

# GETTING BACK TO THE POINT



The return of the Silver Arrows in 1989, for the first time in 34 years, resulted in domination that had echoes of the past – and Lewis Hamilton’s F1 success of today, says **Gary Watkins**

## RETURN OF THE SILVER ARROWS

It was a momentous decision. The Team Sauber Mercedes entries in the 1989 World Sports Car Championship would run as Silver Arrows, just like the W125 grand prix cars before World War II and the W196 Formula 1 racers afterwards. The 'new' livery for the Sauber-Mercedes C9 Group C design tipped its hat to the glorious past of a manufacturer returning to motor sport after a long hiatus. And it also paved the way for an equally bright future that comes right up to the present day with the line of championship-winning F1 hybrids.

Yet the call to adopt the famous livery of the marque wasn't made as the result of intense boardroom debate, extensive market research and never-ending focus groups. Rather it was the personal diktat of one of the highest authorities within Mercedes at the time – unsurprisingly after he'd had a few drinks inside him.

Mercedes had ended its official absence from motor sport in 1988, breaking a sabbatical that dated back to 1955 and the aftermath of the Le Mans 24 Hours disaster (see sidebar on p.XX). It launched twin programmes: one with Sauber in the WSCC, then known as the World Sports-Prototype Championship, and also with the 190E 2.3-16 in the DTM touring car series in Germany. Only after some early successes – five wins in the WSPC, and six in the DTM – did the marque have the confidence to adopt the iconic racing livery that graced the C9's famous forebears.

That confidence was buoyed by alcohol at the Mercedes end-of-season motor sport party in 1988. The late Werner Niefer, deputy chairman of the board of parent company Daimler-Benz, was sitting around a table with the Sauber hierarchy when he decreed that the Silver Arrows would make a return after a year of the team's cars running in the colours of Daimler-Benz subsidiary AEG.

Max Welti, Sauber's long-time team manager, takes up the story: "We were all drunk, pretty drunk actually. Niefer had these big hands and he banged his big fist

down on the table and said that we were going to race silver cars. The beer glasses literally sprang up in the air. It was all done by him, Mr Niefer. It was his decision and his decision alone."

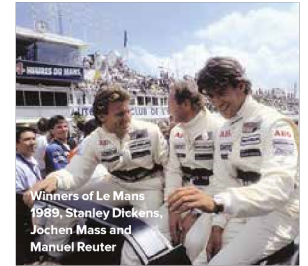
The backstory to the return of the Silver Arrows had begun much nearer the start of the decade than its end. The Swiss Sauber team had forged a tentative link with Mercedes ahead of the 1982 season when it was developing its first car, the C6, for the new Group C fuel formula. Team boss Peter Sauber had approached the University of Stuttgart about using its wind tunnel. That wasn't possible courtesy of the institution's work with Porsche, but he was pointed in the direction of Mercedes by a helpful professor.

Sauber's team might have been a minnow of the sports car world at that time, but he had a receptive response from Mercedes, where a group of motor sport-minded road car engineers had already taken a close

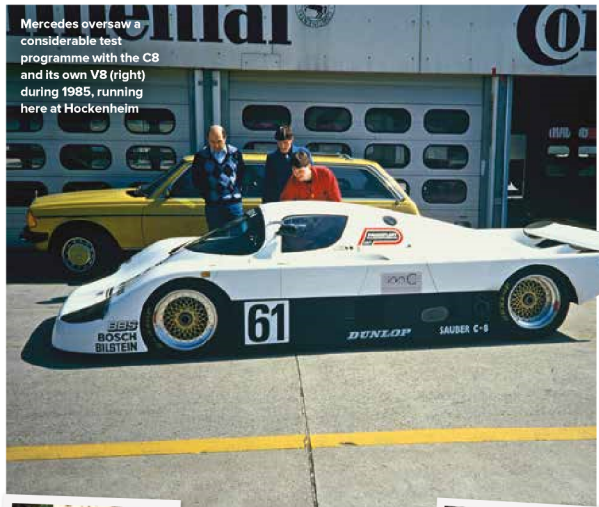


The Sauber C8 was the first with Mercedes power and paved the way for the C9. This is John Nielsen and Henri Pescarolo in 1986

"Niefer banged his huge fist on the table and said we would race silver cars"



Winners of Le Mans 1989, Stanley Dickens, Jochen Mass and Manuel Reuter



Mercedes oversaw a considerable test programme with the C8 and its own V8 (right) during 1985, running here at Hockenheim



The official team photo, with number 63 going on to win at Le Sarthe

### Mercedes in motor sport 1985-present

After ending its absence from the sport, the Silver Arrows have thrived



**1985**  
Returns to racing as engine supplier to Sauber in Group C



**1988**  
Enters DTM with 190E model



**1989**  
Saubers painted in Silver Arrows colours win Le Mans and WSPC

#### 1990

Wins WSPC again. Michael Schumacher helps team to victory in Mexico before joining F1



**1993**  
Sauber enters F1 with Mercedes affiliation



**1994**  
Mercedes officially returns to F1 as Sauber engine partner



**1995**  
Switches to McLaren. Powers team until 2014

DANIEL AG, SUTTON, GETTY, LAT

## RETURN OF THE SILVER ARROWS



Kenny Acheson, Mauro Baldi, Gianfranco Brancatelli lead early on at Le Mans in 1989



While he won with the C11, Michael Schumacher did test the C9, here making the brakes glow

look at the Group C regs. This group, working on an unofficial basis, included Leo Röss. He would go on to design the monocoque of Sauber's next Group C machine, the C7 of 1983, (while on gardening leave after his recruitment by BMW) and all of its subsequent prototype sports cars (as technical director of the team from 1985).

"We were just a group of dreamers," says Röss, who also did the calculations for the suspension geometry of the C6 using the manufacturer's computer power. "We always believed that a low-revving, big-volume turbo engine would be the most fuel-efficient. But it took three years from Peter Sauber's first contact for Mercedes to be convinced."

The first Sauber powered by a Mercedes engine, the C8, broke cover in 1985. The turbocharged M117 powerplant had, officially at least, been developed by renowned Swiss tuner Heini Mader. The truth was slightly different, however: the new race engine was designed and built in-house at Mercedes.

Welti describes the Mader story as a "smokescreen" to hide the true origins of the V8s, put about by a manufacturer who still wasn't officially involved in motor sport. "Maybe Mader built up one or two engines, but no more," he says. Röss suggests that the original plan was for Mader to undertake the project, but recalls everything being quickly taken in-house because Mercedes wanted to be in control of an engine that bore its badges.

The Mercedes engine wouldn't make its maiden race start until 1986, however. The C8 non-started on its one appearance of the previous year at Le Mans when John Nielsen, who would win the race with Jaguar in 1990, crashed on the Mulsanne Straight. It didn't reappear that season.

Sauber undertook a partial world championship season, which included a fortuitous victory in a two-part wet race at the Nürburgring in '86 with backing from the Yves St Laurent aftershave brand Kouros. A deal that stretched through the 1987 season had been brokered by former BMW Motorsport boss Jochen Neerpasch, then

working for Mark McCormack's IMG management group. The German would be brought in by Mercedes to head up its return to racing, a decision which was taken in early January 1988.

The Swiss operation now became Team Sauber Mercedes and with the AEG sponsorship undertook a first full-season campaign in the Group C ranks. It did win the WSPC opener at Jerez with a lone C9 shared by Jean-Louis Schlesser, Mauro Baldi and Jochen Mass, but the truth was that the team wasn't ready to take on reigning champion Jaguar.

The Mercedes decision to put its full weight behind Sauber hadn't been taken until January 12, yet the Jerez WSPC opener was on March 6. The programme remained a one-car effort until Silverstone in early May, the final race before Le Mans. The first factory assault by Mercedes at the Circuit de

la Sarthe since '55 turned out to be disaster: Klaus Niedzwiedz suffered a high-speed blow-out on the Mulsanne Straight during qualifying; tyre supplier Michelin couldn't guarantee it wouldn't happen again, and Mercedes took the inevitable decision to withdraw from the race.

By Le Mans, Sauber had a new engineer running the race operations of the team. Dave Price joined from the Richard Lloyd Racing Porsche squad after being approached by Welti in the pitlane during the Silverstone 1000Km meeting in early May. He recalls arriving at an outfit that had yet to organise itself in a way befitting of a full factory team.

"It was very small when I first went there," remembers Price. "Leo was doing everything; he was the designer and was engineering both cars. And as we know, designers don't make very good race engineers! They probably had no more than 12 people in total, including Peter and Max."

Price helped knock the team into shape, while Röss was freed up to devote more time to car development. After a major suspension test with shocks supplier Bilstein after the Le Mans debacle, Sauber's season came alive. Team Sauber Mercedes ran a pair of cars in each of the six races post-Le Mans and ended up winning four of them. Schlesser and Baldi took second and third in the points respectively behind Jaguar's Martin Brundle.

That momentum carried into 1989 with a further upgrade of the C9, which was now powered by a four-valve version of the Mercedes engine known as the M119. Only once would one of the Silver Arrows fail to win over the course of the eight championship rounds in '89, when hot temperatures at Dijon killed its Michelin tyres and the Joest Porsche team took a surprise victory. Sauber also claimed the big prize at Le Mans, finishing one-two in a race that wasn't part of the WSPC that season.

The arrival of the new engine was an important factor in the domination of Team Sauber Mercedes, but perhaps not the defining one that some history books relate.

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### "Le Mans in 1988 was a disaster, with a high-speed blowout"

Mercedes in motor sport 1985-present



**1997**  
Enters FIA GT Championship with CLK. Wins both the drivers' and teams' titles

**1998**  
Wins F1 titles with McLaren and Mika Häkkinen; FIA GT champion again



**1999**  
Häkkinen wins second F1 title; new CLR flips three times at Le Mans



**2010**  
Enters Formula 1 as a full-blown entrant



STUTTON, MOTORSPORT IMAGES



**2011**  
Returns to GTs with SLS GT3

**2014**  
Lewis Hamilton and team win both F1 titles

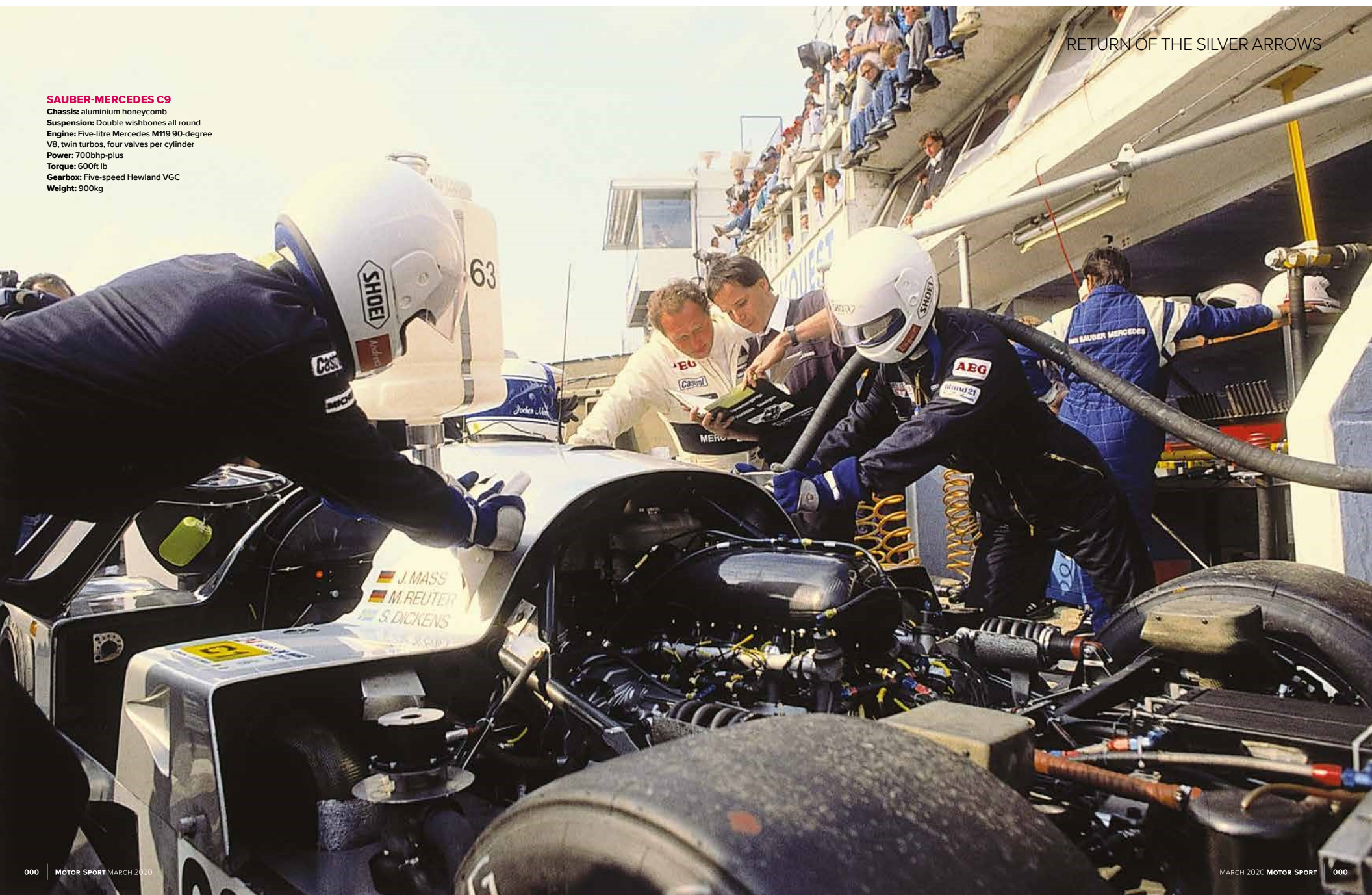


**2019**  
Hamilton wins sixth F1 title and team records a sixth consecutive crown; enters Formula E (above)



**SAUBER-MERCEDES C9**

**Chassis:** aluminium honeycomb  
**Suspension:** Double wishbones all round  
**Engine:** Five-litre Mercedes M119 90-degree V8, twin turbos, four valves per cylinder  
**Power:** 700bhp-plus  
**Torque:** 600ft lb  
**Gearbox:** Five-speed Hewland VGC  
**Weight:** 900kg





The battle-scarred C9s return to the pits after their glorious Le Mans victory in 1989

“The engine was definitely more efficient and more power always helps, but at the first test it was actually slower,” explains Ress. “We were a bit surprised and then we saw that we were slower in the corners. That was because the centre of gravity had gone up with the extra weight at the top of the engine. Mercedes undertook a big development programme to come back to the original centre of gravity.”

The reorganisation of the team that took place through '88 and into '89 was just as important, he reckons. “Everything was less rushed and we were properly organised,” continues Ress. “We had more time to focus on car development, the aerodynamics and car set-up. In 1988, we had been struggling just to get to the races.”

Price has a similar viewpoint: “I went there at just the right time; you make some small improvements and you’re a f\*\*\*king hero. It was a piece of cake, really. We used to go to the races expecting to win. It’s great to have that mentality in the team.”

Team Sauber Mercedes ended up taking just about all the silverware in 1989. Schlesser claimed the WSPC title ahead of team-mates Mass and Baldi in second and third positions. The Le Mans victory went the way of Mass, Manuel Reuter and Stanley Dickens in a third C9 entered for the big one in France, with the car shared by Baldi, Kenny Acheson and Gianfranco Brancatelli in second.

It wasn’t the first time that the Silver Arrows had dominated at or near the pinnacle of world motor sport. Nor would it be the last. They would maintain their superiority in 1990 on the arrival of a new Group C car – the Mercedes, not Sauber, C11 – that together with its predecessor won seven of the eight WSPC rounds that year.

Today’s Mercedes F1 team has carried on the run nicely, with six drivers’ and constructors’ doubles since 2014. But it undoubtedly owes something to a drunken conversation more than 30 years ago. **o**



The pits at Le Mans in 1955 became a sombre place after Levegh’s SLR flew into the crowd

## The long shadow of Le Mans 1955

Mercedes’ three-decade sabbatical was understandable, even if it couldn’t entirely be blamed for the French tragedy, says **Damien Smith**

On October 16, 1955, Stirling Moss and Peter Collins led a Mercedes-Benz 1-2-4 at the Targa Florio to clinch the manufacturers’ world championship and complete a dominant season in the wheel tracks of Juan Manuel Fangio’s F1 title. Little did anyone know it would be 34 years before a Silver Arrow would again grace the track, when a Sauber-Mercedes C9 carried the famous colours to victory at a World Sports-Prototype Championship round at Suzuka on April 9 1989.

The silencing of racing engines for more than three decades has always been blamed on the Le Mans disaster of that tragic 1955 season, when Pierre Levegh’s 300 SLR was launched off the back of Lance Macklin’s Austin Healey and into the crowd opposite the pits, killing

more than 80 and injuring almost 100 more. But Mercedes has always claimed its decision to withdraw was down to more practical reasons. Fritz Nallinger, board member responsible for engineering, said at a ceremony honouring its racing drivers on October 22, 1955: “The development of our product makes it appear advisable to put these highly skilled people to work now, without overtaxing them, solely in an area which is the most interesting to our customers, namely production car engineering.” It’s even claimed the decision predated Le Mans.



Levegh and John Fitch’s 300 SLR

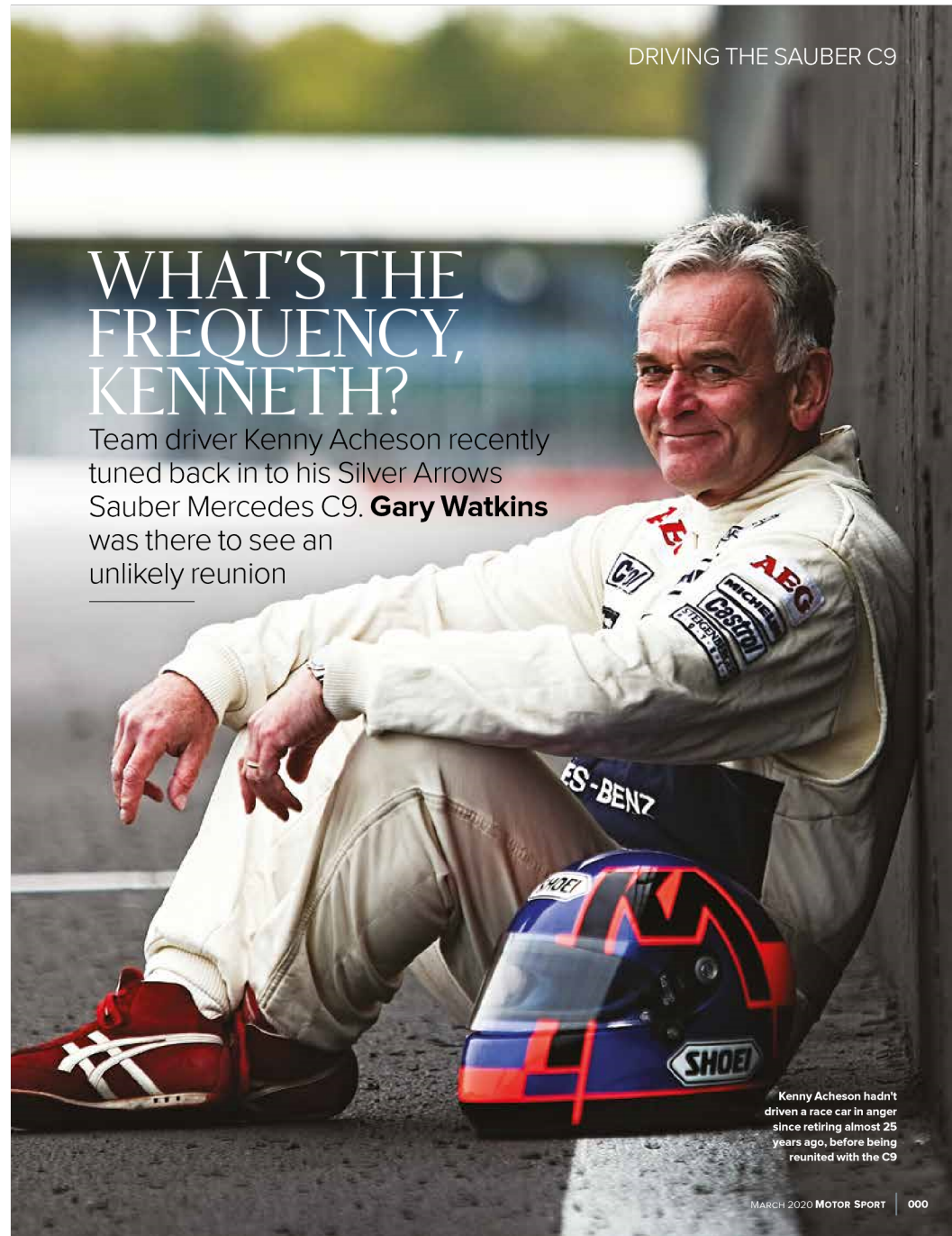
Whatever the backstory, consider the context of the disaster: it was just 10 years after the second war of the century in which Germany had wrought devastation on France. It also sparked a backlash against motor sport that led to the cancellation of four grands prix that season and a long-lasting ban on racing in Switzerland. A withdrawal was entirely reasonable in such circumstances.

Le Mans 1955 cast a long, dark shadow, even though poor Levegh was blameless for an accident that was triggered by Mike Hawthorn – in a Jaguar. Undeserved ‘shame’ kept Mercedes away and explains why clandestine measures were taken as 1980s engineers went racing on the quiet. In truth, the Silver Arrows’ return was long before its time.

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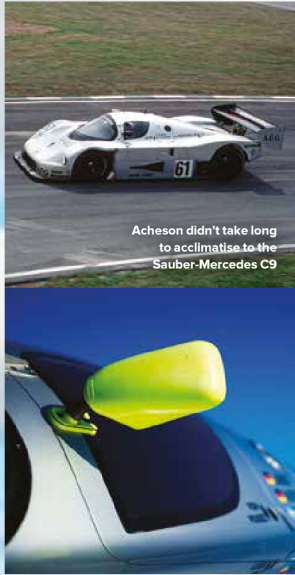
## WHAT’S THE FREQUENCY, KENNETH?

Team driver Kenny Acheson recently tuned back in to his Silver Arrows Sauber Mercedes C9. **Gary Watkins** was there to see an unlikely reunion



Kenny Acheson hadn’t driven a race car in anger since retiring almost 25 years ago, before being reunited with the C9

DRIVING THE SAUBER C9



Acheson didn't take long to acclimatise to the Sauber-Mercedes C9



Twin-turbo V8 engine is the heart of the C9



A run in the Sauber brought back plenty of memories for Acheson

The overalls still fit and so, by definition, does the cockpit. Thirty years on from the most successful season of his racing career, Kenny Acheson is easing back behind the wheel of a Sauber-Mercedes C9 in the same grey Nomex in which he won two rounds of the 1989 World Sports Car Championship and endured a heart-breaking near-miss at the Le Mans 24 Hours.

Acheson, now 62, feels immediately at home in the Silver Arrow that put Mercedes back on the international motor sport map in only year two of its official comeback. He's not driving the car on a circuit - he hasn't had a competition licence since he walked away from the sport nearly a quarter of a century ago - but on the Turweston aerodrome runway just down the road from Silverstone. But it's enough to rekindle some fond memories.

"The strangest thing is that it doesn't feel strange at all, if that doesn't sound a bit odd," says Acheson, who has driven a racing car just the once, and only for a short demo, since retiring in 1996. "It all felt so natural - the noise of that V8 engine brings it all back. It really is a lovely racing car."

But then the Northern Irishman knew

the C9 was something special from the moment he first took to the track for what should have been his race debut with the renamed Team Sauber Mercedes squad at Le Mans in 1988.

He had reservations about going back after a fraught maiden appearance at the Circuit de la Sarthe in 1985, which ended before qualifying was over with one of his team-mates in hospital with a broken leg.

He describes the Porsche 962C in which he completed just three laps as "awful and a bit scary - for some reason I couldn't go flat in a straight line". Three years later, the C9 was "an entirely different proposition - you could tell immediately that it was a good racing car".

Accepting the offer of a Le Mans drive



It is believed body panels came from the Le Mans-winning car

with the Swiss Sauber team turned out to be a pivotal moment in Acheson's career. He might not have got to make his Le Mans debut, but his introduction to the factory Merc squad resulted in a full-season campaign in the following year's WSCC, or World Sports-Prototype Championship to use the name it adopted in 1986. Top drives followed as he racked up an impressive Le Mans CV that encompassed a trio of podiums in his first four starts.

Acheson was given a second outing aboard a C9 at the back end of the '88 season at Fuji, a home from home for him after four seasons racing in Japan. He finished fifth with Jean-Louis Schlesser and Jochen Mass, doing more than enough to be invited back for '89.

"I went there as a fifth driver, but every time I got in the car it was wet and I was quick," he recalls. "I remember the team telling me I was going to start the race. I said to them, 'hang on a minute, I'm not one of your regular drivers, I've only done a handful of laps!'"

Acheson would be part of an historic year for Mercedes as both the manufacturer and its Swiss partner upped the ante. Sauber outgunned its rivals, including reigning champion Jaguar, which meant the big rivalry was within the Swiss team. ●



"A Porsche 962C was scary, but the C9 was an entirely different proposition"



Acheson had plenty of success during the 1989 season, here celebrating winning the 1000km of Brands Hatch alongside Mauro Baldi (left)

Schlesser and Mauro Baldi had started the 1988 season as co-drivers, winning first time out at Jerez and finishing on the podium at the next two races before the team expanded to run a pair of cars. Now they would be in separate entries from the outset, Baldi teamed with Acheson in car #61 and Schlesser lining up with Mass in #62.

"They were the two bulls in the field," recalls Acheson. "Jochen was really relaxed as always and I was just happy to be there. I was always aware of the rivalry, but I don't think it ever got in the way of things."

Schlesser wasn't happy from the get-go that Dave Price had been assigned to engineer the sister car, even less so when Baldi, recovering from breaking his right foot at the Daytona 24 Hours in February, ended up driving - and winning - with him at the season-opening Suzuka round. The team was forced to shuffle its line-up on race morning when Mass fell unwell. With the team down a driver, that meant Acheson had to race #62 alone over a 480km or 300-mile event lasting nearly three hours.

He ended up second, six seconds in arrears of the sister Sauber, but the

## "Acheson had to race alone for a 300-mile, nearly three-hour, event"



newcomer was the moral winner after ceding his position to the car shared by the two bulls late in the race.

"I started 30th because I had to use Jochen's qualifying time," he remembers. "I thought there was no way I was going to be able to do the whole race on my own, because these are physical cars and Suzuka is a tough circuit. But suddenly I found myself running second and I was able to overtake Schless in the last stint."

"He claimed he believed I was unlapping myself. He didn't! I caught him and pulled away by a couple of seconds before the call came. When I pulled over, I made sure I did it in front of the pits to let everyone know what was going on."

"I sat on his tail to the end of the race, and it was only on the last lap when he nipped in front of someone in the S-Curves that he was able to pull a gap."

Neither Baldi nor Schlesser took the big prize at Le Mans that year. Instead it went to Mass, who was teamed with Stanley Dickens and Manuel Reuter in the additional #63 car entered for the French enduro. It might have been different, however. ◻

## DRIVING THE SAUBER C9

Baldi, Acheson and third driver Gianfranco Brancatelli held the lead on Sunday morning when its number one driver went off at the Dunlop Chicane. This incident and subsequent repairs to a damaged nose turned a narrow lead over the sister car into a one-lap deficit.

The second-placed Sauber made it back on to the lead lap, only for the gearbox to jam in fifth on Acheson's first lap back in the car for the run to the flag. When attempts to repair the transmission proved fruitless, the car's driver had the big task of getting out of the pits in top gear.

"All I did was keep hitting the starter and dropping the clutch, so the car would keep rolling," he explains. "Start, drop the clutch and stall; start, drop the clutch and stall. By the end of the pitlane, the clutch seemed to be burnt out and I couldn't really accelerate. I remember getting onto the Mulsanne and two thirds of the way down the clutch started to come back as it cooled down a bit."

**"You were in trouble if you got it sideways when the tyres were old"**

Another WSPC win for Baldi and Acheson at Spa in September, coupled with a retirement for Schlesser and Mass, meant the Italian went to the series finale in Mexico City with a narrow advantage at the head of the championship table. But on the assumption of a Sauber one-two, he still had to win the race to claim the crown.

Baldi took the pole, but it was Schlesser who led throughout the opening stint on the Autódromo Hermanos Rodríguez. Acheson, though, quickly closed down Mass after the pitstops and outdragged the sister car on the start-finish straight after getting a better run out of the fast 180-degree Peraltada.

Just a couple of laps later, the Sauber driver attempted the same move on the lapped Richard Lloyd Racing Porsche driven by Tiff Needell. This time, the C9 ended up in the barriers. "I had Jochen just behind me and I knew I had to get a good run onto the straight," recalls Acheson. "I didn't want to

get too close to Tiff in the corner, but I came up right behind him and lost downforce in his slipstream just at the point where there was a bump in the road.

"The Michelins were very difficult to drive: you were in trouble if you got the car sideways once the tyres were five or six laps old. The car went ever so slowly, but there was no chance to get it back on those tyres. I was just too close to the car in front at the wrong moment. My fault. Maybe it wasn't meant to be."

Acheson already knew that his services weren't required for 1990 by the time he headed for Mexico. His seat would be filled by a trio of youngsters - Michael Schumacher, Heinz-Harald Frentzen and Karl Wendlinger - as Mercedes motor sport boss Jochen Neerpasch sought to replicate the successes he'd enjoyed with his junior programme at BMW in the 1970s. The young tyros would alternate in the second car alongside Mass, while Schlesser and Baldi were reunited in the lead entry.

Acheson wouldn't drive a Sauber again after climbing from his damaged car in Mexico. Not, that is, until the offer last year to reacquaint himself, however briefly, with the C9. The run, however short, enables him to look back on his time with Team Sauber Mercedes with fondness.

"I feel lucky that I got that chance with Sauber and Mercedes," he says. "If I hadn't have got that opportunity, I'd probably have done a couple more years in Japan, and that would have been it. My life wouldn't have been so rich."

His exploits in 1989 won him the British Racing Drivers' Club Gold Star for the most successful Commonwealth driver of the season. He calls himself the "least famous and least-deserving name" on an honours board that includes Richard Seaman, Stirling Moss and every British Formula 1 world champion. That's a typically self-deprecating comment from a driver who was always one of the nice guys of the paddock.

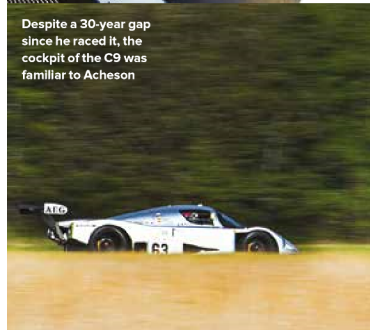
"I couldn't speak highly enough of the group of people I raced with in 1989," continues Acheson. "It was the nicest atmosphere I ever encountered in a team. Everyone worked well together, the Germans, the Swiss and the Brits."

The chance to once again slip into the cockpit of a C9 results in "a great day" for Acheson. "The only thing is," he says, "it's the wrong number on the car. If there was no #63, I would have won Le Mans." ◉

*Special thanks to BBM Sport for its help with this feature*



Despite a 30-year gap since he raced it, the cockpit of the C9 was familiar to Acheson



## A lunchtime coincidence

This Sauber's owner had no idea he was sitting across from Kenny Acheson during an encounter at Goodwood, which led to this test

Kenny Acheson's return to the cockpit of a Sauber-Mercedes came about entirely by chance. Invited to a corporate event at the Goodwood Festival of Speed last summer in his capacity as a business man working in the cosmetics industry rather than as an ex-racing driver, he happened to sit opposite the owner of this C9, historic racer Rupert Clevely.

"Kenny asked me what I did and I ended up telling him that I raced a bit," explains Clevely, who has also owned Lancia LC2 and Peugeot 905 Group C cars.

"He asked me what car I drove, I said it was a Sauber. When I told him it was a C9, he said, 'Wow, I finished second at Le Mans in one of those'. I had no idea who he was when we started talking."

One thing led to another, and suddenly Acheson was digging out his old overalls for a short test in Clevely's C9.

The car was purchased from the defunct Donington Collection by Clevely. An unraced spare car in period, chassis #89 C9 A1 became a display vehicle at the end of the design's competitive

life early in 1990. The car came with an engine and gearbox, but no bellhousing between them, while other missing parts included the injection plenum and the rear suspension rockers.

What the car did come with, however, was a set of bodywork used at Le Mans. It is believed that the majority of the panels came off the Le Mans winner, while the 04B chalked inside the nose suggests that this section was used on Acheson's second-placed car, chassis #04.

BBM Sport, formerly

Chamberlain-Synergy, readied it for Peter Auto's Group C Racing series. That meant reverse engineering components, something it was well qualified to do having previously run another C9, as well as the Sauber-built Mercedes C11.

The car was ready in time to run up the hill at Goodwood last summer and the plan is for Clevely to race the C9 a couple of times in the coming season. "I'm a massive Group C fan," he says, "and in my opinion this is the coolest looking of them all."