

Le Mans 24hrs 1995

Memories of an unforgettable adventure

By Chris Marsh



4pm Saturday 18th June 1995. 2 cars ready for the start of the 24hrs of Le Mans. I wasn't due to drive for a couple of hours but sitting in the paddock ready to go.

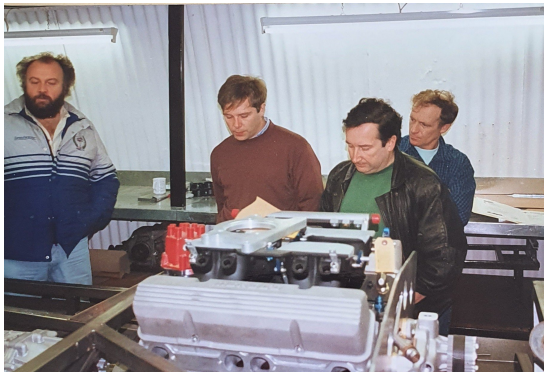
I was feeling great and surprisingly relaxed. With a brilliant team of mechanics looking after the cars, and a fantastic group of support staff looking after everything else, we were ready.

We had made it through all the dramas and planning and hard work. Team Marcos was ready to go...

Part 1: the Build-up

Getting to the start line at Le Mans had been a tough journey. It took a lot of blood sweat and tears to turn the dream into reality after my father, Jem Marsh who had founded Marcos, returned from a club meeting fired up about taking a works team to Le Mans for the first time since 1968.

Back in 1994 we spoke with Philip Hulme of Computacenter about running a Marcos race team. He was up for the challenge but we only had the funds to run one LM500. I managed to raise sponsorship to build another car, and then Philip supported the two-car Marcos Racing team in the 1994 British GT Championship.



Graham Nash, Colin Denier and Chris Hodgetts trying to work out where to put the exhaust

Graham Nash started his influential role in the development of the race-car and built the engines, including using old stock ex-track gearboxes, in true Marcos fashion.

Gene Pinel who had been my mechanic in Formula Ford and an apprentice at Marcos in the 80's when there were only 3 of us - came into get the project off the ground.

whose input into the development of the car in both 94 and 95 seasons was invaluable. He found us some serious speed, which allowed us to get on pole and start consistently securing podiums, showing that Marcos could be competitive British GT level car.

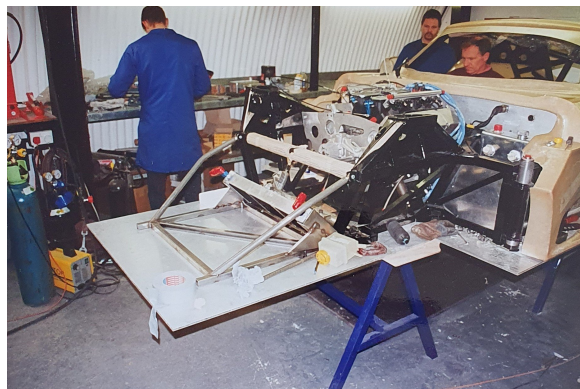
Andy Purvis who worked at Computacenter and was one of the LM500 drivers introduced us to Chris Hodgetts

Towards the end of the season...talk turned to having a serious crack at Le Mans 95. With a bigger engine and Hewland gearboxes we developed the car with McNeil Engineering to get more speed and were ready to put an entry into Le Mans.

The ACO entry required pictures of the road car but at that point we didn't have one! Undaunted we propped up a car body on milk crates and took photos from clever angles and the ACO were happy. ACO liked to welcome small privateer teams into the competition - embodying the true 'david and goliath' spirit of Le Mans.

The only problem with that, was that the ACO then wanted to come and visit to see the road car version of the 'milk crate' car just a month later. Lots of late nights and weekends, and the boys managed to get a v8 engine from a scrapped corvette into the car and got it running in time.

It was almost un-driveable as it was so low to the ground. Great for a race circuit, but not for driving around the roads of Westbury trading estate! Undaunted we jacked it up but then it was so high it was

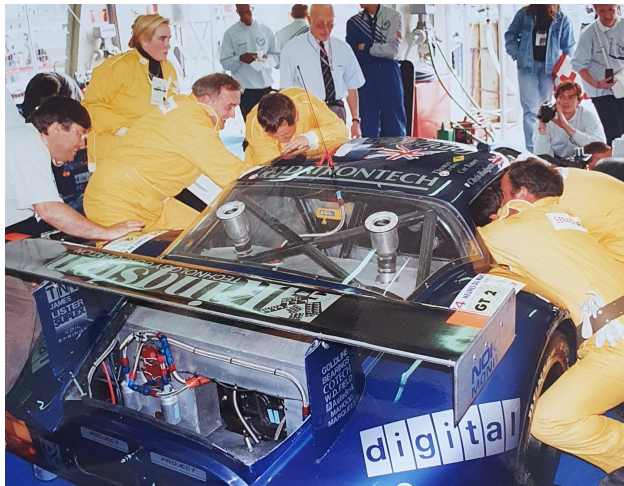


The LM600 under development, Hodgy trying out the seating position

closer to an SUV height, but nonetheless it convinced the ACO technical rep, Pierre Fillon - who is now the current ACO president. Dad was there and charmed them with lots of history so they left suitably convinced that we had a legitimate road car and our entry was confirmed!

One of the worst moments in the run up to Le Mans was that the Chevy engines we were going to put in the real race cars hadn't arrived as promised. Graham and I had to undertake an emergency 24hr trip to the States to chase them up and finally they arrived. These sorts of things do happen when you are building this type of car under this sort of pressure. In the end the cars were ready, thanks to the incredible efforts by an extraordinary bunch of people at Marcos.

The LM600s debuted in the British GT and were quick enough to mean that we turned to Le Mans with confidence. No matter that the longest we had ever raced or tested them was about an hour. We hadn't even managed to undertake a 12 hr test. Many people doubted we'd last 4 hours, let alone 24. No 24hr testing. In retrospect this was crazy but we believed that if the car was well built it should cope with 24hrs. Typical Marcos attitude!



Safety evacuation test from the LM600 - AJ was successfully "rescued" proving our car was safe to start...



Part 2: Getting to the start line



Dad & Francois Migault on stage at Le Mans

The build up week was really stressful – addressing the financial and logistical challenges of getting 2 cars and team of about 45 people to the circuit as well as making sure the cars were ready with the best possible chance of competing and completing.

A couple of last minute hitches on the driver front. Jan Lammers pulled out last minute which set off a last minute hunt for a driver with less than a day before signing on. Luckily we phoned Cor Euser who'd already bought himself an LM600 to race and he was up for it. He and his wife Elly, drove overnight from Holland but managed to get to Le Mans just in time to sign on in the morning and he also fitted in Jan's overalls!

This wasn't the last of the driver dramas. Signing on was underway when Dad came running over, "Chris, you need to come and sort this out!" "What? Right now?" I replied. "Yes, Francois is about to be taken away!"

Unbeknown to us, the French tax authorities had been waiting at signing on to arrest Francois Migault and take him away! Immediately they wanted him to hand over his Le Mans starting fees. With a look of total innocence, Francois shrugged his shoulders in that Gallic fashion and looked me straight in the eye "I'm not getting paid for this, am I, Chris?"

Luckily I twigged what he was up to "No, absolutely not, officer, he's doing this for fun!" I then harped on about how important it was for France that this iconic French driver be allowed represent France on this team of 'Rosbifs'.... And luckily they let him be.



Signing autographs before scrutineering, with Jeremy Kearns

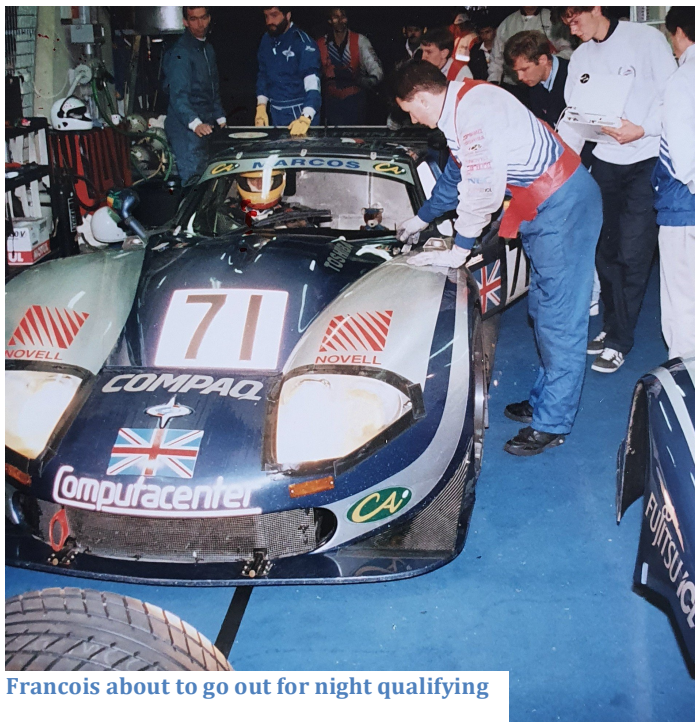
At the end of the race, I ran fast towards the garage after parking up in park fermee, but I had nothing on Francois and the speed with which he disappeared after the race. Which was sad, as he wasn't around to share in the celebrations and post race wind down which was the best bit .



Marcos Drivers Briefing before signing on - Cor still en route from Holland!

The other slight concern was that we arrived at Circuit de Sarthe with only one guaranteed entry for the race – no 70 car to be driven by Chris Hodgetts and Tommy Erdos.

The second car, no.71 needed to qualify in the pre-qualifying sessions. Luckily we could call on the talents of the great David Leslie, who used all his experience at Le Mans to pip a Porsche to the final qualifying place.



Francois about to go out for night qualifying

I owe a huge debt to David Leslie who was a phenomenal human being. He was kind and generous and a genuinely lovely guy.

I'd actually only managed one lap in pre-qualifying as the oil pump belt had broken. In those days we didn't have access to simulators and there certainly wasn't any help from YouTube! 23 years later when preparing for Classic Le Mans I spent many hours watching in-car footage of the circuit which meant it felt like an old friend when I was finally back behind the wheel.

David had spotted that I was woefully underprepared for the circuit, so suggested we go play at being tourists on the Le Mans Circuit Tour coach. We told the driver we were Pilotes and he let us sit at the front.

So I learned how to drive the Circuit de Sarthe courtesy of David Leslie on a 15 mph lap of the circuit sitting about 3m up from the tarmac sitting on a tour bus. Not ideal preparation for driving it at speeds approaching 200mph and about 70cm off the track.



Nashy pulling the heads down pre-race

It was a real privilege to get first hand coaching from such Le Mans masters as David and the immensely experienced Francois. It is sad that neither are around to commemorate this anniversary but their memory lives on.



In the Marcos garage during qualifying. Hodgy looking pensive

When I went out in the evening for qualifying – it was starting to get dark. And the difference in perspective from the coach tour to behind the wheel of the LM600 soon became very apparent. Particularly at the end of the Mulsanne straight, where there's a slight brow which you really don't notice in a coach! Needless to say, the first few laps were a bit daunting, but then I got the hang of it. And discovered I quite liked racing in the dark.



Last minute tuning by the influential Chris Lawrence with Shawn Mitchell

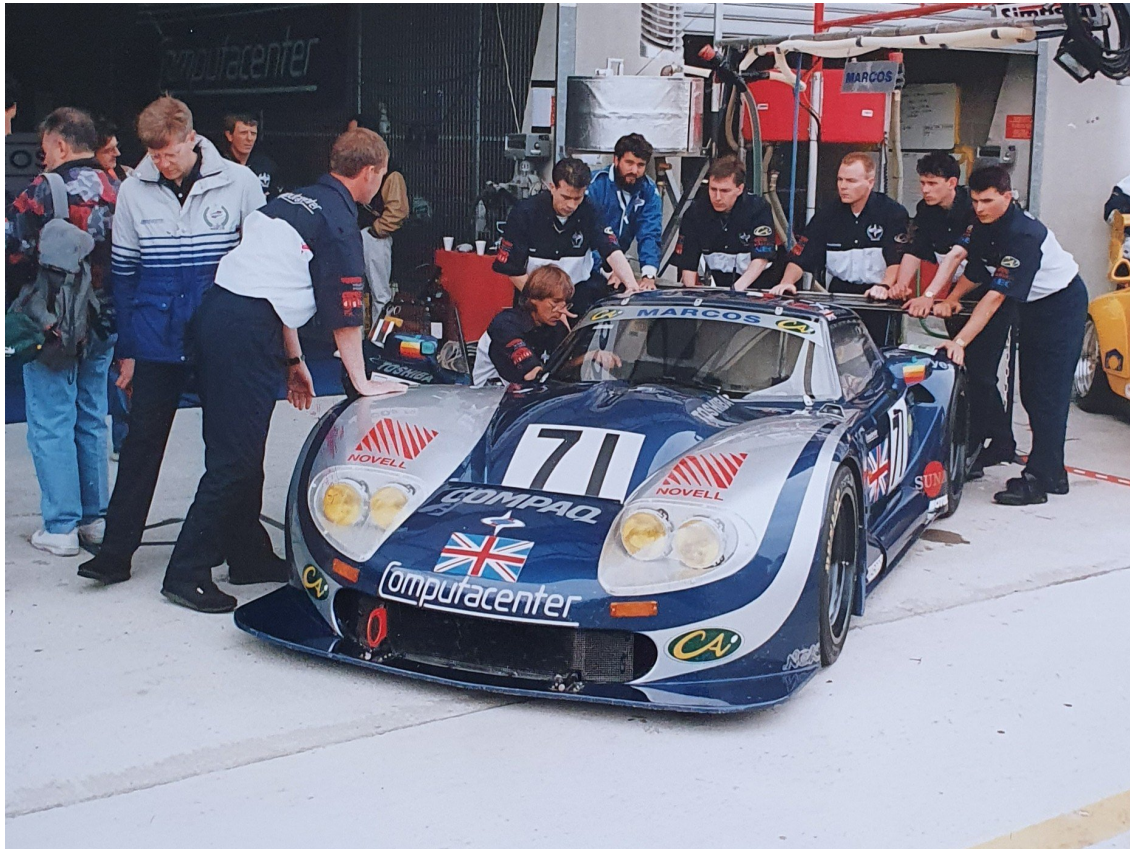
Le Mans week is really about managing sleep deprivation. It's not just the 24 hours of the race. I am pretty good at controlling my nerves, so did manage to get some sleep the night before, but we had to get up really early to get to the circuit before the traffic built up so you go into the start of the race pretty knackered.

Lyn Marsh recalls, "Jem and I were staying in a chateau nearby with Jennie and Joss our wonderful friends and Marcos importers from Belgium. Jennie wisely insisted I get a big union jack flag – so we went into the village and bought one. I was holding it aloft as we emerged from the Marcos garage into the pit lane, to be greeted by an enormous roar that erupted from the other side of the track on seeing the flag. It was absolutely overwhelming at the time and still makes me well up with emotion now even just thinking about it"



Just after Lyn's rousing reception - waiting for the off

Part 3: The Race



En route to the start line. Time to go

Finally I could relax. We were ready to start. All the noise and stresses and strains from the build-up melted away and I could focus on the race. I can't remember what order I went in – but I am fairly certain my first stint followed both David and Francois.

Tommy, Chris and Cor were going for it in no.70 car, but as a team we'd decided to try and go for a safe clear round – taking it steady. 'Steady' is relative term at Le Mans as you can't race slowly. You need to be in the zone, you need to be operating instinctively even when at relatively 'steady' speeds. Drop out of that instinctive zone and you start to overthink what is going on and that's when trouble happens.

We knew that David and I were going to take on the lion's share of the night driving as Francois wasn't keen. Luckily in mid-June the nights are short. Le Mans 2020 running in September will be fun if you like driving in the dark! It wasn't a problem for me - as far as I was concerned it meant I got to drive more.

I got some extra time at the wheel as David brought the car back in with a suspicious



noise as the darkness was lengthening. He wanted me to work out what was going on. I jumped back in the car but luckily there was nothing wrong and I got some extra night driving experience into the bargain.

No bad thing to get some extra night driving under my belt, considering what came next!



Pitstops: (R) Journalist Colin Goodwin getting live experience as a Le Mans 24 hr mechanic. I was fine with him cleaning the windows, but was a little nervous when I looked down and saw Keith teaching him how to tighten wheel nuts!



The eyes have it. Fuelling during a big race is a huge responsibility



Back in the driving seat – for another night stint

I was driving down the Mulsanne straight when I hit a bump which caused the aircraft fuses we used to pop out and kill all the lights. In that initial split second of darkness, I thought I'd crashed. Then the reality hit me. I was driving at Le Mans on the Mulsanne straight at upwards of 200mph at some 6000rpm.

Luckily I managed to tailgate behind a Porsche with working lights and my heart-rate dropped and I was able to breathe again. I thought I'd been quite cool about it, but in retrospect I was pretty freaked out because I genuinely turned to the

charity teddy bear sat in the passenger seat and tried to have a conversation with him. "I bet you s*~^t your pants, didn't you bear? I certainly did".

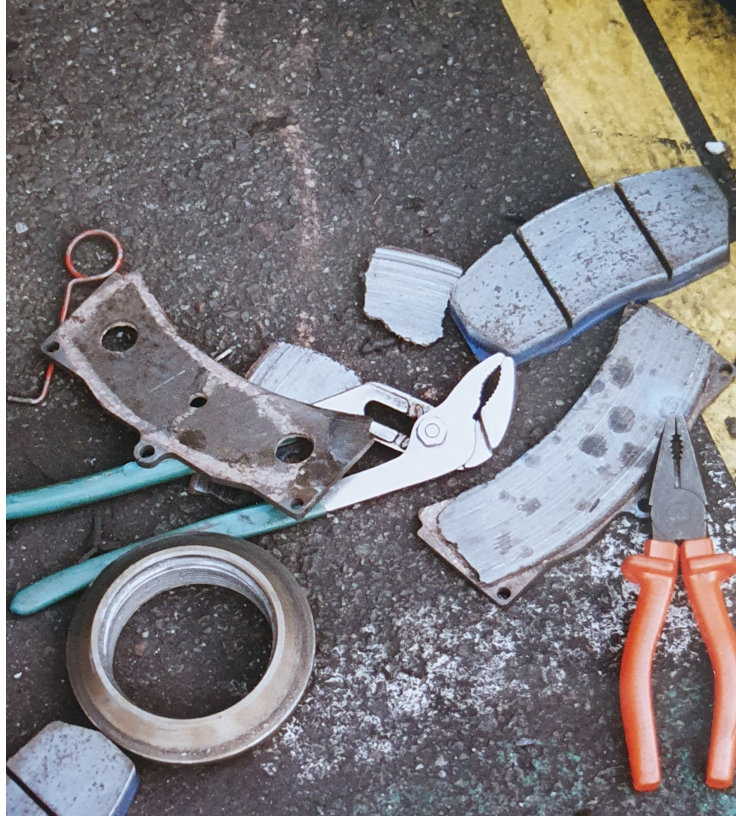
I reported the headlight loss to the team over the radio, to be met with the question, "what, have you crashed or something?!!". I managed to get safely back to the pits and the fuses were taped over and I was sent out with instructions to come back in if I smelled smoke!



Night-time driver changes: Tommy takes the wheel in no.70 car

Once the race had started, it still wasn't just about racing. When not driving, I needed to spend some time with our amazing sponsors in the hospitality tent that Nicky was running. I was getting more and more fatigued so borrowed a bike – which then became an adventure in itself trying to avoid increasingly pissed people!

When not driving, you try to get some sleep, but you have way too much adrenaline to sleep and there's lots of noise and movement in the caravans, so it's really only about snatching some rest. My driving overalls and my fireproof base layer would be dried in the tumble dryer in the garage. You get absolutely soaked through racing – even in the cool of the night – not to mention other liquids if you don't manage your personal pitstops!



A change of brake pads required!

Those LM600's are an absolute beast to drive and one of their design "features" was that the exhaust fumes were piped away under the footwell, so your feet were boiling and the cabin was super hot. At one point during a pit stop Tommy was sat with his feet in a bucket of icy water as they had nearly been singed!

It was incredible to be driving as dawn broke. By this time the track was half wet, half dry and I was on slicks. It certainly kept you awake more effectively than any amount of caffeine!

Later in the morning I hit a wet patch and spun at the chicane. I was very lucky as I was nearly t-boned by a McLaren (I can't remember if it was the one that went on to win). It all seemed to happen in slow motion and I remember being sideways and seeing McLaren driver's eyes on stalks as he was getting closer and closer to me at 90 degrees. Luckily he was a great driver and managed to avoid me and I just slid into the gravel, avoiding any collision with the tyre walls...a quick apology to the team over the radio and back on it.

Unfortunately luck ran out for car no.70 due to mechanical failure. Devastating for the team as up until then they were easily the fastest car – one of the fastest of the GT2 cars.



On slicks in the wet. Who needs caffeine?!

I remember driving past and seeing Tommy trying to fix the car – I thought about stopping but wouldn't have been allowed to help. He managed to rip off the aluminum gear-box panel to get to the prop shaft, and managed to get the car moving the next time I drove past. Phew, I thought. But alas that was false hope as the next lap came round he'd stopped again and this time permanently. Now the pressure to finish was really on.

Another drama was when our exhaust broke. I can't remember exactly when it happened but I realized I was starting to feel sick and dizzy - and the exhaust was making a hell of a noise. The crew called me in and Rob, Keith and Joe did a great job and managed to drill a hole in it to hold it in place and I took a break from driving to get some fresh air in my lungs.

I thought that Francois would have been the obvious candidate to drive the car over the line, French driver in France and all that, but I will be eternally in debt to David and Francois who both vehemently disagreed and said they wanted me to drive the car over the line – because they knew just how much I'd put in to getting us to that point. They also knew what an unforgettable experience it would be for me - and probably because they'd both had that privilege before!

It being Le Mans, you still can't make any assumptions, even as the time ticks by and you start to have conversations about who would theoretically drive across the finish line.

You are super tired and any lapse in concentration in the 24th hour could have the same disastrous consequences as at any hour in the race. So as I took the wheel for the last stint I focused on staying in the rhythm, focus, focus, focus, as the laps started ticking down.

What I did notice on those last couple of laps was the swell of humanity surging towards the fence, wherever we went round the track. On the last lap I started to back off a little but at those sorts of speeds you can't afford to stop racing. Luckily I was really conscious of the various pockets of crowds representing different nationalities around the circuit. Everyone waving, cheering and drinking.

Last lap, driving down the final straight, it was like a massive Mexican wave following me – really weird, as you feel the movement and the noise and heat. Thinking back on it – it gives me goosebumps to this day.



I was told that the cheer was as loud as that for the winning McLaren car. As I crossed the line, picked up a huge union jack from Richard Fielding, who'd left over the barrier. I offered him to hop in to escape the ACO officials in hot pursuit, but he managed to sprint off and disappear from their clutches.

Down the straight with flag and then into Parc Fermee and I finally turned off the engine. But before I'd had time to collect my thoughts or reflect in anyway I heard an urgent, "Chris, quickly!"...I think it was Andy Wallace in the Harrods McLaren who turned to me and said, "Run!!!!"

I thought he was joking. "What do you mean run, I'm absolutely knackered"

"Look behind you Chris!"

I turned and saw this wall of people and flags charging up the pit lane, so I legged it for our garage. Luckily the team knew I was coming and left just enough space under the door for me to roll in. As I disappeared into the safety of the garage someone grabbed my legs, but the boys dragged me in just in time – with boots intact too.

The aftermath was a bit of a blur. I recall a gang of Scottish supporters outside our garage chanting for David Leslie. It was all surreal. There were a lot of tears shed in the Marcos garage. The combination of exhaustion and elation was too much for many of the team. Everyone was shattered. It was almost like an out of body experience for me.

Then Dad got up on a chair with tears rolling down his cheeks and gave a little speech. In my whole life I'd never seen him shed a tear! After, I stood on a chair and manage to say something too. But it was hard to put in words how thankful I was – and still am – to everyone connected with Marcos, without whose support we could never have crossed that finish line.



Back at Westbury. Father & son. Exhausted but utterly elated.

As everyone was starting to leave we found out that no 71 car had won the prestigious ACO team award – never was an award more appropriate nor more richly deserved. All credit to Keith Lothian, Joe Cubbit, Jerry Sandell, Rob Evans and Shane Monger.

We all went to dinner that evening in a restaurant nearby – the whole team were there alternating between being as high as kites and super emotional or sound asleep as exhaustion won. I didn't actually sleep properly until nearly back in Wiltshire when finally I was forced to pull over in a layby near Salisbury where Nicky and I slept for some 6 hours. In a Marcos. Shows how dog tired we were!

On Monday Graham Nash was dispatched to McDonalds to buy 40 Big Macs or so. First they gave him 4. Then 14.....they couldn't believe how many he actually wanted. Lucky we'd had Peter Short to do all the important translating and Graham was in the team for his engine skills. Otherwise we could have been in a lot of trouble!

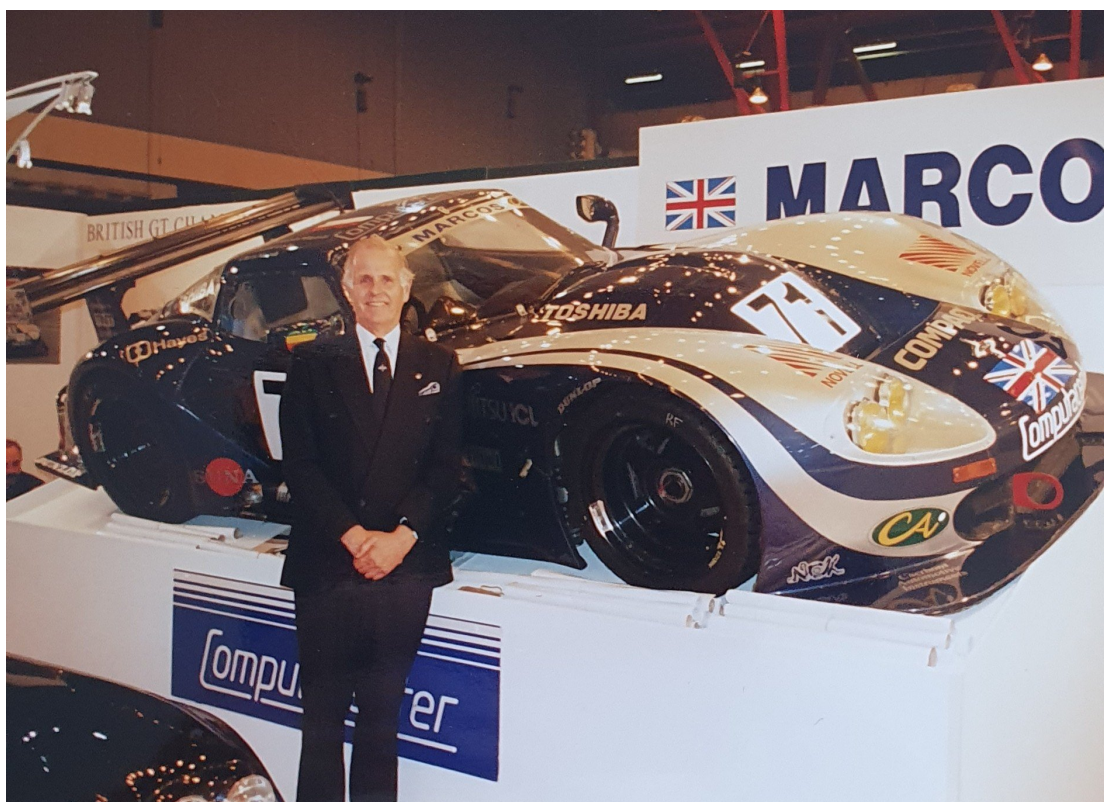


Looking back I get quite emotional thinking about the whole event, but at the time, in the moment, the emotions were still quite carefully kept at bay. As a race driver you just can't get emotional. The pride and sense of quiet satisfaction comes later when you look back and reflect at what you've achieved.

It was definitely one of those life-defining weekends that everyone who was there will never forget. Time diminishes memory of the pain and the effort and the exhaustion, but pride in our collective achievement burns brighter as the years go by.

A few months later, some guys came up to me at the NEC and wanted to shake my hand and thank me for their worst hangover ever. A group of Brits had adopted Marcos as their drinking game car. Each time a Marcos went by they had to drink a beer. They were definitely in the camp that thought we'd do well to last 4 hours. 24hours later they were still drinking....sorry boys!

My recollections may not be entirely consistent with the official press releases but it is 25 years ago - and there was an awful lot going on that weekend – but hopefully you've enjoyed a different perspective on a momentous event for the Marcos marque.



Dad at the NEC motor show that autumn. Pleased as punch

So many people to thank, it is difficult to name them all, but post pandemic I plan to host a 25 year reunion so we can properly share stories and toast our amazing achievement. Thank you to everyone at Marcos who either worked directly with the Racing Team or elsewhere in the workshop. Thanks to all our families and friends, without whose understanding, Le Mans would never have happened.

Thankyou also to Lyn Marsh for your love and support through the years, and also thanks for all the photos.

And finally, thankyou to all the Marcos fans who have kept the marque alive and whose memories of that extraordinary weekend enrich it for all of us.

In memoriam: Jem Marsh, David Leslie, Francois Migault, Roy Baker & Jeremy Kearns

Chris Marsh, as told to Sarah Milne.
Wiltshire, June 2020

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