Speed Lover and Porsche Lorient Racing on the SP2 grid in Mugello for example were LMS Race Engineering, both an overall and multi-time class champion in the VLN; IDEC SPORT, the 'new' team of V de V GT champion Patrice Lafargue built on the foundations of 2015 997 Teams' champion, Ruffier Racing; B2F compétition, the eponymous outfit of Porsche Carrera Cup France regular Benoît Fretin; even French independent Vortex V8,

another name synonymous with 24H SERIES longevity, had been surprisingly successful with its GC Automobile GC 10 V8 prototype.

It was actually JR Motorsport though that fired a metaphorical, and decisive, shot across the SP2 bows when the Dutch team's M4 Silhouette – complete with a mid-mounted straight-six plucked from an 'E46' M3 CSL – scampered to SP2 class pole position more than two seconds clear of nearest rivals Vortex and B2F. Speed Lover's Pierre-Yves Paque, Jean-Michel Gérome and Christian Kelders meanwhile were a further three seconds adrift, propping up the category's final row. One could be forgiven for thinking the Belgian team was doomed to a long, fruitless weekend. André, however, felt otherwise...

"Most of my drivers are 'gentlemen' drivers. They are businessmen: they can only arrive a day or two before the race; they don't drive very much *[on-track]*; they don't do Carrera Cup; they don't get a lot of practice getting in and out of the car. So they only get into a rhythm during the race. But as the race goes on, they make *[fewer]* mistakes, they learn, and they start getting quicker. So it's not that unusual when they're not particularly quick during qualifying."

Indeed, just one lap into the race, Speed Lover was already one place better off. IDEC SPORT, whose GT3 Mercedes would go on to finish 2nd overall behind the winning Scuderia Praha Ferrari, was eliminated after a clumsy collision with the #33 Car Collection Motorsport Audi R8 LMS that was scything its way through from the very back of the grid. After one hour, Speed Lover was up to 8th, and, impressively, by the end of the second hour, the #78 Porsche had catapulted its way up to 2nd in SP2, an unprecedented nine Code 60s in just four hours at Mugello proving the Belgian team's well-worn ace in the hole...

"There's one rule in motorsport: you need 'x' amount of fuel to do a 24-hour race. Without fuel, the car doesn't run. So, if you can get that fuel when the other teams are doing 60kph, it's always better than when they're doing 150kph. And that's always been our philosophy. Of course, sometimes you make the wrong decision: a Code 60 may not be long enough, and we're still in the refueling area when the race goes green. But, if you can make 80 per cent of the right decisions, you can win a lot."

Heading into the overnight intervention, and like IDEC SPORT before it, polesitter JR Motorsport had also hit problems. Just 130 minutes into the race, the M4 Silhouette pulled to a smoking halt at Biondetti, and summarily lost 50 laps overnight while the engine was replaced. Porsche Lorient Racing though was still looking strong, and while the Lanester-based team's #65 had briefly slipped behind both the sister #64 991-I Cup – now in the lead – and Speed Lover, a late pit stop to change tyres, driver and re-fuel meant the #65 Porsche would be back in the pound seat when the race restarted the following morning.

Paradoxically, Mugello 2017 ended up being one of the worst 24H SERIES events for Porsche Lorient Racing to-date. Less than 50 minutes into 'part two,' the leading #64 Cup car ground to a halt at Palagio with electrical problems, and, once recovered and 'repaired,' would do so again an hour later mere moments after leaving pitroad, the Porsche's pitlane speed limiter having refused to disengage. A quick, and valiant, kerb-side repair by Pascal Gibon meant the #64 did eventually get going, but ultimately to no avail as the Porsche was parked for good shortly afterwards.

The #65's retirement meanwhile, after less than an hour of running on day two, was altogether more dramatic as an unsighted Jean-François Demorge slammed into the back of Optimum Motorsport's stalled Ginetta G55 GT4 on the crest of the hill exiting the second Arabbiata. Demorge and Optimum's Adrian Barwick fortunately emerged unscathed, but the Ginetta's rear end was completely destroyed (doubly devastating, as the British team had spent most of the night replacing the engine) and the Porsche's front left wheel and much of the suspension behind it was ripped off.

André does sympathize with his rivals, but given that he'd seen his cars retire in similarly abrupt fashion many times before and since, he admits such things are inevitable in endurance racing.

"If you see *[at the 2023 Hankook 24H DUBAI]*, we had pole in 992-AM, and we had four quick drivers. But we had just one touch from an Audi, and that cost us three hours because we had to repair the whole front end. So with accidents, you have to be lucky: sometimes it's only a radiator, which takes 20 minutes to fix; sometimes the same hit can cost you three hours."

With B2F compétition also losing time in the pits after a tangle with RAM Racing's GT3 Mercedes (the French team later lost its sister Peugeot 308 Racing Cup after a heavy smash against the barriers), Speed Lover, leading, now had only the LMS Engineering Audi TT RS2 to contend with.

Albeit not for long: five hours from home, Chris Tiger, who'd been taking upwards of five seconds per lap out of the leading Speed Lover Porsche, suddenly pulled the smoking TT off the road at Materassi. The American's quick thinking was sadly not enough to stop a small fire, sparked by an oil leak, engulfing the engine bay. LMS was out as well.

Up ahead, and now five laps in front of the recovering B2F compétition, the Speed Lover Porsche, running faultlessly, simply soldiered on. And after 12 dramatic hours in Tuscany, Jean-Michel Gérome eventually brought the bespoke, #78 Porsche 991 Cup home to secure – finally! – the first class win in the 24H SERIES for Speed Lover after more than a decade of trying.



"One could be forgiven for thinking that Speed Lover was doomed to a long, fruitless weekend in Mugello. André, however, felt otherwise..."

Though the team didn't realize it at the time, Mugello 2017 was a result that opened the floodgates. Speed Lover's second win came just 11 months later at Silverstone in the SPX class, and between 2018 and 2021, the Belgian team took at least one class win per season en-route to category championships in SPX and, ironically, 991. Asked six years later whether he'd ever doubted that his team could make it to the top step of the podium one day, André van Hoof just smiles a self-assured smile...

"No. I was always confident! And I also know the reason. Most of the time, my drivers are 'gentlemen,' so it's hard to win just on pace: in Dubai, a PRO driver can do 2m 02s lap times, easily; an AM will be around the 2m 09s, or 2m 10s mark. That's eight seconds per lap, and you're not going to make that up with 'real' speed. So instead, we're always looking at how we can win by making no mistakes and 'without speed.'"

"One of my American drivers – I'm sorry, I can't remember who it was! – once said to me after a win, 'it's not the driving that matters, it's only the tactics!' That's the way we've always done our races. And if you know the reason why you're not winning, it doesn't make you nervous, because you understand how you can eventually succeed." ■

Check out video highlights of the 2017 Hankook 12H MUGELLO

