

Bamber drives into history with first-up Le Mans win

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Earl Bamber, the boy who grew up learning to drive on the family farm at Jerusalem, roared into sporting history yesterday when he claimed the Le Mans 24-hour race.

The Wanganui 24-year-old shared the driving duties with two others to bring their Porsche 919 hybrid home in first place.

The French circuit has ruined as many careers as it has launched and is one of the world's premier races. Winning there is second only to winning a Formula 1 grand prix.

Bamber shared the driver's seat with Englishman Nick Tandy and German Nico Hulkenberg, while another Kiwi, Brendan Hartley, was co-driver of another Porsche that finished second.

"It's been an amazing 12 months for me," Bamber said after his victory.

"I have to say a huge thank you to Porsche for believing in me and giving me the opportunity to race here.

"It's beyond my wildest dreams to come here and win Le Mans at the first attempt — it feels incredible.

"It's been a long, long day to drive in the evening and then again in the morning but I'm not tired at all. I'm pumped up on adrenalin now."

Bamber got his kick start in serious motorsport with the backing of the Wheels Trust, set up in Wanganui when he was still a student at Collegiate School.

Local accountant Lindsay Tait, who led the formation of the trust, said Bamber's win was a major achievement.

"The point is that in Europe, which is the hub of motorsport, winning Le Mans is second in prestige to winning a Formula 1 championship.

"Earl is now officially a 'legend' in world motorsport," Tait said.

Ed Boyd, another Wanganui businessman who supported Bamber in the early days, was at Le Mans to see the moment of triumph.

"It is the neatest thing in the world to see one of our own come home like that," Boyd said.



FUTURE SET: The *Chronicle* took this image 10 year ago of a fresh-faced Earl Bamber, then 14 and already marked for big things in motor racing.

PHOTO/STUART MUNRO A—WAC050926-1



VICTORY: Winning threesome Nico Hulkenberg, Earl Bamber and Nick Tandy on top of their Porsche 919 hybrid that they brought home in first place at Le Mans yesterday.

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Bamber's win came almost half a century after the last New Zealander stood on the winner's podium at Le Mans.

In 1966, Chris Amon and the late Bruce McLaren shared a drive in their Ford GT40 to take the title.

And yesterday Amon told the *Chronicle* from his home in Taupo that the win was "just marvellous" for the Wanganui driver.

"I'm delighted to see it — and it's also a great day for Wanganui Collegiate," Amon said. Like Bamber, he was a pupil at collegiate.

"I'd been following the qualifying and, realistically, both Earl and Brendan had a shot at winning — but I never expected them to finish first and second.

"This is a major milestone for Earl in terms of his motoring racing career, no question about that.

"The commentators said that both Earl and Brendan were the quickest drives throughout the race and I believe it. They are both such talented drivers."

Amon said he harboured two ambitions and one had been realised.

"The first was to see a Kiwi win at Le Mans and the other is to see a Kiwi driving in Formula 1 — now one has happened," he said.

The 24 Hours of Le Mans is one of motorsport's greatest races and regarded as part of a "triple crown" which includes the Indy 500 and Monaco Grand Prix.

More than a 250,000 fans line the 13.5km circuit, which has tested drivers and their machines since 1923.

■ For more of Bamber's momentous win turn to Page 28.