Porsche congratulates Derek Bell on his 85th birthday

31/10/2026 Derek Bell is one of the most successful racing drivers of his era. Five overall victories at Le Mans, world championship titles and numerous successes with the Porsche 956 and 962 prototypes mark a career that is closely linked to the most successful period in Porsche's sports car history. Today, Bell turns 85.

Derek Bell is part of a generation of racing drivers who have helped shape international endurance racing over the decades. On 31 October 2026, the highly successful Porsche works driver will celebrate his 85th birthday. "Derek Bell epitomises an era in which technical innovation and human endurance formed an inseparable whole in motor racing," says Thomas Laudenbach, Head of Porsche Motorsport. "His victories, his understanding of the cars and his team spirit have been invaluable to Porsche during a crucial phase in the history of motor racing. We thank him for this important contribution to Porsche's history and wish him all the best on his 85th birthday."

Precision, patience and a feel for distance

Derek Bell was born on 31 October 1941 in the London suburb of Pinner, Middlesex. His path into professional motor racing began in the traditional way: via British club racing, he first moved into Formula 3, then on to Formula 2. His first encounters with Porsche came in the early 1970s in endurance racing. In 1971, Bell competed in the 24 Hours of Le Mans in a Porsche 917 LH, one of the fastest racing cars ever built at that time, built for maximum speed on the long straights at La Sarthe. For Bell, it marked the beginning of a relationship that would span decades.

It was a time when endurance racing was characterised by long stints and high speeds. Drivers were an integral part of the system, acting as observers, strategists and mechanics from behind the wheel. Bell's special qualities became apparent early on. He was regarded less as a spectacular attacker than as an exceptionally consistent driver. Calmness, a clear overview and an understanding of the mechanics became his hallmarks.

The 956 and 962 eras

At the heart of his years with Porsche was the Group C era of the 1980s. The Porsche 956 and, later, the Porsche 962 were prototypes that struck a new balance between aerodynamics, efficiency and stability. The 956 marked the start of a new chapter in endurance racing. Ground effect and turbo technology took cornering speeds to a whole new level. For drivers, this meant extreme speeds, long distances and the utmost concentration during 24-hour races.

The Group C regulations at the time focused not only on performance but also on fuel consumption. Drivers had to strike a precise balance between speed and range. In this environment, Bell established himself as one of the defining endurance racers of his generation. Together with team-mates such as Jacky Ickx, Hans-Joachim Stuck and Al Holbert, he won numerous races and championships. His partnership with Ickx was particularly influential. Over several years, the pair formed one of the most consistent driver duos in motor racing.

In 1985 and 1986, Bell became World Endurance Champion. He won the Le Mans 24 Hours five times, four of those with Porsche: in 1981 in the Porsche 936, in 1982 in the Porsche 956, and in 1986 and 1987 in the Porsche 962. His strength over long distances was also evident at Daytona: in 1986, 1987 and 1989, he won the 24-hour race there in a Porsche 962.

A personal highlight of his time with Porsche was racing alongside his son Justin. In 1992, Derek Bell, Justin Bell and Tiff Needell shared the cockpit of a Porsche 962 C at the 24 Hours of Le Mans. The trio finished the race in twelfth place.

Memories without sentimentality – linked to Porsche

Team-mates and engineers consistently described Bell as calm, attentive and remarkably grounded. When he talks about his early years at Le Mans, he likes to recount a specific moment from his first Porsche race in 1971: the top speed of 396 km/h on the long Hunaudières straight. He later described the acceleration of the 917 LH using a simple analogy: like an aeroplane taking off.

Even after retiring from active racing, Bell remained closely connected to the company. At historic events, in interviews and during presentations, he speaks of a time when engineers, mechanics and drivers frequently worked together to find solutions under enormous time pressure. At a reunion to mark the '40 Years of Group C' anniversary a few years ago, Bell spoke openly about the effort behind the results: "We worked like mad." By "we", he means all the racing drivers who once drove the Porsche 956/962, what Bell referred to as the ultimate racing car, at racing speeds, but at this particular gathering he is referring especially to Jochen Mass, Hans-Joachim Stuck and Bernd Schneider.

Today, Bell lives in Florida and looks back on a career that spans several technical generations of endurance racing – from the 917 of the early 1970s to the Group C prototypes of the 1980s. His races tell the story of an era in which speed, endurance and technical precision had to work in harmony for hours on end. That is precisely the constant in his career: Bell was not just fast. He was a driver who understood how to manage his pace over the entire distance.

MEDIA ENQUIRIES

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Image Sublines

Path: Porsche congratulates Derek Bell on his 85th birthday/Images/img_2.jpg
Title: Porsche 917 LH, Derek Bell, Jo Siffert (No. 17), 24h Le Mans, 1971, Porsche AG
Subline: Derek Bell (with helmet) at the 917 LH

Path: Porsche congratulates Derek Bell on his 85th birthday/Images/img_3.jpg
Title: Porsche 956, Derek Bell, Jacky Ickx (No. 1), 24h Le Mans, 1983, Porsche AG
Subline: Derek Bell in the 956

Path: Porsche congratulates Derek Bell on his 85th birthday/Images/img_4.jpg
Title: Stefan Bellof, Derek Bell, Jochen Mass, Jacky Ickx, Vern Schuppan, John Watson (l-r), 1000 km Spa, Belgium, 1984, Porsche AG
Subline: Stefan Bellof, Derek Bell, Jochen Mass, Jacky Ickx, Vern Schuppan and John Watson (l-r)

Path: Porsche congratulates Derek Bell on his 85th birthday/Images/img_5.jpg
Title: Porsche 962 IMSA, Derek Bell, Bob Wollek, John Andretti (No. 67), 24h Daytona, 1989, Porsche AG
Subline: Derek Bell in the 962 IMSA during 1989 24h Daytona

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