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1908 PANHARD LEVASSOR

1908 Grand Prix Panhard – Levassor, 12.5-Litre Double Chain drive
The ex- Maurice Farman, ACF Dieppe Grand Prix Works Entry

The 1908 French Grand Prix at Dieppe witnessed a coming together of the titans of motorsport, a showdown between the great manufactures of the time.

Organised by the Automobile Club de France, the event was a 10-lap endurance race of almost 50 miles per lap, with average speeds of 80mph on roads of loose gravel. With packed grandstands lining the route it was an incredible spectacle to which a truly international entry flocked. Beyond the French entries there were Mercedes, Benz and Opel from Germany, Itala and Fiat from Italy, Austin from England and Thomas representing the USA.

Panhard-Levassor were true automobile pioneers, securing two previous victories on the Gordon Bennett Trophy and tree successive Circuit des Ardennes triumphs. They built 3 cars especially for the 1908 Grand Prix, boasting huge 4 cylinder, 12.5-Litre engines. There were coupled to a 4-speed gearbox linked to double chain drives, giving an extraordinary top speed of 100mph. Maurice Farman, a pioneer aviator, was the chosen pilot of car number 32.

At various times during the 1908 race Farman was amongst the front-running pack. It was both the Mercedes and Benz teams, however, that had made the more prudent tyre choice, and it their regular changing of wheels and rubber kept Panhard-Levassor off the podium.

Following disagreements between the manufacturers another Grand Prix was not staged until 1912, with a 3-Litre capacity restriction the agreed solution. As such the Grand Prix cars of 1908 were the last of the great, big-capacity, chain-driven racing cars, and the end of an unparalleled era.

Following Dieppe, a wealthy Argentinean instructed Labourdette to road equip the Grand prix car, which would be used for both road and race events in the South America nation. Laid up in 1930 and discovered in 1972 in extraordinarily original condition, it was then acquired by its current owner. Upon its return to Europe, Bentley specialist Dick Moss carried out the painstaking task of both preserving and restoring the car.

For 40 years the current owner has enthusiastically used this mighty machine in all manner of events, driving from his home in England to compete at circuits all over Europe, as far south as Bordeaux and Le Mans, before driving back again!

Possibly the most original and complete Grand Prix car from the pre-1912 era, and definitely the most important surviving French Grand Prix car of the period, this titan of the chain drive era is a testament to how powerful a force France was in those early pioneering days of motorsport.

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