

1911, First French Grand Prix

The first GP, organised in 1906 by the Automobile Club de France on a circuit measuring 100 kilometres, and starting from Pont de Gennes, was an important stage for motor racing in the Sarthe.

Five years later, in 1911, the Automobile Club de la Sarthe et de l'Ouest created the first French GP on a circuit measuring 56.600 kms, in the form of a triangle, connecting Pontlieue to Ecommoy, and then Le Grand Lucé.

The start was given from the Pontlieue Corner, where the refuelling pits and grandstands were situated, in the direction of Ecommoy.

At this point, we are not yet speaking about the "24 Heures du Mans", but the legend of the Mulsanne Straight has begun.

The 1911 circuit was characteristic of the circuits of the time, being triangular in shape. The races took place over long distances, speed being the principal desired objective.

The notion of endurance will appear later, in 1923, with the first edition of the 24-Hours Grand Prix of Endurance.

The name "24 Heures du Mans" will not be used until 1932.

In 1911, the race took place over 12 laps (i.e. a little more than 650 kilometres).

This same circuit was used in 1912 and 1913, but in the opposite direction, with the race now starting in the middle of the Mulsanne Straight (just in front of the hippodrome).

These were the only two occasions when the Mulsanne Straight was used in another manner to what is customary today.

A third start was given from the Mulsanne Straight in 1925, following a dispute with an owner of the land in the "Rainières" area. This same year (1925) saw the creation of the "ear-of-corn" start, which was used until 1970.

The first fatal accident on the Mulsanne Straight happened during the sixth lap of this first French GP.

Maurice Fournier and his mechanic, Georges Louvet, two young drivers from the Sarthe, both aged just 31, lost control of their Corre La Licorne while battling with Victor Hemery's Fiat. Fournier was killed instantly, and Louvet succumbed to his injuries at the hospital in Le Mans. A memorial stone was erected at the exit of the first chicane on the left-hand side of the straight line, to commemorate forever this tragedy.

1912, The first Motorcycle International Cup

The 1911 circuit, which was used for the 1st French GP, was used once again for the 2nd French GP, which took place on 8th and 9th September 1912.

The choice of the 1912 circuit was challenged, since 4 other places had been thought of, between the North of the Sarthe, Orne and Mayenne. The city of Le Mans was determined to keep its Sarthe circuit, and secured the decision which validated the 1911 layout.

The race took place in the opposite direction to that of 1911, starting from the hippodrome on the Mulsanne Straight, in the direction of Pontlieue, where the official grandstand continued to be situated.

In addition to the 2nd French GP, an International Race of motorcycles, sidecars and tricars (3-wheeled vehicles), was organised on Saturday, September 8th 1912, on an 18-kilometers circuit.

A circuit was created, starting from the hippodrome on the Mulsanne Straight, in the direction of the Pontlieue Corner, and then, just after the beginning of what is now Jean Mac Avenue, the drivers returned on the right via the road to Ruaudin.

After crossing Ruaudin, the circuit continued towards Mulsanne, with a return to the finish situated on the Mulsanne Straight at the level of the hippodrome.

The race took place over 22 laps on this 18-kilometers circuit, and was won by Devay at the wheel of a 500 Triumph.

Ruaudin at the heart of the legend

As from 1911, Ruaudin was inscribed at the heart of the circuit with the 1st French GP.

In 1912, the first Motorcycle International Cup crossed the municipality of Ruaudin. It will be the only time, but 1911 linked Ruaudin to motorsport more than 10 years before the first edition of the "24 Heures du Mans".

The picture above shows the scrutineering for GP motorcycles and cars, which took place, for the first time, at the Place de la République, in Le Mans.

In 1913, a 3rd French Grand Prix and the 2nd Motorcycle International Cup were held, but both races took place on the big 54-kilometre circuit.

1923, The first Grand Prix d'endurance de 24 Heures

The layout of the 1923 circuit, which will be used for the first edition of the 24 Hours of Le Mans, took shape in 1919.

It will be used as from 1920 for the International Cup for racing 'voiturettes' (small race cars), and the A.C.F Grand Prix, and then in 1922 for the "Voiturettes" Cup. It is the first time that a circuit is located to the west of the Mulsanne Straight.

If 1923 marked the beginning of a 24-hour race, this first edition was not yet named the "24 Heures du Mans", but the "Grand Prix d'Endurance de 24 Heures" (the 24-Hour Grand Prix of Endurance). The race was presented for the first time under the now famous name of "Les 24 Heures du Mans" in 1932.

It was also in this same year (1932) that the circuit was modified in order to remain within a configuration which will evolve while still remaining close to the 13 kilometres.

From speed to endurance

As soon as mechanical locomotion made its appearance, there was a desire to demonstrate the capacity of vehicles to move quickly. Races were now mainly named "Grand Prix de Vitesse" (Speed GPs), with triangle-shaped circuits most of the time.

Nevertheless, these races took place on relatively long distances. The 1906 GP circuit was traced in a lap of 103 kms to be covered 12 times. For the 1911 French GP, a circuit of 54,600 kilometres, with 12 laps to cover, was chosen.

The notion of endurance really appeared with the first GP of Endurance in 1923, where the goal of a distance to cover was replaced by that of a race endurance to attain.

The notion was different, but speed remained particularly important, since the winner of the 1923 race covered 2209.56 kilometres in 24 hours, whereas the record was achieved in 2010 by the Audi R15 + TDI with Romain Dumas, Timo Bernhard and Mike Rockenfeller, covering 54120.713 kilometres.

2023, Centenary of the

« 24 Heures du Mans »

Ruaudin at the heart of the legend

2023 saw the "24 Heures du Mans" gain entrance to those very exclusive clubs celebrating their centenary. In 1923, the creators of the race would probably never have imagined that this race would be able to boast of such longevity.

The race has become legendary despite the various difficulties it has encountered. The Second World War put a stop to this race for 10 years, and left the Circuit completely destroyed

The tragic accident of 1955 could likewise have put an end to this event once and for all, as well as to all other motor car races, as indeed was the case in Switzerland.

The obstinacy and determination of the ACO managers has not only enabled the event to continue its existence, but has also given it a special and unique resonance, placing it among the most famous events world-wide.

After a few years of transition, and 2 editions (2020 and 2021) struck by the pandemic, during which the "24 Heures du Mans" was closed to the public (2020), and was open to only a limited number of fans (2021), the 2023 race undoubtedly marked the beginning of a new era for endurance.

Ferrari, Glickenhaus, Peugeot, Porsche, Toyota, Vanwall have all put their stamp on the legend of the "24 Heures du Mans".

These 6 constructors all had their hearts set on winning the coveted Centenary edition. After a fierce battle, with a multitude of twists and turns, it was Ferrari that entered its name on the list of winners, clinching victory for the 10th time, 58 years after its last victory.

The Mulsanne Straight, a part of which is situated in the municipality of Ruaudin, has marked the history of the village. Since 2015, Ruaudin has been an integral part of the festivities marking the 24 Hours of Le Mans week, thanks to its event Les R'Hunaudières.

This event, which takes place on the Tuesday of the week leading up to the race, receives a crowd of fans eager to drink in the atmosphere, and to share the vibes of this iconic race of the Sarthe.