

100 years Francorchamps

Page 6

Preface of Giacomo Agostini

Memories of Francorchamps

I will always have many good memories of Francorchamps because I won the 500cc race there eight times and when you win, it always leaves positive emotions!

Armed with this history, I always return with pleasure to the beautiful green region of Francorchamps, a circuit like no other. I am thinking, naturally, of the old track, the only one I raced on. Subsequently, I was able to discover the modern course on the occasion of the Bikers' Classics, an event I attended several times.

But let's go back to the Belgian Motorcycle Grands Prix which, in my time was contested every year at Francorchamps, a unique setting, demonstrated by the speeds at which we played there. Today, while the length of the route has been halved, this has made it possible to achieve great progress in terms of safety. On the other hand, it must be recognized that despite the implementation of the new track, Spa-Francorchamps circuit has kept a very special soul.

Francorchamps and its extremely fast layout was a very important place in my career. Curves of more than 200 km/h were negotiated, which required very precise, rigorous and courageous riding.

Francorchamps was so fast that I had problems there when the full-face helmet came into fashion. When in 1971 I opted for the 'modern style' I competed in a few races without experiencing any big problems adapting to this new equipment. Arriving at Francorchamps, it was therefore quite natural that I wore my new helmet. But I was immediately surprised because of the extreme requirements of Francorchamps. The speeds were so high that this helmet seemed very heavy with a very large wind resistance. The design bothered me and after two or three laps of training, I stopped to put my little old 'pudding basin' helmet back on. This demonstrates how at Francorchamps the speeds were so much faster than we were used to at other circuits. Eventually, I was able to adapt and had to get used to the full-face helmet which undoubtedly brought greater security at Francorchamps as elsewhere.

Apart from this anecdote, I have naturally amassed many good memories on the Belgian circuit. Among these highlights, I particularly remember a race that I finished without knowing my result. I hesitate about the year, but I can assure you that that year we suffered a very violent storm during the 500cc race. The track was wet, slippery and visibility was poor. Due to this I could not read the signs that my pit position displayed to me as each lap passed. So when I saw the checkered flag and stopped I didn't know what my result was and then I saw people running to congratulate me, only then did I think I had won!

Francorchamps was a track that presented a lot of difficulties because of the speeds that were reached there. Cornering between steel guard rails at 200 or 230 km/h is not within everyone's reach. That's why when a rider won at Francorchamps he was always proud and happy! Even today, my victories at Francorchamps remain significant pages of my career.

You should also know that when I was competing in the Belgian Grand Prix, there were always a significant number of my compatriots in the audience. After the war, many Italians came to Belgium to work in the coal mines and they were really happy to see me win. After some of my victories at Francorchamps I have seen more than once compatriots, who did not necessarily have an easy and happy life in Belgium, crying with joy as they congratulated me. These are things that cannot be forgotten...

These Italians living in Belgium have always motivated me. At Francorchamps, I had to fight against very fast champions like Mike Hailwood, Phil Read and many others. But it is true that some years, with the powerful and reliable MV Agusta I was the fastest and my victory was not

threatened. Several years in a row, for the pleasure of these Italians and others, I competed against the clock. And almost every year, I broke the lap record at more than 200 km/h and in 1973 recorded a lap completed at more than 210 km/h average speed.

Of all this, I have only good memories!

With the first race organised in 1921, Francorchamps has a long history, it is the oldest of the European circuits being located in a green setting, in the far east of Belgium, close to Germany.

Preface of Christian Jupsin

Page 11

Chapter 1 : Francorchamps at that time

Page 13

Francorchamps is a village located in the east of the small country that became the independent Kingdom of Belgium in 1830. This village is situated in a rural landscape, in the part of the Ardennes that is called the 'Hautes Fagnes', Francorchamps is less than 10 kilometers away from the popular 19th century tourist town of Spa.

Page 14

The Francorchamps circuit was created after the great war was over. WW1 left painful memories in this part of Belgium close to the German border. Be aware that as soon as hostilities began in August 1914, Francorchamps suffered many deaths and buildings destroyed. After 1918, the allies tried to put things in order in the face of the defeated invader. Various measures were taken and among these, one was of great importance for Francorchamps and its region for in 1919, following the Versailles Agreements, the Belgian-German border was redrawn. What was called "the eastern cantons" comprising of a few German-speaking villages passed from Germany to Belgium.

Among these municipalities that changed nationalities, there was in particular Malmédy. This is of paramount importance for the future Francorchamps circuit. Until then, the boundary between Francorchamps and Malmédy, thus the border between Belgium and Germany, was situated on a small stream called the Eau Rouge, a modest tributary of the river Amblève, itself a sub-tributary of the Meuse.

Page 19

Today, all those who know the Francorchamps circuit know the Eau Rouge, it is this modest stream that flows at the foot of the Raidillon. But let us not get too far ahead of ourselves! At that time, the Raidillon did not exist. In 1919, this border was moved a few kilometers with the passage of Malmédy (incl ten other German-speaking municipalities) from Germany to Belgium.

So, after crossing the small bridge over the Eau Rouge, we were no longer stopped by the Belgian and German border posts on either side of the river.

During the years following the First World War, this region of Belgium's economy comprised mainly of agriculture as can still be seen in the wild nature that remains to this day. Between the fields and the villages, the expanses were vast. These cultivable lands and the wooded parts were traversed by some roads. Going from Francorchamps to Malmédy then Stavelot and back, you would travel roughly a triangle of about fifteen kilometers.

Francorchamps was therefore a rather modest village, but since the mid-19th century we have seen the birth of some hotels and some residential villas. Francorchamps owes this expansion of tourism to the railway and more precisely to the line Spa - Stavelot - Gouvy inaugurated in 1867 with the establishment of a station in Francorchamps. This was the beginning of tourism in this particularly peaceful corner not too far from the large prosperous industrial city of Liège which is about fifty kilometers away...

Page 21

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Liège region had a multitude of independent motorcycle manufacturers whose brands were often small affairs. But within the boundaries of Liège, more precisely in the municipality of Herstal, was the cradle of the three largest motorcycle factories in the country, Saroléa, F.N. and Gillet, brands who had worldwide reputation. In Liège again, in December 1912, enthusiasts gave birth to the Motorcyclist Federation of Belgium. It brought together six motorcycle clubs established throughout Belgium. The F.M.B., under the direction of the Automobile Club of Belgium, thus became the Belgian representative of the F.I.C.M. (International Federation of Motorcycling Clubs) which became, in 1949, the famous F.I.M. (International Motorcyclist Federation).

Among the founders of the F.M.B was Martin Fagard who was none other than the director of the Saroléa factory. At the time, the motorcycle was still in its infancy. The engines were relatively unreliable, the gearbox often absent and the braking system was very rudimentary.

In 1921, Chevalier Jules de Thier, the boss and founder of the Liège daily "La Meuse", Baron Joseph de Crawhez, mayor of Spa and Henri Langlois van Ophem, president of the sports commission of the Automobile Club de Belgique, planned to organise an automobile Grand Prix on the track that is not yet called "the Triangle of Francorchamps". Legend has it that these three met "by chance" at the Hôtel des Bruyères in Francorchamps. Others claim that they had made an appointment to discuss this project that was close to their hearts, the organization of a Belgian Grand Prix.

There was only one proposed race for 1921, a car event, sadly, this project was stillborn. But the desire to organise a race is not dead for everyone. The F.M.B. , which is placed under the protective wing of the Automobile Club, takes over, the Circuit de Francorchamps will be inaugurated by a motorcycle race in the same year 1921.

Page 23

At that time, the circuit was very different from what we know today. The roads that made up the route were narrow and devoid of a main highway. The Raidillon did not exist yet. In its place it followed the route to the border/customs house, a path located further to the left which, after crossing the Eau Rouge stream climbed the hill in the direction of Malmédy. Over the years and after the border moved, "the customs route" was renamed "the old customs road".

Arriving near Malmédy, the route took another long descent towards Stavelot where its famous banked turn had not yet been built. The competitors went all the way to the entrance of the town to negotiate a hairpin right turn before going back up to Francorchamps. There they arrived at another acute turn forming the hairpin of La Source. The overall length of this "layout" was 15.082 km. The huge change in elevation was important as in 1921 it was very suitable for highlighting the power developed by racing machines.

On these dirt roads, with slow turns there was no question, even with a vintage motorcycle of providing very high averages speeds.

In terms of technology, great progress had being made, especially during the great war when the motorcycles used by the armies during the conflict were forced to become more efficient, more maneuverable and more reliable.

But let's go back to that first race that took place on Friday, August 12, 1921. 21 entries were received by the organisers. Two races were on the program for the 500cc and 350cc categories. All the bikes were grouped in the same race but the 350cc were stopped after 15 laps while the 500cc had to cover 20 laps, nearly 300 kilometers to the finish. In the aftermath of the great war, the regular machines were powered by single-cylinder four-stroke engines with side valves. But a French ABC had a flat-twin with overhead valves.

The British brand Norton would win this first 500cc race with its single-cylinder engine with side valves. At that time, the Norton's engine was coupled to a 3-speed gearbox that was produced by Sturmey-Archer, a brand that the elders knew well because for decades, many bicycles had a 3-speed Sturmey-Archer hub!

Page 25

In terms of Belgian and particularly Liège motorcycles, we noted the participation, during this first Belgian Grand Prix, of the Saroléa in 500cc and the very young Gillet company in 350cc. The Gillet factory did not open until after the war. This brand which, for many years was an ardent defender of two-stroke engines, entered the sport in 1921 with a 350cc 2-stroke engine with a modest 3 horsepower!

The 21 competitors, divided into the two classes, descended towards the bridge over the Eau Rouge which was so narrow that, as a precautionary measure, the start of the race was given after the bridge, on the climb to the old customs house.

This first race for motorcycles being contested on the Francorchamps circuit allowed for some competitors to post amazing performances. At the controls of a Norton, the British rider Bill Hassal covered the 20 laps, or 301km, in 3 hours 18'53" at an average of 90.6 km/h. It was a British victory in what was not yet called the queens category while at the same time Belgian riders and motorcycles experienced very different fortunes. In the 500cc, the two Saroléa competing did not reach the finish due to mechanical problems. In the 350cc on the other hand, in the face of competition which it is true to say was not very high, the Belgian colours were raised high as they celebrated a one-two of the Belgians Kiecken and Desterbecq driving their Gillet 2 strokes.

Of the 21 bikes at the start, nine reached the finish, the reliability of these bikes, pushed to their limits, was not yet excellent.

Referring to the reports of the period, we can estimate approximately 1,500 members of the public attended this first GP of Belgium. This is consistent with the fact that in 1921, relatively few people had a car or motorcycle to travel. A large number of the spectators had travelled to Francorchamps and its surroundings by train.

Page 27

As early as 1922 important improvements were made to the Francorchamps track layout. The bridge crossing the Eau Rouge was widened as was the Malmédy-Stavelot hairpin section where the turn was 'swept' to make it faster. We also saw the appearance at the G.P of Belgium a new category for 250cc motorcycles. The races had been lengthened for that year's event, the 500cc motorcycles covering 422km, the 350cc 362 km and the 250 cc 305kms. This resulted in the winner in the 500 cc, the Belgian Gaston Antoine taking 5h.21'42" to finish in first place on his Triumph at an average speed of 78.6 km/h. This was significantly slower than the previous year. This relative under performance is mainly explained by the wet conditions present on the circuit on Sunday, July 23, 1922. Is it necessary to recall that in the absence of tarmac, the surface was muddy and extremely slippery?

Of technical interest it should be noted that the victorious Levis in the 250cc class, won at a speed higher than that of the 350cc. It was powered by a 2-stroke, one of the peculiarities of which was to offer a lubrication of its engine by an oil pump that the pilot had to operate by foot while driving.

Page 28

After a G.P. contested in the Dinant region in 1923, the motorcycles returned to Francorchamps in 1924. For this Grand Prix which was contested on Sunday, July 13, the triangle of Francorchamps-Malmédy-Stavelot was surfaced with a compound of bitumen which was a temporary fix but which on the day of the race considerably limited the dust and pebbles raised by the bikes.

In 1924, the 500cc class had 30 laps to complete for a distance of 462.5 km which the victorious Norton of the British rider Alec Bennett will cover in 4h.28'45" at the average of 94.250 km/h. It's engine was equipped with overhead valves, an upgrade that had also become customary at Saroléa. The year 1924 also marked the introduction of the 175cc category at Francorchamps.

Pages 30-31

The 350cc race will unfortunately be mourned following the crash suffered by the British rider Bill Hollowell, a works rider for the A.J.S factory. He was fighting for the victory when at the

bottom of Masta's descent, shortly before Stavelot, Hollowell touched a competitor's rear wheel with his front wheel. Unbalanced, he fell at high speed and unfortunately became the first rider/driver to lose their life on the Francorchamps track.

From 1925 there was conflict between the FN factory and the organizers, the F.M.B, arguing that the official motorcycles of the F.N. factory. had participated in races other than those governed by the F.M.B. and the Federation banned the participation of the F.N. team in the Belgian G.P. The Herstal plant counter-attacked taking legal action and won its case, thus F.N. regained the right to participate in the G.P. of Belgium 1925.

Following this court decision, the F.M.B., obviously a bad loser, decided not to organize the Grand Prix due to take place on the Sunday, August 2nd, but to move it to the Saturday, one day earlier! The F.M.B. received from the F.N. factory. a letter signed by Mr. Joassart, general manager of the Factory of Herstal. Of particular interest it read: "Only concerned with sparing the multiple interests that you deliberately sacrifice and since you are determined to abolish the event rather than comply with the judicial decision rendered, we confirm that we are willing to make the sacrifice of our participation in the 1925 Grand Prix so that the race can take place tomorrow or later. Public opinion will know the difference between our generosity and your much less generous obstinacy."

On the day the F.M.B. received this letter, riders of different nationalities were already present at Francorchamps. They were consulted and agreed to contest the G.P. eight days later, on the 9th August. The 500cc class witnessed another victory for the British rider Alec Bennett and his equally British Norton.

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Page 35

In the 175cc race, we record a Belgian victory with Nestor Vanneste driving a Ready Blackburne motorcycle built in the city of Kortrijk.

The following year, the F.I.C.M. accorded the Title of European Grand Prix to the G.P. of Belgium. In the 175cc category and thanks to the valiant Ready it was a future great Belgian champion who won at the controls of a Belgian motorcycle, René Milhoux.

In 1927, on the eve of the event, it was mainly technical developments that fueled the conversations. In the 350cc and 500cc categories, until then the side valve engine was the choice, but now the overhead camshaft was more and more popular, especially on the English A.J.S. and Norton. This resulted in increased performance and this new Norton allowed the Irishman Stanley Wood to win at an average speed of 115.354 km/h.

At the 1928 Grand Prix, it was particularly hot on July 15th resulting in many mechanical problems to such a degree that despite the paving of the track we have to note a decrease in speeds across all the different categories.

Page 38

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In 1930 Belgium celebrated the 100th anniversary of its existence. For the occasion, the Belgian Grand Prix contested at Francorchamps would again carry the title of European Grand Prix and on this occasion we discover a new F.N. equipped with an overhead camshaft. It was ridden by Walter Handley of Great Britain, who immediately took the lead. Then surprise, at the end of the second lap Handley entered the pit while his bike still seemed to work properly. Handley began talking to F.N. manager Dougal Marchant, who had also designed the new bike and after a brief

discussion, the F.N. returned to the paddock... We have never discovered the reason for this abandonment!

Pages 40-41

Twelve months later, during the training sessions of the G.P. of Belgium at Francorchamps, Grégoire, with his official factory Saroléa 500cc bike made a lap at the fabulous average of 132.444 km/h.

As early as 1931, the F.M.B. instigated major changes in its organizational program at Francorchamps. Before the Grand Prix, the Belgian championships had to be contested on the same track. It was an opportunity for the Belgians and their machines to conduct a dress rehearsal. As part of these national championships, Saroléa took the opportunity to win the Expert 500 and the Senior 500 with Demeuter and Noir. For his part, René Milhoux won as an Expert 350 riding his official factory F.N. Four weeks later, on the occasion of the G.P. of Belgium, things were quite different for the Belgian teams who could not prevent a British victory in each category.

The national championships were held at Francorchamps for five consecutive years. In 1932, Grégoire's victory over Saroléa at 120.040 km/h raised great hopes, but at the Grand Prix, the victory once again went to Stanley Woods and his Norton.

Twelve months later, during the training sessions of the G.P. of Belgium at Francorchamps, Grégoire, with his official factory Saroléa 500cc bike made a lap at the fabulous average of 132.444 km/h. But during the next lap, surprised by a local thunderstorm that had developed at the top of the circuit near La Source, while exiting Blanchimont curve at high speed he skidded on the asphalt which was suddenly and unpredictably wet. He fell, hit a tree and it cost him his life. As a sign of respect the Saroléa team withdrew.

Norton took the opportunity to bag a double at Francorchamps by winning in both 350 and 500cc classes. For the Belgian side, F.N. saved its honour with the third places obtained by Noir and Milhoux respectively in the 500 and 350cc. To achieve this result Noir had achieved a famous feat. On lap 24 of 28, in Stavelot curve, Noir hit a dog that was frolicking on the track. He could not avoid the fall. He got up and put his F.N. back on its wheels. The gearbox was stuck in the top gear, 4th. It was with this unique handicap that he finished the event, long after the winner but in a fine third position.

Page 44

During this race we also witnessed the arrival of Italian manufacturers, the British rider Wal Handley winning on his Moto Guzzi in the 250cc class and the Belgian Yvan Goor who won the 175cc race at the controls of a Benelli.

1934 was a disastrous year for the Belgians, at the German Grand Prix while Eric Noir and Léopold Demeuter occupied the first two places in the 500c class with their F.N. it was tainted by tragedy. During this race, Noir lost his life as a result of a fall. Before Demeuter could be brought in and retired as a sign of mourning he also fell and was also killed. With the death of Grégoire a year earlier, in the space of twelve months Belgium had lost its three greatest motorcycling champions!

Pages 46-47

At Francorchamps once more for the G.P. of Belgium, while the Nortons remained invincible in the higher categories, from 1935 among the lower capacities, we witnessed the domination of the German team DKW and its 2-stroke engines. In addition, we note in the 175cc class the victory of a Belgian rider on a Belgian motorcycle once more, Maurice Van Geert on a Rush, a machine that was produced in the Brussels region.

It then appears that the committee that managed the organizations on the Francorchamps circuit has somewhat lost interest in the motorcycle racing. Thus, the G.P. of Belgium found itself on the Floreffe circuit in 1936 before returning, the following year, to the Spa region.

There we once again witness the domination of the British in the upper classes while in 250 and 175cc, the DKW 2 strokes supported by the National Socialist regime that ruled Germany at that time had become unbeatable. These German winners, those whom some will call 'Hitler's Riders' did not hesitate (or were forced by the hierarchy) to make the Nazi salute after winning a race.

At a technical level, the year 1938 saw the arrival of compressors (superchargers). In the 500cc class, this addition was present on the BMW flat-twin and on one of the F.N. with two parallel cylinders. The BMW was unique in its design with its two opposing cylinders, its two cylinder heads each topped by two camshafts and especially with its shaft drive transmission. It took BMW two years to develop this bike but in 1938 it dominated the class. Georg Meier won the race at an average speed of 145.462 km/h. He had covered the 416 km in 2h.51'40".

With his Norton that relied on atmospheric pressure, the Briton Freddie Frith was second but more than a minute behind while the Scottish rider Jock West completed the podium with the second BMW from the Bavarian factory. This was the first time since 1923 that a team could undermine the dominance of British motorcycles in the 500cc.

Equipped with large financial resources, the official BMW team had extremely powerful motorcycles but their handling was very nervous because of the torque reaction generated by the engine and its crankshaft being arranged longitudinally. This meant that during a downward rpm gear shift (to a higher gear) the engine would react with a left-rotation force. At the downshift, the sudden increase in rpm led to the opposite phenomenon, with the bike being pushed to the right. DKW's German armada bowed to a Norton and a Velocette in the 350cc, but the DKW secured victories in both 250 and 175cc events, taking the top three places in the 250cc class!

Pages 48-49

Regarding the track layout 1939 saw the introduction of the Raidillon bend. After crossing the Eau Rouge, rather than turning left on the road to the old customs house, the track now climbed the hillside through a beautiful right turn, the gradient being 18%. The Raidillon would become the principal feature of Francorchamps. One of its greatest assets is the spectacle it offers, especially from the meadow located in front of the stands, where traditionally a large crowd gathers.

In terms of competition, the official Nortons were technically outdated and declared obsolete at Francorchamps in 1939. The BMWs now faced a new challenger, the Italian Gilera 4 cylinder, which were also equipped with a supercharger system. The BMW had been improved since the previous year. It had been lightened and now developed some 54bhp. On the frame side, the 1939 BMW was equipped with a telescopic fork while the rear suspension was of the sliding post type unlike the Gilera which already used a swingarm with friction dampers. At the front, the Italian was equipped with a parallelogram fork. The mechanics of the Gilera were modern with its 4-cylinder block facing the road and water cooling. The cylinder head was topped by two camshafts and a compressor was arranged before the carburetor. The Italian engine was the only one that could compete in power with the German flat-twin. On the starting grid of the 500cc there were three twin-cylinder F.N. of which only one, driven by Ginger Wood was equipped with a compressor. As in 1938, we witnessed another victory of Meier and his BMW who passed under the checkered flag with an advantage of 5'53" over the Gilera of Serafini! In the 350cc class the factory Saroléa had a very powerful motorcycle. Their single-cylinder engine produced 30bhp at a speed of 7,000 rpm. but the riders of these Saroléa could briefly run them up to 8,000 rpm if required for an overtake or during a final sprint to the line.

Pages 50-51

But the performance of the Belgian motorcycles did not prevent Velocette from taking the first two places in front of a DKW. In the 250cc class, the German supercharged 2 strokes took the first two places ahead of a Benelli which finished a lap behind. The Germans thus won in this last motorsport game before the war of 1940-45...

From 1921 to 1939, 19 Belgian Grands Prix were contested, including 17 on the now famous Francorchamps triangle. On the manufacturers' side, the British were largely dominant as they

won 15 times in the 500cc and 13 times in 350cc class. Within this list, it is worth highlighting the success of the Norton brand which has won 10 times in the 500cc and 7 in the 350cc. Only the German onslaught was able to break the domination of English motorcycles in 500cc with the arrival of the BMWs though the German offensive had begun with the DKW.

With its high pitched exhaust note, DKW signaled its first victory at Francorchamps in the 175cc class in 1927. This factory, specialists in 2-stroke engines would still win 4 more times in 175cc and 5 times in 250cc, uninterrupted from 1935 to 1939. It is interesting to note that the engines developed by DKW had two pistons acting simultaneously in two cylinders joined at the cylinder head producing a form of 'supercharge' This is a technique that will later be used on a large scale by the Austrian marque Puch. But back to DKW who, during the 30s, could boast of having the largest factory team on the Grand Prix scene. Indeed, on the circuits, in the days before the race and before the competitors commenced practice, the DKW team, 100 strong, settled into the paddock with no less than three motorcycles for each of its riders!

In terms of winning brands, in G.P. contested at Francorchamps between the two wars, we can count seven victories for motorcycles built in Belgium, even if, in general the three major Brands of Liège (Saroléa, F.N. and Gillet) were not the main architects of these successes. During this period, Gillet distinguished itself in 1921 but the other Belgian victories were achieved by lesser-known firms such as Rush, P.A., Levis and Ready Bourne.

Chapter 2 :World Championships

Page 55

At the end of the Second World War the entire Francorchamps region was hugely affected by the memories of bitter battles...and the circuit itself had been heavily damaged. The famous "Battle of the Bulge" the last German counter-attack led by General Field Marshall von Rundstedt left deep wounds and the horror of war could be seen everywhere.

Page 57

As normal life resumed, at Francorchamps the local authorities set to work to renovate the entire circuit. A new track surface and development of a new stand facing the start and finish line. Two tunnels were also dug under the track in order to facilitate access to the race paddock.

Page 61

The renovation work was exhaustive and it was not until 1947 that the Francorchamps circuit once again hosted competitions. When motorcycles returned to the track in this first post-war confrontation, there had been many changes to the regulations for motorcycle racing. Supercharging was now prohibited so no more compressors.

Page 63

The G.P. of 1947 brought together three solo categories: the 250, 350 and the 500cc. Here, for the very first time, was a race reserved for sidecars, a category that over the years, would be a big favorite of the public.

In addition engines could only use commercial gasoline, no more mixing of benzol and alcohol, the exotic brews used to power engines before the war. It was also decreed that following the war, the Germans were excluded from all sports competitions in any discipline, including motorsports. There will be no German at the start of the first post war G.P. of Belgium.

Page 65

The G.P. of 1947 brought together three solo categories: the 250, 350 and the 500cc. Here, for the very first time, was a race reserved for sidecars, a category that over the years, would be a big favorite of the public. The races had also been significantly shortened since the three solo categories each had 10 laps to complete, a distance of 145 km, while the sidecars battled over 6 laps (87 km). The introduction of three wheelers would allow a Belgian driver to record a victory in 1947, Frans Vanderschrick who piloted a Norton-engined combination.

Page 66

In the 250cc, it was a Moto Guzzi driven by the Italian Bruno Francisci who won by a lap ahead of two Excelsior's. In the 350 and 500cc, Norton recorded a double of victory in the two bigger capacity classes. It would be the same the following year for the English brand.

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Page 72

While at the end of 1948 an inter-municipal council was founded that will oversee the future and development of the circuit, 1949 was also a pivotal year in the history of motorcycle racing with the launch by the F. I.M. of the World Championships.

For this first world series, these championships would be contested over six Grands Prix with, in addition to Belgium, the Tourist Trophy at the Isle of Man, Switzerland, Holland, Ulster and Italy. Five categories were in contention for this first world championship, 125cc, 250cc, 350cc, 500cc and sidecars. At Francorchamps in 1949, the two smaller classes were absent.

Page 75

On the Belgian circuit, in the races contested before the war the gaps at the finish between the competitors were always substantial. This completely changed with the world championships and the much shorter distances to cover.

Thus, at Francorchamps in 1949, in the 500cc, the British rider Bill Doran won on his A.J.S. with an advantage of 0"2/10 over the Gilera of the Italian Artesiani and 1"3/10 over the Moto Guzzi of another Italian, Lorenzetti. With Frith winning in 350cc at the controls of his Velocette and Oliver coming out victorious with his Norton in sidecars, British riders and motorcycles had still won everything at Francorchamps during this, the first event of the world championship.

Page 76

By 1950, the Gilera had made good progress. Umberto Masetti and Nello Pagani taking the first two places in the 500cc with their 4cyl Italian cylinders machines which, for the first time, were equipped with four carburetors.

It was during 1950 that the very high speeds achieved at Francorchamps astounded everyone. With his single-cylinder Norton, from the beginning of the race the British rider Geoff Duke took the lead and halfway through the race, he broke the lap record at 157.210 km/h. But the rear tire could not stand these high speeds. He was in difficulty and at a reduced pace and with rear tire down to the canvas Duke brought his Norton back to the pits where he abandoned. It was that same year that we saw the first appearance of another Italian 4-cylinder bike, the one that would become the famous MV Agusta.

Page 82

It was not until 1956 that the MV won at Francorchamps and with this first victory it became unbeatable for 18 consecutive years! First with John Surtees on board, then with Gary Hocking, Mike Hailwood, Giacomo Agostini and Phil Read.

But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves! Putting the disappointment of 1950 behind him, Geoff Duke would win at Francorchamps the following year in the 350 and 500cc while still riding for Norton. He would repeat his victory for Norton on the 350cc in 1952. But in 1954, it was at the handlebars of a Gilera that he would score the victory in the 500cc class on the Ardennes circuit.

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Page 87

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Page 96

His final victory at the G.P. of Belgium, was won at the extraordinary average speed of 176.348 km/h. It was during the same year, 1954, that we witness the appearance of the integral 'Dustbin' fairing that covered the front wheel. The appearance of the GP bikes was thus significantly changed. At the front, these fairings were of a very 'voluminous' appearance. This was required as it encompassed the steering front wheel. Three races were traditionally contested making up the GP of Belgium held on the first Sunday of July: the 350cc, the 500cc and the Sidecars, then in 1956, the 125 and 250cc were added at Francorchamps.

Page 98

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Page 105

It would be a glorious Grand Prix for MV Agusta who, with two riders were victorious in the four solo races contested that day. Carlo Ubbiali won in 125 and 250cc at averages of 160.790 and 168.696 km/h respectively. For his part, John Surtees took victory on his four-cylinder MV in 350 and 500cc at speeds of 176.466 and 184.076 km/h.

Page 106

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Page 107

In 1960 the 125cc class produced victories for MZ who, from beyond the Iron Curtain, had taken over production in the former DKW factory located in the city of Zschopau. Like their predecessors, the MZ's used formidable 2-stroke engines.

New regulations in 1960, the 'Dustbin' fairing incorporating the front wheel is considered too dangerous and unsightly by the officials of the F.I.M. and is now prohibited. Most racing motorcycles are equipped, from 1960, with a fairing integrating the fork head and going as far as under the engine, a design close to what we still know today, The 'Dolphin' fairing, named due to its slender appearance .

Up until 1960, the world championships were mainly contested between European riders or riders from the Commonwealth (association of former British colonies) and all were at the controls of European motorcycles.

It was the time of the so-called "Continental Circus" where many private riders went from circuit to circuit in tired vans, living day by day on their meagre start and finish bonuses. The paddock was a vast campsite where the huge trucks and trailers were not lined up as they are today. It was just a tangle of old vans, caravans and tents that served as sleeping quarters, kitchens and small workshops. Places in factory teams were scarce before the Japanese manufacturers' arrival.

Page 108

In 1961, however, Honda signaled the 'winds of change' during the Grand Prix contested in the Ardennes. Riding Honda's, the Swiss Luigi Taveri won in the 125cc while the Rhodesian Jim Redman did the same with his 4-cylinder in 250cc. This bike astounded with its performance but even more by the sound coming out of its exhausts. The whole region was invaded by the incomparable feral howl of this 4-cylinder rotating at more than 15,000 rpm. This was the beginning of the domination of Japanese motorcycles in the small and medium displacements.

No doubt the Japanese manufacturers had launched an impressive offensive, clearly demonstrated when in 1961, the factory Honda's had at Francorchamps six works riders in the 125cc and 250cc categories. At the same time, we also notice the arrival of Yamaha and Suzuki in the 125 and 250cc classes although these two Japanese manufacturers are not yet ready for victory. But everything comes at the right time to those who wait.

Page 110

Thus, in 1964, aboard a Yamaha twin-cylinder two-stroke, the Japanese riders Fumio Ito and Yashikazu Sunako created a surprise by placing first and second in the 250cc race in the G.P. of Belgium. It created a big problem for the organizers come the podium, the Japanese anthem was not available on the sound system of the circuit! It was necessary to do without this anthem...

This unexpected victory of the Yamahas is explained by the very high power developed by these machines which, on a track as fast as Francorchamps gave the advantage to these fabulous Japanese bikes.

The Spa-Francorchamps course was so fast that in 1963, Mike Hailwood, riding an MV, completed a lap at 201.150 km/h with his Italian 500. The mythical milestone of an average of 200 km/h for the lap had been achieved! Deprived of serious competition, the MV thus lined up, year after year with the victories at the Belgian GP (and on all the circuits of the world championship).

Page 115

Then in 1965, a young Italian rider discovered the Francorchamps circuit for the first time. It was Giacomo Agostini, the teammate of Mike Hailwood in the invincible MV team. The Italian finished in second place not able to mount a strong challenge to the man who was nicknamed: "Mike the bike"! But Ago was there to learn and from 1966, it would be his turn to rank first with the MV.

That year, when a thunderstorm was 'almost flooding' the Ardennes track, the young Italian had to face the official Honda 4 cylinder bikes of Mike Hailwood and Jim Redman. The latter fell in Stavelot, a fall which resulted in a serious injury which forced Redman to retire from serious competition.

For his part, Hailwood retired with a faulty gearbox. Ago found himself in the lead and he easily won his first victory over the mythical Francorchamps. It still required for him to stay upright on a track made very slippery by the rainstorm following a period of warm weather.

While acknowledging the domination of the Japanese bikes, we must also talk about the 50cc class which was also present on the Ardennes track. It was in 1962, the year of their debut in the world championship, that for the first time the small cubes were featured on the extremely fast road course of Francorchamps.

Page 117

Simplifying the mechanics

To cope with the excessive sophistication of motorcycles, especially from Japan during the 60s, the F.I.M., at its congress held in autumn 1968, would limit the number of cylinders and the number of gears in the gearboxes.

At the time, the 50cc had 12, or even 14 speeds with twin-cylinder engines for Honda and Suzuki. The latter has also started work, probably for 1970, on a 50cc 3-cylinder engine! (Sadly never seen at the track).

At Honda, always focusing on the four stroke, we have at the end of the '60s a 5-cylinder 125cc and a 6-cylinder 250cc. At Yamaha; 125cc and 250cc are created using 4 cylinders 2 strokes.

To curb these excessively expensive developments, which put European manufacturers at a disadvantage, the F.I.M. decreed that from the 1969 season, the 50cc would be limited to one cylinder and 6 gears.

In 1970, the other categories will have to adapt to the following standards:

- maximum 2 cylinders and 6 speeds for 125 and 250cc;

- maximum 4 cylinders and 6 speeds for 350 and 500cc.

These regulatory changes (deemed anti-Japanese) at such short notice meant that by 1968 Honda and Suzuki withdrew their official teams from the road race world championships.

Page 123

In 1967, the 50cc was at its peak. While the Honda twin-cylinder four-strokes had disappeared after dominating the category, the Suzuki twin-cylinder two-strokes were the most efficient. These small motorcycles were equipped with a 14-speed gearbox and these Suzuki's were superior to the eight-speed Derbi and the Kreidler 12 speeds. In 1967, the Suzuki riders did the triple at Francorchamps with the German Hans-Georg Anscheidt winning at the phenomenal average of 158.594 km/h while Yoshimi Katayama completed a lap at 161.040 km/h!

Pages 124-125

On the old track, these 50cc were practically flat out everywhere except at La Source (turn 1 hairpin) and in the Raidillon at the bottom of which the drivers of the fastest 50cc braked briefly before tilting the machine at the moment when, due to the slope, the suspension 'bottomed'. But it took a brave heart to go full gas head in the bubble at more than 200 km / h in the great Burnenville sweep and at nearly 200 km /h in the turn of Stavelot. The true artistry of these 50cc weapons was to make the best use of the narrow power bands when revving at more 17,000 t/min. the operating range was in the order of 300-500 rpm wide!

This meant that if a Suzuki arrived at 200 km/h on the descent leading to the great right hander of Burnenville, when they negotiated this curve as the descent diminished, as soon as they lost about 5 km/h, they had to downshift by a gear! In the curve of Burnenville, in 1967, Suzuki riders went down one and then a second gear simply because the change of profile of the ground made them lose a little speed. On areas of heavy braking, downshifting all the gears with 14 speeds was an impossible mission. In these areas, as when arriving at La Source in 10th or 11th gear, it was not possible to go down to the first in the space of 2 or 3 seconds. That's why, on the Suzuki's, it was engineered to be possible to go down 4 gears at one time.

It was during this period that the most difficult 50cc to operate was undoubtedly the 12-speed Kreidler which was equipped with two gearboxes! A 3-speed with hand control and a 4-speed with foot control. It was necessary to combine the use of these two boxes to have the full 12 gears. Going from 1st into 12th or 12th into 1st was within the reach of all drivers, but, when it was necessary to go down a few gears, for example from 9th to 3rd or from 7th to 4th, the many riders who tried their hand at the bars of this Kreidler cursed the design!. Only the German Hans Georg Anscheidt (who later moved to Suzuki) was a virtuoso at the controls of this machine but he was never world champion riding the Kreidler. Among the 50cc pack, a special mention goes to the Dutch firm Van Veen which was the importer of Kreidler into Holland and worked wonders with these machines which for many years claimed victories.

Page 127

This was particularly the case when the gearboxes were limited to 6 gears. Jan de Vries, the Dutchman who died at the beginning of 2021, was twice world champion with one championship to his compatriot Henk Van Kessel. It was also aboard a Kreidler Van Veen that the Francorchamps public was able to celebrate a national victory in 1975 thanks to Juliaan Van

Zeebroeck who had an outstanding race there. Fighting for victory with Spain's Angel Nieto and Italy's Eugenio Lazzarini, the Belgian managed to break away towards the end of the race. He was 4" ahead of the Spaniard when he crossed the finish line to the delight of the Belgian public. He also set a new lap record on the last lap at a fantastic average of 165.342 km/h. Many years later, the Flemish driver said: "*At the exit of the turn of La Source, before the finish, I turned around and saw that Nieto was far behind. Before crossing the line, to respond to the cheering of the audience, I stood up and greeted the crowd. Without it, I think I could have reduced the lap record by 2 or 3" more, a record that has never been beaten!*"

Page 129

To witness another Belgian victory during a G.P. contested at Francorchamps it will be necessary to wait for the new track and 1983 when Didier de Radiguès wins on his Chevallier against the Yamahas of the Frenchman Christian Sarron and the Venezuelan Carlos Lavado. Didier de Radiguès had made an excellent start and immediately settled at the head of the race at the same time as Sarron and Lavado made poor starts, they were respectively 13th and 14th at the end of the first lap. Both of them made fantastic comebacks and the Frenchman who had joined his Belgian friend at the front appeared to be able to win. But de Radiguès resisted him valiantly and it was finally with little more than 3" of a lead that he celebrated a new national victory in the G.P. of Belgium!

We see that while mastering the skills required of a 50cc on the extremely fast road circuit of Francorchamps was an art, exploiting all the performance of a 250cc and a fearsome 500 also required a lot of skill but in addition a lot of courage on fast dangerous curves like the S of Masta and on the long descent to Stavelot were with every event the speeds increased. It was at more than 250 km/h that the riders came close to the walls fronting the houses.

From the beginning of the 70s, Francorchamps began to gain the reputation of being very dangerous. This perhaps is one of the reasons why the champions were so proud when they won on the Belgian circuit.

Page 131

Against Phil Read who became his teammate at MV, Giacomo Agostini was magnificent at Francorchamps in 1973 where he commandingly beat the Englishman in the 'blue riband' class with the Italian completing a lap at 210.709 km/h with his MV 500 three-cylinder four-stroke. In 1973, the great champion Giacomo Agostini won his eighth consecutive victory on the very fast track of Francorchamps. "Teammate" Phil Read became world champion the following year, 1974, when Agostini switched to riding a Yamaha two-stroke. With the new MV once again using a four-cylinder engine, Read was imperial and wrote a page in the history of Motorcycle Grand Prix by completing a lap at 214.720 km/h, recording the last victory at Francorchamps of a 500 cc four stroke!

At the end of this victory, in an interview, Read said: "*The fast curves of Francorchamps are very delicate to negotiate. We have no room to make mistakes. In the S of Masta, I went to the limit with the MV, I was at more than 250 km/h. You ask me if that didn't scare me? No, in such situations we are totally focused on riding and we certainly do not have time to think about what would happen if we hit a rail. And if we thought about it, we would stop immediately,*" he continued, laughing. After this long domination by the MV with 4, then 3, then again with 4 cylinders ended, it signaled the era of the large capacity two stroke Japanese bikes which would be even faster. But now the Francorchamps track was increasingly being criticised by the riders and by the officials of the International Motorcycling Federation.

Page 133

Ago 8 times in a row

In the world championships contested at Francorchamps, the record holder for the number of victories is Giacomo Agostini who, from 1966 to 1973, was successful with his MV Agusta eight years in a row in 500cc.

John Surtees for his part has won four times in the 500cc but he also has two successes in the 350cc, still on MV Agusta. Mike Hailwood scored four victories in the queen category with the Italian brand but he also added a victory in 250cc on Honda in 1966.

As for Freddie Spencer, he has imposed his Honda three times in 500cc but also once in 250cc.

Francorchamps brought together from 1949 to 1990 the spectacle of 40 world championships. Those who are strong in mathematics will have already concluded that from 1949 to 1990 was 42 years ago. It should be remembered that the G.P. was held in Zolder in 1980 and that it was not run at all 1987. Only sidecars and 500cc were in the running at each of the 40 editions in Francorchamps. In 500cc, the MV Agusta won 19 times. For sidecars, the BMW engine won 18 times and in terms of riders on three wheels, the British ace Oliver won six victories against 4 for the Swiss Scheidegger and 4 also for the German Steinhausen.

Page 136

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Page 145

In terms of absolute records of the road circuit, it is in 1977 that they would be set by Barry Sheene. At the controls of his Suzuki XR14 two stroke, the Briton won at the average speed of 217.370 km/h, having set a new lap record at 220.720km/h, both numbers that will be forever etched in the record books.

Page 146

In 1977 and 1978, the Belgian Grand Prix could only be held at Francorchamps because a brand new track had been promised for 1979.

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On that same day, in the sidecars the German Rolf Steinhausen completed a lap at the average of 200.520 km/h. Make no mistake, the Francorchamps triangle was a fast track and hats off to these riders for the performances they were able to achieve.

Page 147

The Suzuki was powered by a square four engine, with two cranks mated, a bit as if two 250cc twin-cylinder engines were glued one behind the other. This Suzuki had 120 horsepower. Its main rival was the Yamaha, it is also a four-cylinder two-stroke but with the cylinders arranged in line and facing forward. In 1977 the American Steve Baker, new to the circuit of Francorchamps, would finish second riding such a Yamaha.

In December 1977, work commenced on the construction of the new Francorchamps track layout. It would be necessary to act quickly to be ready on the first Sunday of July 1979!

We are now entering a period at the new track which experienced many 'issues' with the motorcycle riders during its difficult birth!

Page 150

Within a few years, the new Francorchamps suffered a strike by the riders leading to a cancellation at the last hour and, finally, to its temporary removal from the calendar of the Grand Prix world championships. In 1978, the 'original' road circuit took the official name of Spa-Francorchamps but in the press, it is often called "the most beautiful circuit in the world". This was to be the last Grand Prix on the 13.5 km track. That year, the weather conditions were not excellent and it was the Dutchman Will Hartog who won in the 500cc race, pitting his Suzuki

against the Yamaha's of Roberts and the Suzuki of Sheene. The pace due to the conditions was slower than the previous year but THE subject of conversation is the new layout that will significantly shorten the circuit in the future.

Page 151

From the bend of Les Combes (altitude 465 meters) at the end of the climb following the Raidillon, a new route will go down to join in a series of sweeping curves the old circuit on the route back towards La Source, rejoining a little before the ultra-fast curves of Blanchimont.

In 1979, the new Francorchamps is ready just in time to welcome the motorcycles in early July. The surface is brand new. It was laid a few days before. The asphalt is so new that it is still greasy and lacking grip. In the three solo categories, the stars decide not to start. The leaders of the F. I. M. do not want to accept this riders 'strike' Threats and counter threats are made on both sides. Eventually it is decided the races will be run and those who are not at the start will leave the victory to another.

But the star riders stood firm and when the race took place it was contested by the 'lesser' know riders motivated by the lure of financial gain and by the possibility of an unexpected victory in a Grand Prix.

Page 154

The behavior of these less fortunate privateers was understandable. It is the New Zealander Denis Ireland who will pocket the 15 points for the victory in the 500cc. At the end of the 1979 season, the winner of Francorchamps will be 14th in the world championship with a total of... 16 points!

The beginning of the "new" Francorchamps was therefore difficult with the GP riders. In order to avoid any dispute and because the guarantees offered by the inter-municipal council of the Francorchamps circuit were considered insufficient, the organisers (the FMB) decided that the Belgian Grand Prix will be contested in Zolder in 1980...

But by 1981, motorcycles were back on "the most beautiful circuit in the world". After the "issues" of 1979, we saw the real spirit of the world championships come to life once more on the new Ardennes track. In the queen category, we witness a double for the Suzuki's of Luchinelli and Mamola, while in the 250cc, we note with satisfaction the fifth place of our compatriot Didier de Radiguès.

1983 was a memorable year for the local public as the Belgian Lucio Pietroniro placed fifth in 125cc and the Brabançonne (the national anthem of Belgium) was heard at the end of the contest in the quarter liter class with the victory of Didier de Radiguès. In the 500cc, we witnessed a one, two for American riders with Roberts (Yamaha) winning ahead of Spencer (Honda).

Once again it was an American double in 1984 with Spencer's victory over Lawson and again in 1985 as Freddie Spencer achieved an amazing American 'double' of his own winning both the 250 and 500cc races, going onto win the world titles in both categories at the end of the season.

Page 161

American supremacy continued at Francorchamps in 1986 with a one two on Yamahas ridden by Randy Mamola and Eddie Lawson.

In June 1987, everything was again put in place for the races that would constitute the G.P. of Belgium, scheduled as usual on the first Sunday of July... But the races will not take place! It's the beginning of the end of an incredible history, the result of the amateurism of the F. M. B. Due to the genuine concerns of the riders, the F. I. M. decides that the Belgian Grand Prix 1987 cannot be contested. The promised work on safety did not happen in the second half of June when Randy Mamola, representing riders went through Francorchamps on his way to Assen to compete at the famous Dutch TT...

A representative of the inter-municipal council of the circuit was particularly unhelpful to the American rider during this visit. On the side of the F. M. B. , they no longer know on which hook

to hang their hats. As a last resort, they even re-consider Zolder, the other Belgian circuit that could host this competition and that did so in 1980. The move cannot be done in a week, especially since the riders are not keen on the idea...

Exit the 1987 Belgian Grand Prix. Francorchamps can no longer depend on its lofty reputation and history to guarantee its place near the center of the Grand Prix world.

The required work having been carried out, the Grand Prix de Belgique did take place more or less normally in the Ardennes in 1988. But nothing was like before between the riders and Francorchamps.

Page 163

After the 1988 GP, the late Yves Jamotte wrote in the Belgian magazine Moto 80: "*Since the famous story of July 1987, or even since the boycott of 1979, the atmosphere is not quite the same at Francorchamps*"... And as a visionary, Jamotte added: "*... The future of the Grand Prix inevitably depends on this "safety" parameter and hiding behind a homologation obtained until 1990 would secure the future if not in the short term at least in the medium term.*"

In 1988, the event was run in wet conditions and this did not help the success of the organisation, at least in financial terms. On the sporting front, Gardner wins from Lawson in the 500cc and de Radiguès is fourth. In the 125cc, Pietroniro is third.

But the financial reserves of the Belgian federation are melting like snow in the sun, mainly because a large part of the income of this federation comes from the G.P. organized annually in Francorchamps. Then to "fix" everything, in the following years, the 'Czar' of Formula 1, Bernie Ecclestone, was engaged & took matters into his own hands as he organised the Motorcycle Grand Prix on behalf of the F. M. B. The Englishman sees this purely from a profit point of view. The general price (Bfrs 700 in 1988) rose to Bfrs 1,000 in 1989, Bfrs 1,200 for the weekend, Bfrs 2,000 for a seat in the seated areas. According to Ecclestone's plan, the spectators present will be obliged to pay the required price. But that's not quite what happened...

Page 165

It seems that Ecclestone's view of dealing with the F1 spectator has little or no similarity with the fan of a motorcycle G. P. Thus, in 1988, a part of the public present at Francorchamps decided they had had enough. During the night from Saturday to Sunday, in Francorchamps and the surrounding area, there was a lot of mayhem. We are talking about hooliganism. As this is not the first time that bikers have caused behavioral problems in the region during the Grand Prix period, it seems that the regional managers of the time decided that the motorcycle public is no longer welcome. This was not an officially announced decision but a state of fact which will undoubtedly have a great influence on the future.

The weather was again very bad in 1989 once again damaging the reputation of the Belgian event. That year every time they commenced the start to the 500cc race, it started to rain!

The race was stopped the first time after five laps, then a second time after three more laps... To try to satisfy the public they start for a third time following which Wayne Rainey is declared winner of the Belgian GP... In order to obtain this result, the times of the three partial races were recorded. But on the evening following the event, the officials responsible for the F. I. M. decided that they should not have allowed a third start. It then becomes Lawson who is declared the winner of the GP (taking into account only the first two partial races), but only the half of the championship points are awarded!

Page 169

The riders, led by Kenny Roberts, agreed to make a third start out of respect for the public. But when they learn, the same evening, that they have contested a third restart "For Fun", they are furious!!

These weather conditions and indecisions of the F.I. M. obviously play against the image of the Spa-Francorchamps circuit once again with both the professional riders and the spectators.

All the ingredients were in place to make the 1990 Belgian Grand Prix a complete fiasco: Ecclestone, in total command, has further increased the entrance fees; the races are contested on Saturday instead of Sunday because of the competition with the Wimbledon tennis tournament and especially with the Formula 1 French Grand Prix which takes place the following day... And to make matters worse, the weather is again bad... Attending the races is an audience of about 10,000 spectators... We are very far from the more than 100,000 spectators that the GP motorcycles was used to bringing together at Francorchamps!

Page 172

Will everything be better in 1991?

That is what everyone is hoping for. And yet, from the beginning of the 1990 season, we learn that there will be no Belgian GP the following year. The Road Racing Commission of the F. I. M. requires that there are issues needing to be fixed at Francorchamps and in view of past experience with the Ardennes circuit, it was decided that this work should be completed before 31 December 1990.

Having no means of predicting that the deadlines will be respected, René Bruneel, who has just taken over the Presidency of the F.M.B. is obliged to give up the Grand Prix which constituted a windfall for the Federation. It was hoped that a round of the Superbike World Championship would be played at Francorchamps in 1991, but again, when the Grand Prix was cancelled, it was too late to put the Superbikes on the international calendar!

The only consolation, the 24 Hours of Liège, which had been cancelled in 1990 following the demands of Ecclestone, will be reinstated as the only motorcycle event of world status 1991. Thus, the grand history of Francorchamps became a thing of history to motorcycle racing fans with many mourning the loss, at least as far as the 'premier' events in the motorcycle world championships are concerned.

During these lean years, with regard to motorcycling matters, Spa-Francorchamps has been fortunate to be able to keep an important relationship with the bikes thanks to the organization of DG Sport. We'll talk about that again.

Page 173

Belgian victories at the G.P. of Belgium

During the Belgian Grand Prix's held at Francorchamps, there were a number of victories for Belgian riders and also for the Belgian manufacturers.

For the riders, we record 14 victories shared between 11 of our compatriots. For the 4 manufacturers, there are eight victories that have been won by motorcycles built by Belgian manufacturers.

Belgian drivers		Belgian
1921	350cc Jean Kicken	Gillet
1922	500cc Gaston Antoine	-
	350cc -	Rush
	Nestor Vanneste	Ready (1925)
1926	175cc René Milhoux	Ready
1928	350cc J. TreborgLa	Mondiale
1930	175cc Yvan Goor	-
	250cc -	Excelsior
1932	175cc -	Excelsior

1933	175cc	Yvan Goor	-
1934	175cc	Yvan Goor	-
		Maurice Van Gee	Rush (1935)
1938	175cc	Léon Neumann	-
1947	Sidecar	Frans Vanderschrick	-
1948	Sidecars	Frans Vanderschrick	-
1975	50cc	Juliaan Van Zeebroeck	-
1983	250cc	Didier de Radigues	-

Among the three major national manufacturers (Saroléa, FN, Gillet), only Gillet added its name on this list while four less well-known Belgian brands are also among the winners of the Belgian Grand Prix at Francorchamps.

Page 175

Chapter 3 : The 24 Hours of Liège

It was a Liège club, the AMC RAC Junior, that set up the 24 Hours of Liège following the first two editions organised on the circuit at Zolder, but from 1973 this endurance race was to be contested on the track of Spa-Francorchamps. The choice of this ultra-fast track raised some concerns at a safety level but finally the 'doom merchants' were silenced and everything went relatively well during the first editions on the Spa track.

Page 178

It is true that the Junior RAC had made great efforts to improve safety. Thousands of straw bales had been deposited in many places in front of the armco "safety" rails put in place for cars and "deadly" for motorcycle riders. To cope with the dangers of the night, light festoons had been placed in some bends in order to mark the course. In addition, during the night hours, each rider had to wear attached to his riding suit, a light tube that would make it easier to find him in the undergrowth after a possible exit from the track... Over the years, these 24 Hours events enjoyed various successes.

Page 180

In 1978, the last year that competitors rode the grand circuit, there were only 45 bikes at the start and only 15 were at the finish. From a show point of view, it made for a dull race during the last hours of the event. This also means that only 31% of the participants were classified, which corresponds to the highest relative number of retirements in this event.

Sticking with statistics, it was in 1995 that there were proportionally the least retirements with 74% of crews classified (39 out of 53) and also, it should be noted that it was in 1975 that the most participants were entered, 78, while conversely, only 40 teams entered in 1993.

In 1973, during the first meeting at Spa-Francorchamps, the event was won comfortably by the semi-official Honda of the British riders John and Charlie Williams, two riders who, despite the same surname were not related. On the other hand, the Belgians Jules and Charly Nies, ranked third on a BMW, are indeed from the same family since they are father and son!

Page 181

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Page 182

In 1974, it was the Honda 860cc of the French Chemarin-Debrock that won ahead of the Kawasaki of the Franco-Swiss crew Godier-Genoud. Jules Nies, who this time teamed up with his other son (Alain), was for a long time third with a BMW 900 delayed at the end of the race by clutch problems. A year later, it was the rain that was invited to the 24 Hours: it rained practically without interruption from the start (Saturday at 4 p.m.) until Sunday noon. In these difficult conditions, it was the French Ruiz-Huguet who won at the controls of a Honda modified by a Parisian team, the Japauto 1000.

Page 183

In 1976, Christian Léon and Jean-Claude Chemarin, factory riders of an equally factory Honda 1000 dominated the event from start to finish. They won and took the opportunity to set the absolute record for distance, 4,447,800 km traveled at the average speed of 185.325 km/h. This is a record that will never be broken, especially because from 1979, it is the new shorter and more winding circuit that will be used.

Jules Nies, who had partnered his eldest son (Charly) for the occasion, won another third place in 1976, this time at the controls of a Japauto 1000.

Page 184

In 1977, Léon and Chemarin again seemed favorites to add yet another victory. But a fall by Jean-Claude Chemarin in the very fast corner at Blanchimont would allow Jacques Luc and Pierre Soulas, who were driving the second factory Honda, to add their names to the list of winners of the event.

Page 185

In 1977, Léon and Chemarin again seemed favorites to add yet another victory. But a fall by Jean-Claude Chemarin in the very fast corner at Blanchimont would allow Jacques Luc and Pierre Soulas, who were driving the second factory Honda, to add their names to the list of winners of the event. Christian Léon having missed the victory in 1977, still left his final mark on the event with a fabulous lap record at more than 200 km/h average: 202.276 km/h to be precise! And after a great comeback, Léon and Chemarin will finish in a meritorious second place.

Page 187

Crushing French domination

French drivers largely dominated the endurance scene and this is true in the context of the 24 Hours of Liège. On the list of winners of this event, during the thirty editions of Francorchamps, with teams composed of two and then three drivers, there were 80 guys who found themselves on the top step of the podium at the end of the event. And of these 80, no less than 50 were French!

Among these winners, apart from the French, there are eleven Belgians, ten British, three Americans, three Swiss, one Portuguese, one Italian and one Australian.

Some riders have been winners on several occasions. Jacques Luc has won four times at Francorchamps as have Christian Lavieille and Brian Morrison. Four riders have won three times: Jean-Claude Chemarin, Hervé Moineau, Alex Viera and Stéphane Mertens.

Among all the victorious riders mentioned, with the exception of the Britain Morrison and the Belgian Mertens, the rest are French.

On the brands' side, during the 30 editions raced at Spa-Francorchamps, Honda and Suzuki have each won ten victories, Kawasaki six, D'Holda two, Japauto and Yamaha one.

Page 188

Coming out with a big smile, Jean D'Hollander replied tactfully: "*but no, this blue smoke is good news, it means that there is still oil in the engine. It was if the bike didn't smoke anymore that I would be worried!*"

Page 189

The 1978 24 Hours was contested for the final time on what was already called "the old circuit" and while Léon and Chemarin were forced to abandon due to mechanical problems at the end of the night, it was the D'Holda 997 driven by the Frenchman Jacques Luc and the Belgian Jack Buytaert who found themselves in the lead on Sunday afternoon. This D'Holda was a machine derived from a Honda but then passing into the expert hands of the late Jean D'Hollander. He was a very high level preparer which earned him the nickname "sorcerer of Moerzeke" (Moerzeke is a small Flemish locality). A very good technician, D'Hollander also had a great sense of humor.

When an hour from the end, with the exhaust of the leading D'Holda spitting out beautiful little blue plumes of smoke when the drivers were downshifting, someone suggested : Jean, the D'Holda smokes more and more! Aren't you worried? Coming out with a big smile, Jean D'Hollander replied tactfully: *"but no, this blue smoke is good news, it means that there is still oil in the engine. It was if the bike didn't smoke anymore that I would be worried!"*

And the Belgian bike won! With a Franco-Belgian crew at the controls. The Kawasaki of the French Peyre-Maingret finished second.

Page 190

1979 marked an important turning point in the history of the 24 Hours, which was contested for the first time on the new Francorchamps circuit. Following the misadventures experienced during the Motorcycle Grand Prix of the same year, the track had been resurfaced. Nevertheless, it was still dangerously slippery. When the star pairing of endurance of that time, the official French Honda riders, Christian Léon and Jean-Claude Chemarin, decided not to start, they were supported by Marc Fontan and Wolfgang Gierden entered on a the Japauto.

Page 191

Richard Hubin riding with Christian Le Liard was leading the race on a Kawasaki when they were forced to abandon due to mechanical problems. Jacques Luc and Jack Buytaert then took over in the lead and as the previous year, they would triumph with their D'Holda.

For the record, this second victory aboard a Honda would cost Jack Buytaert his job. He worked for Moorkens, the Suzuki importer in Belgium. They could not support the success of an employee at the handlebars of a motorcycle in competition with their own business!

In 1980, the F.I.M. created the World Endurance Championship. The 24 Hours of Liège would naturally be part of it.

That year, alongside nightfall, the fog also fell on Francorchamps. Visibility became worse and worse. On the stroke of 10pm, visibility was practically zero at the highest point of the track, the turn of Les Combes, and the race was stopped. With the gradual disappearance of the fog, the pack was restarted after 1 hour 36 minutes. The race lasted a little more than 21 hours and adding up the two portions of the race, it was the French Moineau and Fontan on Honda who won ahead of the Kawasaki driven by Hubin and Huguet.

After the race, Honda raised doubts about the Kawasaki's compliance with the rules and filed a claim. Kawa returned the courtesy by filing a claim against the victorious Honda. After disassembly, both the Honda and the Kawasaki were declared compliant...

Often at the forefront in this event, Richard Hubin in 1981 was at the controls of the official Suzuki that he shared with Hervé Moineau. They were in the lead until 7 a.m., when the GSXR1000 stopped at its pit with an engine running on three cylinders. A holed piston was diagnosed. It forced their abandonment but the victory still went to Suzuki whose second official bike, entrusted to Samin and Luc, won in front of the Kawasaki of Roche-Lafond.

Page 192

At the start of the 1983 event, two Belgian riders were among the favorites: Didier de Radiguès who teamed up with Jacques Cornu and Thierry Espié on a Kawasaki along with Richard Hubin aboard his faithful Suzuki that he shared with Hervé Moineau and Jean-Pierre Oudin.

There was better fortune for Richard Hubin in 1982 when he teamed up again with Hervé Moineau and also Pierre-Etienne Samin on a Suzuki. (Since 1982, crews could include three riders). The Suzuki sank way down in classification after having had to carry out a replacement base gasket, i.e. the joint which is located between the cylinder block and the crankcase. It is a huge rebuild that the mechanics would manage to carry out in record time. And then, it is rewarded with a nice comeback that will see the Suzuki back to fourth position at the finish. Kawasaki took the opportunity to score a double podium with the victory of Chemarin-Cornu-Pellandini ahead of the other Kawasaki, entrusted to Guilleux-Lafond-Dahne. Dutchman Johan Van De Wal and Patrick de Radiguès (Honda) were third.

Page 193

At the start of the 1983 event, two Belgian riders were among the favorites: Didier de Radiguès who teamed up with Jacques Cornu and Thierry Espié on a Kawasaki along with Richard Hubin aboard his faithful Suzuki that he shared with Hervé Moineau and Jean-Pierre Oudin. The duel resulted in success for the Kawasaki with the victory of Didier de Radiguès while Richard Hubin had to settle again for a second place with his Suzuki. But Hubin consoled himself at the end of the season by winning the title of world endurance champion, Belgium's first road race World Champion.

Page 194

With the maximum displacement of endurance motorcycles reduced from 1000 to 750cc, Honda was the only factory entry represented at the 24 Hours of Liège in 1984. Two official Hondas were lined up. That of Bertin-Sarron-Gross would be in the lead until its retirement following a fall during the night. We then find the Suzuki of Patrick de Radiguès and Jean-Pierre Oudin in first place until this Suzuki is in turn victim of a fall thus leaving the second factory Honda RS750 to win with the French Gérard Coudray, Patrick Ioga and Alex Viera.

Page 195

In the history of the 24 Hours of Liège, the 1985 edition was again memorable. In the evening, as is often the case at Francorchamps, we began to see fog banks forming here and there. Little by little, the fog became widespread as it became denser. In these awful conditions, Richard Hubin, the ever faithful Suzuki rider, took the opportunity to forge a victory that fate had denied him for the past few years. Richard was literally running circles around his competitors.

How did he do it? He explains it himself (see *box*).

When at midnight the race was neutralized by the introduction of the pace cars, the Suzuki of Hubin-Moineau-Oudin was two laps ahead of its nearest pursuer. The pace cars slowed down the bikes until 2:30, when the race was finally stopped. It will start again at 10.15 a.m., but instead of traditionally ending at 4 p.m., the race will continue until 5.45 p.m.

This makes it possible to achieve an 18-hour race, the minimum required by the F.I.M. for the championship points to be doubled as was the case for a 24-hour event.

The win was Suzuki's (Hubin-Moineau-Oudin) in this memorable race. This victory was won in front of two Honda RVF750 whose engines no longer had, as in previous years, an inline four-cylinder, it was now a four-cylinder V-block.

Page 196

Richard Hubin, the fog master!

Richard Hubin is one of the Belgian drivers who participated in the 24 Hours of Liège 15 times between 1976 and 1991. He was often involved in the fight for victory and eventually won twice in the endurance event held at Spa-Francorchamps.

This "old timer" had the opportunity to ride on both the tracks of Francorchamps. When asked if it was good for him to ride at night on the very fast old track, he was wary. "Finally, I didn't ride much at night on the big circuit," explains Richard. It was only during training with a Norton which was not the fastest or the strongest because in the race she did not go until the night! And it didn't leave me with much memory."

But the 24 Hours of Liège, and more particularly that of 1985, have made him a legend: Richard Hubin has been repeatedly quoted as "the fog master! This legend is a little overrated", says this son of Verviers. "In fact, it was because I was in the rhythm when the fog came down on the track that I was able to be so fast. It was when I took over that visibility became bad, but I had my landmarks, I was in my stride and as visibility worsened, I was going a little slower, but not much. Besides, the Frenchman Christian Le Liard, who had taken the handlebars at about the same time as me, was on the same lap and he was doing about the same lap times as me. Towards the end of my stint, I saw the official Honda coming out of the pits and overtook it."

Page 197

I had four laps left to do and before I got back to the pit, I had passed it again before stopping. That is, I had taken a lap on the official Honda in four laps! I refueled and said that I should stay on the bike because if someone else had taken over, he would have been slower. Finally, the race was neutralized and it was a good thing because the danger was growing, and neutralization suited me well since at the time of the neutralization, I was two laps ahead".

Asked if it wasn't scary to go heading off into near zero visibility, Richard Hubin replied: "No, because I was in my rhythm, if I braked before a turn at a "200 meters" sign, I would continue to brake at the same place. The difference is that instead of seeing the sign from afar, you could only see it a hundred meters before being there. Frankly, my biggest fear was that the difference between my speed and that of some others was huge. And my fear was to arrive on a slow competitor whose red light might have failed, an incident that was relatively common."

The race in 1985 ended in a victory for the Belgian Richard Hubin teaming up with the French riders Hervé Moineau and Jean-Pierre Oudin.

Two years later, Hubin was once more back at the 24 hours of Liège, again on Suzuki, but in a 100% Belgian team.

- "I had an agreement in principle with Johnson who sincerely thought he would help us. But the tobacco manufacturer officially supported the Kawasaki of Van Vaerenberg-De Donker-Ramon who had an excellent season in 1987. After which Johnson let me know that they were sorry but had to bet everything on the Kawa. So I was without a budget on the week of the 24 Hours. I went to see Jan De Vries who was in charge of Suzuki motorcycles in Belgium. Jan agreed to help us financially on condition that the Suzuki be driven by a Walloon, a Brussels native and a Fleming. I had intended to team up with Michel Siméon and Michel Simul. For the Walloon rider, it was OK (me), for the Brussels rider it was OK with Simeon but for the Flemish, there was not a free rider to find. De Vries finally accepted Michel Simul who was very young and who had a magnificent race, just like Michel Siméon for that matter. And our Suzuki had been beautifully prepared by the late Jean-Louis Collard."

Victorious twice over on Suzuki, Hubin was also three times second in the 24 Hours racing like a real mercenary: once on Suzuki, once on a Honda and once on Kawasaki.

Page 198

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Page 199

In 1986, these Honda V4s achieved the double at Francorchamps. In first place was Coudray-Viera-loga in front of that of Battistini and Espié who were supported by... Richard Hubin!

It was Belgium all the way in 1987! That year, the victory was won by three Belgian riders driving a Suzuki prepared by Jean-Louis Collard, a Belgian garage owner from Olne, a town between Liège and Verviers. But the Belgian success did not stop there: in second place we found the

Kawasaki driven by three more Belgians, Van Vaerenbergh-De Doncker-Ramon. And in this small country divided into three regions where nothing is ever simple, the sharing of the 24 Hours of Liège 1987 was complete with two Walloons and a resident of Brussels on the Suzuki; two Flemings and one from Brussels on the Kawasaki! In the history of the 24 Hours of Liège, this is the one and only time that we are able to celebrate the success of a 100% Belgian rider line up.

Page 202

Normally this event should not have taken place because Mr. Bernie Ecclestone decreed that no event could be organized on the same circuit less than a month before a Formula 1 Grand Prix.

Page 203

For the 1988 edition, Richard Hubin assembled a new Belgian crew. This time he shared a Kawasaki with Michel Simul and Michel Steven. They would finish third behind a Suzuki and a Honda. In 1989 it is another renowned Belgian rider who would make the Belgians cheer: Stéphane Mertens, alongside the French rider Viera and the Englishman Burnett and winning on a Honda RVF750. Normally this event should not have taken place because Mr. Bernie Ecclestone decreed that no event could be organized on the same circuit less than a month before a Formula 1 Grand Prix. The organisers had obtained a special dispensation for 1989 but this would not be the case in 1990, so no 24 Hours motorcycles at Francorchamps.

Page 205

In 1991, we witnessed the return of the 24 Hours and the return of a victorious Stéphane Mertens. This time the Belgian was riding a Suzuki that he shared with the French Dominique Sarron and Christian Lavieille. Rain was the name of the game for the majority of the race.

During this period "the most beautiful circuit in the world" is no longer homologated by the F.I.M. for G.P. motorcycles but it is still possible to race in the world endurance championship... In those years, the 24 Hours remained the only world-class motorcycle event to retain its place on the most beautiful circuit in the world.

Page 206

In 1995, Stéphane Mertens was paired with Michel Siméon and Jean-Michel Mattioli on a Honda RC45. They would win and Mertens will be the only Belgian who has won the 24 Hours of Liège three times and that year, the icing on the cake, he would be crowned world endurance champion with Mattioli.

Page 207

The years roll on and the 24 Hours continues with, sometimes heroic anecdotes. In 1997, following a fall at the beginning of the race, the official Suzuki found itself in last position. This does not prevent Gomez-Polen-Goddard from accepting the challenge and giving it 100% to eventually win. We see much the same scenario a year later with the Honda of Lavieille-Polen-Coste. A change of brake master cylinder having proved essential after the warm up lap, they bike started from the pits while the others had already covered a lap and a half. At the end of the race, after having regained and then lost the lead following a fall, this Honda also triumphs!

Page 208

In the year 2000, Yamaha for the first time won the Belgian round of the world championship then in 2001 then there is a changing of the guard, the return of the 1000cc bikes. From now on, the 750cc Superbikes will compete in the traditional Endurance World Championship while the 'Big Bangers' (original engine limited to 1000cc) will compete in the Endurance World Cup. In 2001, it is a Suzuki 1000 that will win at Francorchamps.

Due to the new promoter of the existing endurance championship repeatedly having made larger and more expensive demands for the event, the organizers of the 24 Hours of Liège decided in 2002 to abandon the world championship to create with the 24 Hours of Le Mans and the Bol

d'Or at Paul Ricard, the 'Master of endurance' Once again as in the previous two years, the victory went to a Suzuki 1000.

For 2004, in accordance with the wishes of the F.I.M., work on the layout of the circuit was planned in order to maintain approval for an event of World Endurance Championship status. But this work was never undertaken and the JUNIOR RAC was forced to throw in the towel. So the 33rd edition of the 24 Hours of Liège? Today, some twenty years later, we are still waiting for it... But very important works are announced and we are promised that for Francorchamps, change is in the wind very soon!

Page 209

The Records

On the old circuit, with the factory Honda RCB997, Christian Léon completed in 1977 a lap in 4'11"30 at the fantastic average of 202.276 km/h.

The previous year, on a Honda RCB941, Christian Léon and Jean-Claude Chemarin had already broken the distance record, 4447,800 km at an average of 185,325 km/h.

Speeds were significantly lower on the shortened track. The best lap was recorded in 2002 by the Mertens-Nowland-Jerman team (Suzuki GSXR 1000) in 2'28"793 which corresponds to a speed of 168.589 km/h.

The record distance on the new track on a Suzuki GSXR 750 ridden by Gomez-Polen-Goddar was 3769.688 km at an average speed of 157.070 km/h. That was in 1997.

Page 211

Chapter 4 : From Bikers'Days to Bikers' Classics

Page 213

The last edition of the Belgian Motorcycle Grand Prix was held at the Francorchamps circuit in 1990. The last edition of the 24 Hours of Liège was held at the Francorchamps circuit in 2003. This was the end of major international motorcycle competitions on the circuit which, according to the policy of regionalisation conducted within Belgium, passed from national status to regional status, therefore to Wallonia.

Yet, since all 2 wheeled major international competitions are now absent from Francorchamps, paradoxically, never before have so many Belgian and foreign bikers been able to drive on the Ardennes track! This situation is due to the company DG Sport, which was set up by Christian Jupsin. Since the disappearance of the 24 Hours of Liège, DG Sport has thus found itself at the heart of all motorcycle activity on the Ardennes track.

For the management of the circuit, the motorcycle was often, but not always and not by all, considered as of limited value, even as a discipline to be looked down upon. It probably began as early as the interwar period, when it was realized that the public attending motorcycle racing was, for the most part, very different from the upper class world that went to motor racing. The bike was somewhat shunned, but it was quickly returned because of its popular success.

Page 214

In more modern times regarding the new track inaugurated in 1979, the relative lack of interest in two wheels has been marked by a certain disregard for appropriate two wheeled safety facilities. These improvements were however essential to hope to obtain an approval from the International Motorcycling Federation. We look back now with surprise and consider this oversight to be petty. But through this period the circuit was constantly evolving and a lot of work was done at Francorchamps, those big investments were made to remain in the good books with the chiefs of Formula 1. In the past, if the motorcycle public was sometimes disappointed with the way it was treated during a G.P weekend, they did not always express themselves wisely. A crazy minority sometimes acted like hooligans on and around the circuit during the night before the races. In 1979, in particular, many straw bales went up in smoke. It can be funny

for those who set it on fire, it is much less so for the organizers who must immediately put everything back in place.

After the disappearance of the races and especially the G.P., Spa-Francorchamps has still seen a lot of motorcycle activities.

In 1998, DG Sport managers noted that in Germany and Italy in particular, open track days were organised for bikers, days which seemed to be working well.

Page 215

This did not yet exist in Belgium, in this small country with the great Francorchamps.

On the strength of these examples, on April 11, 1999, the first **Bikers' Day** was held on Spa-Francorchamps. Each rider could register and thus participate in several riding sessions. It is a practice that has now entered the norm, but at the time, it was exceptional that everyone had the opportunity to ride on Francorchamps, on what is called the most beautiful circuit in the world! This first Bikers' Day was arranged by Christian Jupsin who had teamed up for the occasion with Roger Kockelmann, a motorcycle dealer at Francorchamps. The results spoke for themselves with the participation of 260 bikers who came to ride on their personal motorcycle on the circuit. But financially, it was a small disaster with a loss of 600,000 F.B. (15,000 euros, N.D.A.).

- *"At that time, it meant a lot of money to me,"* Jupsin confesses. After this first experience, Roger Kockelmann declared *"that events were not his job... »*

For Christian Jupsin, on the other hand 'events' obviously were his thing! He decided to pursue the establishment of such meetings on his own. Thus, for the second year of this organization, taking advantage of a greater preparation time, two days of riding were proposed. A website had been developed and it greatly facilitated communication and registration management.

Page 216

There was no doubt about it with the pot now boiling under the leadership of DG Sport activities developed and open track days gradually multiplied to up to 30 days of free track time in the most successful years. Obviously, the number of candidates wishing to ride on the circuit was constantly increasing. This is due to a change in mentality in the world of bikers. It is a fact that at the beginning, road riders were concerned by the reputation of a circuit. Piloting on the track was scary. But little by little there were more and more people who thought that it was less dangerous to ride on a circuit than on the road.

DG Sport has been building on this change in mentality to bring together more and more participants. Belgian motorcycle importers supported the Bikers' Days because at the time they were still selling a lot of sporty models, machines that have become increasingly difficult to use on the open roads.

Today, the super sport motorcycle market has declined sharply. That is understandable. Sports bikes are becoming more and more sporty and efficient at the same time that, everywhere, in Belgium as in neighbouring countries, speed limits are becoming more and more draconian and speed controls are constantly being tightened up!

Page 218

This is why a significant proportion of sports bikes are now purchased to race on the circuit rather than on the road. It is equally true that sports bikes have become so powerful that they are perfectly suited for use on the circuit.

'And from little acorns grow oak trees' now thousands of bikers make their arrangements to ride on Francorchamps, to discover the circuit, to know it better and better and to appreciate it more and more.

These Bikers' Days brought a new way to practice motorcycling sport. They allowed a large number of bikers to ride "like a racer" without having to bear the costs and risks associated with

competition. If the trackdays do not bring glory to the participants, they allow them to let off steam, to practice high speeds while taking fewer risks than when fighting for a result in a race.

Building on its success, Bikers' Days have developed internationally. The amateur riders are thus able to taste the joys of lapping on some of the most famous circuits in the world. Bikers' Days are held on circuits such as Valencia, Barcelona, Mugello, Misano, Le Mans and even Sepang in Malaysia and Phillippe Island in Australia and in the near future, it is Laguna Seca and its famous Californian corkscrew that is planned, strong memories for all taking part! But after these great experiences, both riders and organizers have always been happy to return to Spa-Francorchamps. During the first years of the Bikers' Days' existence, the organizers were able to see that among the participants on their days, there was a strong demand for supervision and advice. Many bikers were ready to learn to go faster and safer.

Page 219

Hence the establishment of the **Bikers'** School. This new activity, was created to meet demand and from the beginning it was supported by both Honda and Michelin.

As far as DG Sport is concerned, they were never short of ideas and will not stop there. Next they had noticed that the meetings of old vehicles were a great success in the car world, but much less so in the world of two wheels.

Among the very conservative English, there was always an adoration for all that is ancient. Motorcycles are part of this worship! Various meetings on different circuits have existed for a long time in the British Isles. But on the continent, meetings of old motorcycles on the circuit were rather rare. At that time, the best known of these events reserved for old motorcycles was the "Coupes Motos Légendes". It worked well in France. They were held on the Circuit de Montlhéry, at the gates of Paris. With all this in mind, it was decided to launch the **Bikers' Classics**. Where? On Spa-Francorchamps of course!

To carry out this project, the Francorchamps circuit was booked on the first weekend of July 2003, a date that was not insignificant. Indeed, it was the first weekend of July that the G.P. of Belgium for motorcycles was traditionally fought. The goal was to revive at Francorchamps a large motorcycle event, an event dedicated especially to the glories of the past.

The Bikers' Classics were, from the beginning, a meeting of old racing bikes.

Page 221

You could admire the machines in the paddocks but also see and hear them while they were doing a few laps of the track. In addition, if many of these venerable machines were in the hands of passionate collectors, over the years, more and more old heroes returned to Francorchamps and took over the handlebars on the occasion of the Bikers' Classics.

In 2003 on the occasion of the first edition of the Bikers' Classics, 300 participants were gathered, with plenty of foreign visitors. All this bode well...

In fact, on the Sunday evening after this premiere, Christian Jupsin was near the Eau Rouge when the English, coming out of the paddock, said to him: *"Thank you and see you next year!" (Thank you and looking to next year N.D.A.).*

Nothing had yet been definitively decided as to the future of this meeting, but these British were already announcing their return for the next edition! *"This little word from these English people warmed my heart,"* says Christian Jupsin. *"There, I understood that with the Bikers' Classics we had launched something that was going to work! »*

The DG Sport team immediately set to work in order to set up a meeting the following year that was to become very "mainstream". Ferry Brouwer was contacted. He is a Dutchman, former mechanic of Phil Read and Jarno Saarinen, a career that has opened many doors for him in the world of speed. After his activities in the field of racing, he became the importer for Europe of Arai helmets. Ferry Brouwer therefore knew a lot of riders and was still in contact with many of them via Arai. In addition, he had organized himself a meeting of the same kind, the "Centennial TT" which had been held on the Circuit of Assen. But after the first contacts, the Dutchman was

reluctant to say the least. He felt that he had invested enough time and money in Assen. He did not want to embark on a new adventure similar but held at Francorchamps. Despite these misgivings DG Sport were able to be particularly convincing because the second Bikers'Classics had as its main sponsor ... Arai! And Ferry Brouwer gave 100% to make this second organization of the Bikers' Classics a great success.

It cannot be repeated often enough how 'long-armed' Ferry Brouwer is and how extensive his motorcycling friendships are. Thus, in 2004, during the second edition of the Classics' Bikers, the Dutchman brought to Francorchamps, among other celebrities, people like Kevin Schwantz, Randy Mamola and Freddie Spencer. We could not have hoped for better.

Page 225

It had a snowball effect. For the second event, because there were great stars on the track, a large audience gathered along the track and strolled through the paddocks to see up close these famous riders relive their past glories, still so present in their memories. Year after year, this successful formula was repeated. An impressive number of former world champions have participated in one or often several editions. In addition to the three Americans mentioned above, there was of course Giacomo Agostini who, with his 15 world titles has a record 'probably' not ready to be beaten. This is all the more true since Agostini was several times world champion of the 350 and 500 cc at the same year. He thus collected two world crowns a year. This is no longer possible today as regulations mean that each rider must choose a single category.

But back to those world champions who were treading in the footsteps of their former exploits at Francorchamps. We cannot mention them all, but if we want to draw up a list of prestige, after the great Giacomo Agostini we will name people like Jim Redman, Phil Read, John Surtees, Freddie Spencer, Randy Mamola, Kevin Schwantz, Steve Baker, Ralph Bryans, Rodney Gould, Mario Lega, Dieter Braun, Carlos Lavado, Hugh Anderson and others. Others include the Dutch Jan de Vries (who died in January 2021) and Henk Van Kessel whose Kreidler-Van Veen 50cc, real jewels, did not go unnoticed when they returned to the Ardennes.

Page 228

When in 2019, the old Superbikes were part of the party, it saw many great riders attend including 4 Superbike World Champions: Fred Merkel, Carl Fogarty, Raymond Roche and Dough Polen. Among the world champions that we had the opportunity to meet during the Bikers'Classics, we must also mention those who were crowned in endurance, the Belgians Richard Hubin and Stéphane Mertens.

And let's stay in the Belgian domain with the participation of two former winners in G.P, Juliaan Van Zeebroeck (50cc in 1975) and Didier de Radiguès (250cc in 1983).

It is obvious that for the public, a good number of whom attended one or more motorcycle G.P.s of the past at Francorchamps, it is a dream to be able to see these champions on the track again. During the Bikers' Classics, every year, you can also admire a multitude of old motorcycles, some simple and austere, some hyper sophisticated multi-cylinders like we no longer build today. Understand that from now on, a manufacturer of a racing motorcycle must follow quite restrictive rules such as having a maximum of six speeds in all categories and a maximum of 4 cylinders for the queen category, that is to say for MotoGP.

Page 229

For all lovers of beautiful mechanics, the Bikers'Classics are therefore an unmissable event. As powerful as they are, the current racing bikes are far removed from the 14-speed 50cc twin cylinders, the 125cc 2-stroke 4-cylinder, the 250cc 4-stroke 4-cylinder and 6-cylinder or the 3, 4 and 8-cylinder engines designed by the Italians to compete in the queen category. To see them is a charm, to hear them running is ecstasy!

Page 231

To make the show even more complete, races have been integrated into the bikers' days organizations. We are referring here to the 500 kilometers and the 8 Hours that has become the 6 Hour race.

Since the beginning of the millennium, it would have been desirable for more motorcycle races to have been organised at Francorchamps. But this was not possible because it must be taken into account that the rental of the circuit represents an important investment that has also increased significantly in recent years. Here the comparison with motor racing can be re-established, an area in which competitors agree to pay significant registration fees and thus participate in a significant part of the show's investment. In the world of motorcycling, competitors are much less inclined to open their wallets in a similar context.

The Bikers' Days and Bikers' Classics, sprinkled with a zest of Bikers' School, have played a role that is far from negligible in the history of Francorchamps because these organisations have made it possible to keep a link between a large motorcycle enthusiastic public and the mythical Spa-Francorchamps circuit. This has been the important role of conveying the message that Francorchamps, while perhaps 'separated' from the white hot heat of motorcycle competition is in no way divorced!

(1) DG Sport S.A. is a company headquartered in Theux. With extensions and the birth of sister companies, DG Sport has been active in all motorcycle events organized at Francorchamps since 1999. Activity has also expanded in the automotive sector. www.dgsport.eu

Page 233

Chapter 5 : Francorchamps today

Page 235

Spa-Francorchamps is above all a motor racing circuit. For a century, there have been major national and international competitions with, at the top of the hierarchy, of course, the Belgian Grand Prix of Formula 1. It was for F1 that in 1995, when the motorcycle was furthest from their thoughts that a new modification of the Raidillon was made. The gradient is important, it remained at 18% but the radius of the curve was decreased by trimming inwards, so that the turn was less pronounced and therefore faster. The primary goal was to gain run off space on the left side of the track for the benefit of safety.

In the two-wheeler sector, apart from the G.P. and the 24 Hours of Liège, Spa-Francorchamps has seen various activities. It began, as already mentioned, as early as the thirties when a few weeks before the Grand Prix, we saw two wheeled competition at Francorchamps, the Belgian sprint championships.

Subsequently, some national motorcycle races were organized but we will particularly remember the Superbikes, whose world championship visited Francorchamps in May 1992. Maybe it was a kind of 'second-best' following the loss of the motorcycle G.P. as the Ardennes track had lost its homologation for races at the highest level but could still accommodate Superbikes. In order to soften the blow of no more bike GP's a race reserved for these spectacular machines was organised instead.

The Superbikes competed in two races. Australia's Tom Phillis won the first heat with his Kawasaki and American Doug Polen won the second with his Ducati. The American would be crowned world champion at the end of the season.

The Superbikes in 1992 were fast, but a little less than the 500cc bikes racing the Grands Prix of the time. On the most beautiful circuit in the world, during the Superbike meeting, the fastest lap was set by Polen and his Ducati in 2'29"89 at an average of 166.682 km/h.

Page 236

At the last Grand Prix held at Francorchamps the track was never perfectly dry. So you have to go back to 1989 to find the track record, a record that was set by Kevin Schwantz (Suzuki) in 2'26"11 at 170.994 km/h. The GP bikes still had a 3 second advantage over the Superbikes. During this Superbike confrontation at Francorchamps, the Belgian Stéphane Mertens, riding a Ducati placed second and sixth respectively in both rounds. However, the Belgian of the day

was Laurent Naveau who participated in the European 250cc championship run alongside the main event. Against all odds, Naveau won after a remarkable race.

On and around the Spa-Francorchamps circuit, we also tried our hand at motorcycling in the various disciplines.

At the initiative of Georges Jobé, there was first a motocross training ground near the paddock and its famous turn. Then, it was a completely new motocross circuit that was traced, after deforestation, in front of the new Formula 1 stands. In 2000, a Mx Grand Prix was contested there counting for the world championships in the three categories of the time: 125cc, 250cc and 500cc.

Finally, as an evolution of motorcycle sport, it was races for the new Supermoto discipline (a kind of marriage between motocross and road race) that were set in motion on the karting circuit.

Page 237

Even the bicycle was entitled to the honours at Francorchamps when, in 2017 we saw the best in the world engaged in the Tour de France tackle the Raidillon. All this should not make us forget that the DNA of Francorchamps is above all speed. And with its extremely fast turns, it's definitely not a circuit for the faint hearted! When half of the track was abandoned to build the new circuit, we built a very beautiful new track while keeping the spirit of the old road circuit.

To talk about it, we meet a specialist, Stéphane Mertens, born in 1959. If this old driver is too young to have ridden on the old track, he knows the current track particularly well. He rode there in Grands Prix, in Superbike and let's not forget that he won three times in the 24 Hours of Liège.

Page 238

And at an age when many riders have put away their leathers a long time ago, in 2019, riding a Ducati Paginale V4, teaming up with Marc Fissette and Didier Jadoul, he narrowly missed the victory at the 6 hours of Francorchamps organized by DG Sport! In other words, anyone who has successfully launched a riding school knows what he is talking about, and he enjoys talking about it.

But Stéphane Mertens cannot speak of Francorchamps without emotion. He says, *'Just thinking about it, I get chills!'*

A lap aboard a Yamaha R1

Stéphane Mertens is well qualified having ridden many motorcycles on Francorchamps. The first time was in 1980, a round of the Kawasaki Cup. Then, in the years that followed, we found him aboard a Yamaha TZ250 at the time when he was competing in the G.P. world championship in this category. There was, for Mertens, the Ducati Superbike in 1992 but also and in particular the bikes with which he won the 24 Hours of Liège: the Honda RVF 750 in 1989, the Suzuki GSX-R750 in 1991 and the Honda RC45 in 1995. And to add to his score of laps on Francorchamps, remember that Stéphane was also second in the 24 Hours on a Suzuki in 1997 and 2000!

It is aboard a Yamaha R1 of the Mertens Racing School essentially based in Mettet that Stéphane invites us to take a lap of Francorchamps in his company. This is of particular interest because an R1 is a motorcycle that can be bought by anyone and with which you can go and discover Francorchamps by registering for a Bikers' Day.

But let's be a little reasonable, if an R1 can be bought by an amateur, it is not expected that they use all the 200 horsepower on their first introduction to this extremely fast track.

- Just talking about Francorchamps, I feel an adrenaline rush, comments Stéphane Mertens. Going to Francorchamps with the intention of riding there quickly is a huge challenge. To go fast at Francorchamps, you have to be in good physical and mental shape, all the senses must be sharp, the concentration must be maximum. Because Francorchamps is a unique circuit in the sense that the speeds reached there are huge, not only in a straight line, as on other tracks, but the speeds reached in curves are also fantastic. I guarantee that going through the full left double of Blanchimont, where we are not far from 300 km / h in the corner, it causes thrills and leaves

lasting memories! Even for the Professional pilot, to go to 280 km/h in Blanchimont, it becomes a challenge every time. During the 24 Hours, in the dark,, it was impressive too. It is like a tunnel in which we travel at high speed, because we want to go fast, but we also want to get out of it unscathed! Francorchamps is a circuit against which we must always remain cautious knowing that we have no right to make mistakes. Compared to other old circuits they did a good job at Francorchamps when modifying the old track.

In terms of speed, the bikes are very fast on the straight sections, but over one lap, the bikes are far slower than Formula 1. They benefit from significant aerodynamic downforce and four very wide tires. This allows them to pass through curves infinitely faster than motorcycles. They also have a much greater braking power.

On two wheels, Xavier Siméon holds the track record in 2'24"082. It's fast and yet it's a good forty seconds more than an F1. That's huge! At the time of the G.P., Kevin Schwantz had set the lap record in the race in 2'26"11 and he had set the pole record in 1990 at 2'23"264, but this is not comparable because modifications have been made to the track since. Indeed, the Raidillon has become much faster while the new chicane costs a lot of time.

-Today, on a motorcycle, when you do 2'30" for the lap, you can say that you are going fast; says Stéphane Mertens. To make this time, you have to be a pro rider. I admit that today, I myself have a hard time getting below 2'30".

Stéphane invites us to share a lap of Spa-Francorchamps. As a good teacher, he explains to us, turn by turn, how to go about it. He remembers his sensations at the controls of a Yamaha R1.

- With the R1, either we use 'shorter ratios' for the final drive, which allows to arrive at the end of the straight for Les Combes in sixth, or we keep the original ratios which are longer and with which we use only the first five gears. I prefer this solution because if it has the disadvantage not only of using only five speeds, we have the advantage of having better staged gears for most corners.

To correctly recognise the turns, not everything is always simple and clear at Francorchamps. Several names have been used for some curves and sometimes corners have been renamed such as the "Jacky Ickx" or the "Paul Frère".

Page 239

1

La Source

Even if it is a hairpin (to the right), La Source remains an interesting turn. It is very wide, with a slight banking (positive.) . With the R1 we arrive in 4th at about 200 km / h. We try to stay well outside and perform a very heavy braking. We make sure to keep the brakes on up to the turn in point. Do not force too much on braking because it is very important not to miss the apex point. The fact that this turn is downhill also means that we are sometimes a little too wide. From this apex point , towards the outside kerb, we begin to raise the bike. It is very important to lift the bike for hard acceleration getting onto the fat part of the rear tyre. It is essential to accelerate well and early because it will determine the speed passing the Endurance pits heading towards Eau Rouge. The descent is steep and therefore the acceleration is very fast.

2

Eau Rouge and the Raidillon

We arrive very quickly at Eau Rouge, probably at 280 km/h. Braking along the low wall on the right and we switch into the left turn of the Eau Rouge. One can pass over the inside kerb so as to widen as much as possible the entrance of the turn which constitutes Raidillon. We release the brakes knowing that we are in a place where it is unwise to fall. On the left there is an asphalt runoff that is well suited to cars but does not stop motorcycles. Therefore, in the event of a fall at this location, it is unlikely that we will be able to escape unscathed. After the left of the Eau Rouge we quickly switch the bike to the right to start the Raidillon. It is absolutely necessary to position yourself well and go to get to the apex point, in fourth around 180 km / h. While

approaching the climb of the Raidillon, the bike sits down on its suspensions but less than before (the turn of the Raidillon was reprofiled in 1995, and the hollow that existed at the bottom of the Raidillon has been lessened, N.D.A). From this apex point on the right, we prepare to aim for the next apex, on the left in the turn that constitutes the exit of the Raidillon and where begins the great straight of Kemmel. Over the top there is a crest that destabilizes the bike. It is important get the bike back straight, possibly rolling the throttle a little to avoid a tank slap that can take you too far to the right. You have to put all your weight on the footrests to stabilize the machine and begin the straight using all the power and making sure not to be too far to the right side.

Page 240

3

Les Combes

The straight that follows the Raidillon is not really straight. It includes the Kemmel curve which you pass at full speed but given the speeds reached, it is necessary to be very careful about the trajectory and the possible overtaking of (much) slower riders. Through the right hander, we could find ourselves then too far to the left. We thus approach Les Combes reaching nearly 300 km/h. These are speeds that we are not used to and the brain must adapt to them. It must be realized that 300 km/h corresponds to 83.3 m/s. This means that every second that passes, we move 83 meters! The perception changes, the turn races up to meet you and it takes a few laps or even a few sessions for the brain to adapt to this unusual situation. It is at this fantastic pace that we approach the braking of Les Combes. We sit up, the fingers on the brake lever at around the 200 meter panel, we brake to enter at about 100 km / h in the first right turn in second or third gear depending on the ratios chosen. To help with braking, your torso is upright and the leg extended to the inside. At these speeds, it's like when you deploy the flaps of an airplane! The aerodynamic brake is sensitive. You have to be very precise in your lines, especially not to miss the apex. If you miss it, you miss the next turn and so on. Here, there are three turns that follow one another, we will avoid going too early in the second left to be able to place ourselves at the best for the entrance of the third turn. We again lift the bike very quickly and we start to accelerate from the third apex trying not to climb on top the kerb on the left in the descent that leads to the turn of Brussels.

4

Brussels

We are heading downhill to tackle big braking on a bumpy surface. There is a choice to brake outside or inside these bumps. Personally, on a motorcycle, I prefer to go inside to dive to the right and pick up the apex early into Brussels. We are still descending and try to avoid being taken too far to the left at the exit of Brussels. From the apex, we are back on the throttle (in third) bringing the bike back onto the fatter part of the tire again but not going too much to the left so as to be able to place yourself ideally right for the entrance of the next left.

Page 241

5

Jacky lckx

Recently renamed from "Speaker Corner" to "Jacky lckx", this left turn seems quite simple but do not be fooled. It is downhill and the speed at which we get out of Jacky lckx determines the speed in the next descent. Braking downhill is tricky and if you don't concentrate, it's still a place where you easily miss the apex. At the exit, the descent is pronounced and the acceleration very fast. Do not enter the Jacky lckx too quickly so as to avoid being too wide at the exit. It is also a place where falls are numerous due to ground clearance being compromised . We come out in third winding the throttle on gradually.

6

The double left (Pouhon)

We find ourselves with big acceleration downhill to the double left, third, fourth, fifth gears select quickly... It's certainly one of the most delicate places on the Spa-Francorchamps circuit. The trick to this double left is a slower entry on the way in and then accelerating smoothly through the second turn. Using the same braking style "deploying the flaps" as on entry to Les Combes, it is necessary to settle the bike on entry to the corners. Releasing the brakes we take the first apex then let to bike run out between the two turns. We then negotiate this second part using progressive acceleration and going faster and faster. It's a big sensation. Finding the second apex, body over the inside curve, you roll out very gradually staying in fourth throughout these two left turns made into one. But as we accelerate more and more while still leaned over we feel that the rear tire tends to slide slightly. We come out of this turn at more than 200 km / h, it is another place where you should avoid any mistakes!

Page 242

7

Le Pif-paf (Les Fagnes)

After coming out of the double left, we arrive in fifth at the Pif-paf. Big braking pressure, we go down to third and once again we force ourselves to stay well to the right until the exit of the right turn to be well placed to approach the left that follows. In this one we take the apex point quite far round which allows us to swiftly raise the bike to accelerate again while avoiding the right kerb and repositioning to the left side of the track.

8

The Campus and the Connection (Paul Frère)

We are therefore already placed on the left at the time of braking before negotiating the Campus, a turn of great importance because we must make sure to place ourselves for the perfect line in the second part of this curve to the right "Connection", which has been renamed "Paul Frère". First is the Campus, we are downhill and it is still a place where if we do not prepare we risk missing the apex. We stay on the brakes until then and accelerate between the two corners by often running on the left edge kerb. The Connection is super important. This is one of the critical turns of the circuit from which you have to get out very quickly because it will determine the speed on the long ascent that follows. On approaching the Connection we short shift to fourth and we start this turn as late as possible, without being too late! We accelerate very gradually by allowing ourselves to be carried out to the left. We stay left as there is a high speed right large curve which with a powerful bike and in full acceleration still requires a lot of attention. From the left we dive to the right of the track and we stay on the right.

Page 243

9

Blanchimont

So here, we will approach one of the biggest if not the biggest difficulty of the circuit, the extremely fast left double of Blanchimont. We stay on the right edge of the track and we arrive at very high speed. Before ducking out from behind the fairing we already hang out the inner leg. The wind resistance is such that it helps the bike to enter the curve. It is possible to drive with the throttle wide open but by slightly relieving the power it greatly assists the bike into the curve and onto the apex. If you stay open wide, it is more difficult to go to this point. Let's not forget that we are there at more than 280 km/h! You have to keep to the left side as much as possible because there is a bump in the trajectory and you have to pass to the left of this bump. We straighten the bike at the exit and we prepare to enter the second part which is less fast: we enter coming back one or even two gears and we put the bike back on the corner. Cars get on the curb but on motorcycles we tend to be careful. There is a wall away to our right and little runoff at such high speeds and little space to spare. So to fall is forbidden. (Some are no longer here to recount their fall in Blanchimont!) It is of course necessary to get out as quickly as possible from this second part of Blanchimont because the speed of exit will fix the pace in the next straight until the braking before the chicane. On a motorcycle, we leave Blanchimont at

more than 200 km / h while having to fight against the very high wind resistance. Despite this it is necessary to maintain full concentration, at these speeds we will pay for the slightest mistake!

10

La Chicane (Bus stop)

This is certainly not the most interesting part of the circuit. Francorchamps is a very fast track as a whole, and then we get to this Chicane which is excessively slow. We are involved in a very important braking section by going from fifth to first. Do not widen the first right turn too much as its best to be placed right for the next left, which is more important since the exit of this one will determine the speed across the finish line and onto Le Source.

Page 245

Chapter 6: Francorchamps in the future

Page 247

It must be admitted that the bikes have been quiet in recent years at Francorchamps. It will even be said that with the arrival of the twenty-first century, international races on two wheels have been cruelly neglected. This unfortunate mistake mainly concerns international competition because among the amateur motorcycle activities, always remember that the Bikers' Days brought a very large number of riders to Francorchamps.

At the sporting level, if the 6 Hours Moto of Spa-Francorchamps have kept a national status for the reasons already stated, it is nevertheless a race that brings together a consistency to the competition and that gives rise to some great battles and entertainment. Returning to the international level, we must not forget the Bikers' Classics. If this event only concerns machines from past years, it is nevertheless of a most international class. The Bikers' Classics also brings a large audience of enthusiasts and connoisseurs. But with regard to motorcycle competitions at Francorchamps, it is true international level racing that the fans have been starved of. We have seen why and how. While in past years some circuit chiefs have shown little support for motorcycle organizations, others have been faced with insurmountable problems. But today, everything suggests that this will change and that the bike will regain its place on the Walloon circuit, especially because the current director of the circuit, Nathalie Maillet, has proclaimed loud and clear that she wants a return of the major international motorcycle competitions on the Spa-Francorchamps track.

Page 248

When we talk to Nathalie Maillet about the period spent with circuit managers who sometimes seemed uninterested in the bike, the general manager of the Spa-Francorchamps circuit answers bluntly: *" I cannot position myself on this point, not being in the heads of previous leaders and not knowing their constraints. I am not in the habit of asking questions about the past, but rather of looking to the future. The future has tremendous appeal for the return of a world endurance championship race to Spa-Francorchamps in 2022."*

The return of international bike racing to Francorchamps is therefore already on the agenda. Are we on our way back to securing a motorcycle Grand Prix? Mrs Maillet is convinced of this and she is not afraid to say so. Yes she believes in it and recalls:

-"This is my will since my arrival at the Circuit. At this point we focus on the return of the FIM Endurance World Championship with the 24H Spa S EWC Motos from 2022. One step at a time."

This will delight motorcycle fans. by specifying *"one step at a time"* Nathalie Maillet surely has ambitious projects and she will do everything to make these projects a reality. A major development plan has been decided. This was necessary to obtain an approval from the International Motorcycling Federation.

It is no secret that in terms of safety at Francorchamps, the bikers' demands go back a long way. And over time, by improving safety for cars, we have sometimes worked in a direction that was not the best for bikers.

An example, the vast asphalt run off areas that allow motorists to "come back" after running out?... But in the case of a fall of a two-wheeler, both the bike and the rider will slide on the asphalt and will not be slowed down enough, if the slide is too long, it may end badly. That is why, in many places, it is planned to return to gravel traps rather than paved surfaces.

Page 249

The development and modernisation projects of the Spa-Francorchamps circuit are gigantic and concern all the infrastructures. A budget of EUR 80 million is announced in the long term. Of course, not everything will be done overnight. It is a ten-year investment plan. And the first works have already been launched. Let's keep in mind that Nathalie Mailliet is preparing for the organization of the 24 Hours for motorcycles from 2022. Negotiations have taken place so that Francorchamps, like other circuits, receives both F.I.A. and F.I.M approval. On the F.I.M. side, there are five approval grades, from A to E. The "A" is required for the organization of a Grand Prix. For Superbike and Supersport races, grade "B" is required. Initially, it is the "C" grade that will be awarded to the most beautiful circuit in the world, which will allow us to stage a round of the world endurance championship. This approval was obtained against the promise to leave the route unchanged but with important safety improvements. Thus, gravel traps will appear or re-appear in various bends.

And since good news never comes alone, major infrastructure works are also planned. It is planned to replace the endurance stand (the descent opposite the endurance pits) with a new structure as well as the creation of a new stand at the top of the hill. In these stands will be many regular seats, VIP seats, toilet blocks and a medical center etc. Everything seems to have been well thought out. It is true that the current boss of the circuit has a background as an architect and that she has only abandoned this profession to devote herself entirely to the circuit. But when it comes to construction and fittings, this does not prevent her from thinking, having ideas, directing and coordinating! After the past glorious motorcycle years at Francorchamps, will two-wheelers have the joy of seeing the greatest champions of the present at Francorchamps?

"There is the small and the big history, the centenary, that's the history of the Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps with a big H", explains Nathalie Mailliet. "These are the lasting memories that motorcycle fans, riders and teams keep from the races held on our Circuit. These races, the 24 hours of Liège Moto, the MotoGP, attracted tens of thousands of spectators. We still know today the crazy enthusiasm for this type of race. It is this spirit that we want to breathe back into the Circuit. Let's not forget that this is part of a more global strategy of diversifying activities on the Circuit, of perpetuating existing races but also of the desire to attract new events."

Page 250

Motorcycling projects and hopes are therefore not lacking on the track that is frequently referred to as the most beautiful circuit in the world. It is a name that could be considered pretentious. What does the boss of the circuit think?

"It was the fans, the drivers and the teams who attributed this qualification to the Circuit", replies Nathalie Mailliet. "But let's be chauvinistic, we are probably not chauvinistic enough! The track, its turns, its technicality, the weather that adds an extra spice to many races, the green setting in which we are set, all this contributes to the reputation of a Circuit that is now a hundred years old. A unique track embracing the natural contours of the Ardennes landscape, a Circuit rooted in its history but which projects itself into the future, resolutely turned towards new technologies. But the Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps would be nothing without the competitions that take place there, would have no soul without the fans and that is the magic of Spa-Francorchamps, the combination of all these parameters make it a mythical place, known and recognized throughout the world."

Page 252

There is no shortage of projects for the overall improvement of the Francorchamps site, for a better environment for the public and for increased motorcycle safety without this harming car safety. Here is a series of developments and transformations programmed essentially for safety purposes.

1

The turn of La Source

A widening of the run off and the creation of a gravel trap

2

Grandstand

In the descent in front of the endurance stands: widening of the run off, movement of the guard rails.

3

The Raidillon

Widening of the track, widening of the run off and tarmacing it.

4

Kemmel

Widening of the sides of the track, moving of the safety rails, creation of asphalt run off.

5

Virage Les Combes

Widening of the circuit, widening of the run off, moving of the safety rails, removal of the tarmac in the run off and replacing with a gravel trap.

6

Malmedy Bend

Widening of the run off zone at the entrance of the turn and moving of the safety rails.

7

Brussels Bend

Replacement of part of the tarmac run off with a gravel trap.

Page 253

8

Jacky Ickx Turn

Moving the safety rails and replacement of the kerb and rumble strips.

9

Double left

Removal of asphalt from the run off area and installation of a gravel trap.

10

Les Fagnes

In the right: replacement of part of the run off by a gravel trap. On the left: modification of the asphalt zone into a gravel trap.

11

Campus Shift

Expansion of the track. Replacement of the asphalted run off with a gravel trap. The medical center will be demolished.

12

Paul Frère Bend

Movement of safety guard rails. The existing gravel trap will be expanded. The asphalt run off will be replaced by a gravel trap. Construction of a retaining wall.

13

Virage de Blanchimont

Enlargement of the area surrounding and embankment work.

In the first part, replacement of the asphalted run off by a gravel pit.

In the second part enlargement of the existing run off. Establishment of new gravel traps and guard rails moved

14

Chicane (Bus stop)

Transformation of part of the asphalted run into a gravel trap.

Page 255

Chapter 7: Epilogue

Motorcycle races have been held at Francorchamps for a century. In 1921, it was unruly, fragile and rigid framed bikes that first embarked on a bumpy, dusty and sometimes muddy course. However, it was believed at the time that these machines were very fast. This is not entirely untrue. Recall that during the first races the winner in the 500cc completed the 301.640 km of the race in 3 hours 18' 53" at the average of 90.6 km/h. It was a great performance even if we were still very far from the 160 km/h reached a few decades later with 50cc! On the other hand, of the 21 starters of this first race, nine will reach the finish, reliability was not a strong point at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since this very first race reserved for motorcycles, if the mechanical reliability has greatly evolved, for its part the Francorchamps circuit has also not stopped improving. The original roads used were covered with asphalt and gradually widened. Over time for the sake of safety, many trees that lined the track have been removed and the turns have been redesigned. At the same time the bikes were getting faster and faster we reached the high point in 1977. On the big circuit, a lap was achieved in the race by Barry Sheene (Suzuki) at an average speed of 220.720 km/h! That was fast. That had become too fast...

This was the reason why the route of the circuit was restructured. The new circuit was designed with a course reduced by half but it retained the character. This new Francorchamps unfortunately suffered badly upon the return of GP motorcycles in 1979. It can be considered that the incidents of that year constituted the origin of the conflicts between the circuit, the organizers, the riders and the F.I.M. Of course a few years after these incidents, it resulted in the loss of the organization of the Belgian Grand Prix. A little later, we witnessed the disappearance of the 24 Hours of Liège.

Throughout these lean years, fortunately some have worked to ensure that the motorcycle activity continues on Francorchamps which, beginning as a purely road circuit, has been able to continuously evolve to become a permanent fixed circuit. Initially, it consisted entirely of public roads that were closed during competitions. Then, in 1939, appeared the Raidillon, a stretch of road reserved for competitors. This became the new route and its connecting road was not accessible to the public.

Page 257

Subsequently, in 2003, Francorchamps became semi-permanent. It became forbidden to circulate there during the summer season. And finally, the Ardennes route has become a real permanent circuit. All year round, Francorchamps is now reserved for its specific activities. And now, a century after the first race, everything suggests that Spa-Francorchamps will once again relive great pages in the history of motorcycling. From 2022, it will be the return of the world endurance championship.

And then?... Fingers crossed, but many observers are waiting while keeping their feet on the ground for the return of the Grand Prix. We can already imagine the whole MotoGP pack attacking the Raidillon and then with the howl of the four-cylinder four-strokes, these bikes of more than 250 horsepower rushing at some 350 km / h in the climb to Les Combes. We can already imagine these same MotoGP bikes banking at nearly 300 km/h in the first part of the Blanchimont corner!

Page 258

Dream or reality?

The future is yet to be written but before dreaming about this future, we asked Didier de Radiguès for a present opinion. Francorchamps is a bit like his playground. He won in Grand Prix and Endurance and we will remember that this famous motorcycle rider also won several times in cars at Francorchamps, especially during the 24 Hours in 1997. Didier de Radiguès was the motorcycle riders' delegate for safety and is now a TV commentator on RTBF (Belgian public television) on Grands Prix. Didier has thus remained very close to the world of speed and he necessarily knows all the tricks.

Francorchamps, de Radiguès loves it, because he has very good memories of it, because he was victorious there.

- "And also because when I was riding a motorcycle, it was 'my' Grand Prix on my circuit", he adds.

But this rider also remembers the bad times in 1987, when the star riders announced that they wanted the cancellation of the G.P. of Belgium. At that time, Didier was caught between a rock and a hard place. He remembers:

-*"On the one hand I had the F.M.B. who told me **you have to run and we increase your starting bonus**. I needed to ride, I needed to earn that money, I needed to shine, to win. But what would an easy victory have been worth? On the other hand, the best 500cc riders came to me and told me you have **to hold with us, this is the only solution you have to if you want to be part of the top table...**"*

Page 259

As we know, there was no G.P. of Belgium motorcycle in 1987. That being said, Didier de Radiguès remains a lover of Spa-Francorchamps. He is delighted with the return of the 24 Hours. As for a possible "comeback" of the Grand Prix, he is equally enthusiastic. He says he is hopeful but is not yet fully convinced.

-*"Francorchamps is part of the history of Grands Prix but it is unfortunately no longer part of the Grand Prix scene", continues de Radiguès. "And it's always harder to come back after an absence. That being the case, it is quite possible that the Grand Prix will come back to Francorchamps, but in order to do so, I think that beforehand we would have to gather the right people around a table, which unfortunately has not yet been proposed. And, by the way, I would be very happy to be part of such a meeting."*

We still have to keep our fingers crossed... As all motorcycle enthusiasts will meet in 2022 for the return of endurance bikes on Spa-Francorchamps while waiting, everyone hopes for the eventual return of MotoGP! And between these two deadlines will we also see Superbikes do battle on the most beautiful circuit in the world?