



TOYOTA AT LE MANS

Toyota's history at Le Mans began twenty years ago in 1975 with the Sigma Automotive Company's entry of a Sigma MC75 sports car. The Sigma, which was driven by a small four-cylinder Toyota engine, succeeded in qualifying but had to withdraw because of mechanical problems.

This was still a significant step in Toyota's history in motor sport. Sigma Automotive Company was later to become Toyota Team SARD, one of the favourites of last year's race. And one of the drivers of 1975, Hiroshi Fushida, was later to become team manager for the Toyota Team TOM'S, the team that ran Toyota's official colors for ten years, both at Le Mans and in the World Sports-Prototype and Sportscar World Championships.

It would take five more years for the next Toyota to make its appearance at Le Mans - in 1980 a Toyota Celica Liftback built in accordance with IMSA regulations attempted to qualify. Alas, Nobuhide Tachi and Fumiyasu Sato did not make the start, but another cornerstone in Toyota's sports history had been laid - together with Kiyoshi Ohiwa, Tachi would later found TOM'S (Tachi Ohiwa Motor Sports).

Another five years passed before Toyota's return to France, but this time it was in earnest. In 1985 two genuine sports-prototypes built according to the Group C rules appeared at the Sarthe road-racing circuit. The decision to once more take part in the greatest endurance race in the world was taken after good results had been achieved with the Toyota 82C in the All Japan Sports-Prototype Championship (JSPC) three years running. The car was still fitted with the small 2090cc engine derived from the Celica, but it nevertheless succeeded in making a name for itself against formidable adversaries such as Porsche.

The Toyota 85C which Team TOM'S and Team Dome took to Le Mans in 1985, was a further development of the 82C. At that time two teams were still involved in the development of sports cars for Toyota. TOM'S took care of the engines and the technical side of things, while Dome developed the chassis and aerodynamics.

In spite of the small engine and the fact that this was their debut, the three Japanese TOM'S Toyota drivers succeeded in reaching the finish in an honourable 12th place. This was the best result so far achieved by a Japanese manufacturer and a Japanese driver.

One year later, in 1986, both teams again sent a vehicle to Le Mans. Again, the car was a further development of the original 82C, still equipped with the small two-litre engine. That year it was the TOM'S car that had to abandon the race prematurely, while the Dome Toyota reached the finish, but too far behind the winners to be classified.

From 1987 TOM'S took responsibility for all preparation work for Toyota, and as such was the only Toyota team at Le Mans. As an extra attraction, former Formula 1 World Champion Alan Jones was recruited. However, this did not prevent both cars from having to abandon their attempts - Jones ran out of fuel in sight of the pits, while Masanori Sekiya had to give up even before sunset.

1988 was the last year that only the four-cylinder engine appeared at the start, and the first year that both cars finished. The 88C driven by Geoff Lees, Masanori Sekiya and Kaoru Hoshino finished 12th, as in 1985, but this time having driven a greater distance than three years earlier, namely 4,750 kilometres (approximately 2,951 miles). This was the longest distance driven by a Japanese car in the race.

Meanwhile in Japan, a brand new car was being readied for the All Japan Sports-Prototype Championship - the 88C-V, equipped with a carbon fibre chassis and a 3200cc V8 twin turbo engine. This time Toyota had the means to compete at top level, to fight the leaders consisting of Porsche, Mercedes, Jaguar and Nissan teams.

The 88C-V was further worked on during the winter, and two 89C-Vs were sent to France in 1989 together with an old 88C. But the team was hit by all sorts of bad luck, and long before midnight all three cars had to withdraw from the race. 1989 was also the year when Toyota took part in the entire World Sports-Prototype Championship programme.

In 1990 three 90C-Vs were entered in the competition - two by TOM'S and a third one by the semi-official Toyota Team SARD. It was not SARD's first entry at Le Mans, in 1973 team manager Shin Kato had brought a 100% Japanese car to the start, a Sigma fitted with a Mazda engine. Two years later, the same Shin Kato brought the first Toyota engine to Le Mans, and decided to stick with it for the future. The team's name changed - Sigma became Sigma Advanced Research Development. In fact, SARD is Toyota's "second" team after TOM'S, while disposing of the same equipment as TOM'S. As a regular participant in the All Japan Sports-Prototype Championship, SARD won a number of 1,000 kilometre races, one of the winning drivers being the late Roland Ratzenberger, who for years was a regular driver for them.

The Nisso Trust Racing Team also made its first appearance at Le Mans in 1990, with drivers Steven Andskar and George Fouche driving a Porsche 962C. In 1983, Trust had been the first team to run a Porsche in the All Japan Sports-Prototype Championship. The team, under the guidance of Nova Engineering, clearly proved their class by winning two JSPC-titles in 1983 and 1984, both in the team and in the driver championships (with Vern Schuppan and Naori Fujita).

Trust was not only the first team to use Porsche, it was also the last do so until 1991 - the second year Trust took part at Le Mans. Then, in 1992, the team switched over to Toyota, to return to Le Mans in 1993 when it achieved a fifth place in the general rankings and a win in the Group C category.

In 1990, SARD paid the price of its lack of experience and the team, just like one of TOM'S cars, had to abandon the race with technical problems. The only Toyota to complete the course finished sixth, the best result so far for Toyota.

In 1991 Toyota did not make an appearance at the Sarthe circuit because the team had not entered for the World Championship as a whole. Indeed, regulations stated that teams could only start in Le Mans if they took part in all races and Toyota was not interested in doing so because they were busy in Japan developing the brand new TS-010. Toyota did take part in the JSPC, but had to surrender to Nissan that year.

By way of exception, Toyota was allowed to take part in one race in 1991, namely the last race of the season. This was held at the futuristic Autopolis circuit in Japan. The new TS-010, the weapon Toyota planned to use against Mercedes, Jaguar, Mazda and Peugeot, was a ingenious piece of technology. The TS-010, which was equipped with a V10 3500cc engine, had been designed by Tony Southgate, the man who had also been responsible for the Jaguars that not only won the World Championship twice in the late eighties, but also triumphed twice in Le Mans. Most recently, Southgate penned the Ferrari 333SP, the car that will mark the come back of the Italian manufacturer with a sportscar capable of going for the win.

Alas, that winter, when Mercedes and Jaguar unexpectedly withdrew from the championship, the FIA decided to cancel the series altogether. But together with Peugeot and Mazda, Toyota pushed and the 1992 championship took place after all, albeit with a greatly reduced field of participants compared to two years before. For the first race in Monza only a dozen cars appeared at the start, which certainly did not bode well for Le Mans. The race in Italy was won by Toyota, the first and also the last Toyota victory at World Championship level. Geoff Lees and Hitoshi Ogawa were the drivers to gain this historic victory, marred all too soon by the death of Ogawa in a Japanese F3000 race a few weeks later.

In Le Mans all fears were justified. Only twenty-eight cars turned up at the start. Nevertheless, the battle for victory was a fierce one. Eventually, it was won by Peugeot, with Toyota achieving a well deserved second place, the best result ever.

In 1993 Toyota and Peugeot once more crossed swords at Le Mans, a praiseworthy performance, as the Sportscar World Championship no longer existed and both manufacturers had built three cars especially for the race. Peugeot stuck to the further development of the previous year's 905, while Toyota built an almost entirely new car. Indeed, the development of the successor of the TS-010 had been at an advanced stage at the time of the FIA cancelling the World Championship, a fact which caused TOM'S decision to use the already developed parts and combine them with the existing TS-010.

The result was a hybrid combining a new chassis and engine with the revised aerodynamics of the old model. Alas, this development would take a long time, resulting in Toyota not having sufficient time for race simulations. The result was accordingly - Peugeot scored a 1-2-3 victory with Toyota not making the rostrum. There was some jubilation with the SARD team, which won a victory with a car driven by Roland Ratzenberger, Mauro Martini and Naoki Nagasaka in the "second division", the category for cars built in accordance with the old Group C regulations.

In 1994, the "old" Group C cars called the shots again with SARD and Trust entering a revised 94C-V apiece. The SARD Toyota looked set for a clean win, only to be dropped back to third when a gear linkage broke a few hours before the end. However, a scorching drive by Eddie Irvine gave the car a well earned second place only a lap before the flag fell.

This year, SARD is the only team representing Toyota as the Nisso Trust Racing Team had to withdraw from the race when they crashed their race chassis during a private practice session in Japan.



1995 TOYOTA SUPRA LM: TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Length:	4565mm
Width:	1920mm
Height:	1275mm
Wheelbase:	2550mm
Tread Front:	1570mm
Tread Rear:	1550mm
Weight:	1150kg
Engine type:	3S-GTE Turbo
Cylinders:	L4
Displacement:	2140ccm
BHP:	600/7000rpm
Tyres Front:	280/655R18 (Dunlop)
Tyres Rear:	320/710R18 (Dunlop)
Wheels Front:	11,0Jx18 (RAYS)
Wheels Rear:	13,0Jx18 (RAYS)
Chassis:	Steel monocoque
Suspension:	Double Wishbone
Transmission:	6-speed X-Trac