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First sight of the A440-0 in the open, outside the plant, March 1973. (©R)

Six months later the new car, named the A440, rolled out of the workshops in Dieppe. It was a Barquette conforming to European Championship regulations.

The car was now a reality, and had developed from an idea into the finished article. There was still a lot of work to do, but all the basics were there, and on 19 March 1973 it was taken for its first test on the Paul Ricard circuit, where it was driven by Jean-Pierre Jabouille. Alain Serpaggi says he remembers that he was there, too, and also drove the car briefly.

Jean-Pierre Jabouille: "When I went to Alpine in the late 1960s as a professional driver, I first drove the old V8 A220. It was OK, but I know Gérard didn't like it. Neither did others: Mauro Bianchi and Henri Grandsire both had big accidents in it. The first year I drove it at Le Mans with Jean Guichet we didn't finish, nor did we finish in 1969, and by then I was doing the F3 Championship with Patrick Depailler. I was already passionate about technical things, suspension, etc. So of course I soon got into trouble – a young driver trying to throw his weight around! But we began to win races with the famous Alpine F3; that was after sports car racing had been stopped in 1969. Of course, they had run at Le Mans many times with the prototypes, but it was the old generation. Then as Renault became more involved



Final adjustments: Jabouille waits, helmet in hand. (©R)



Jabouille feels his way. (©R)



Jarier in the car as Larrousse waits. (Photo GL)

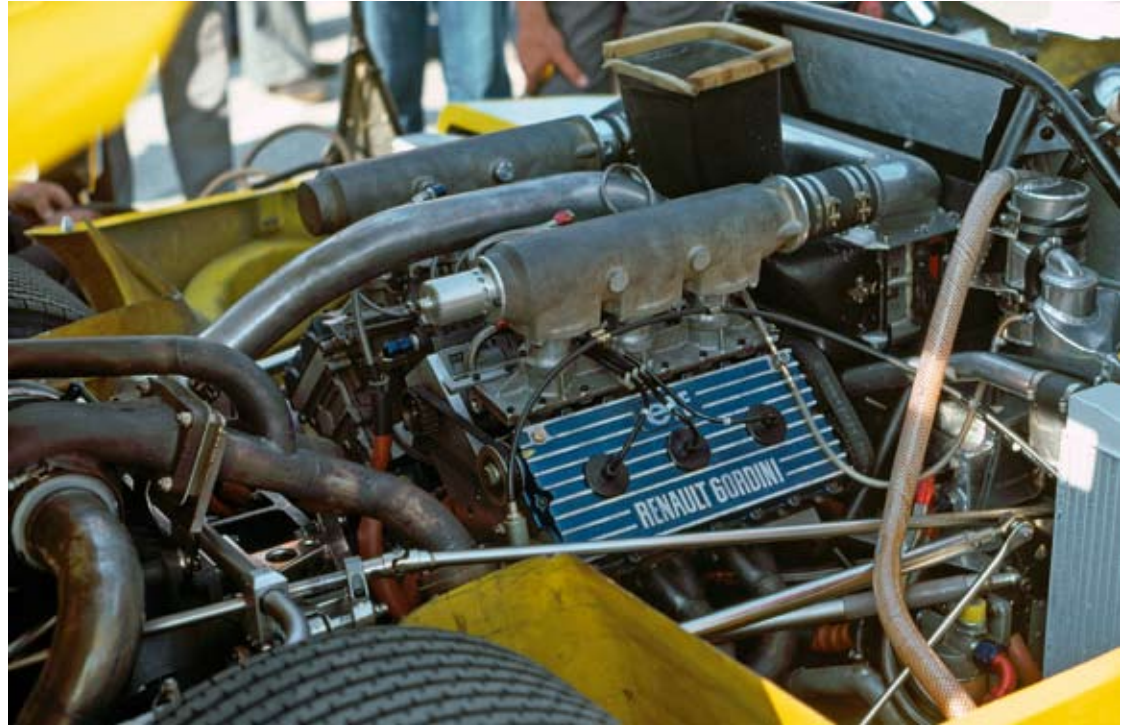
By now the more reliable Alfa Romeo team which had stuck with the Championship rounds had wrapped up the points, but Renault had something to prove, and anyway, this was supposed to be an interim season of development before a full Renault attempt at Le Mans. They must press on. Lella Lombardi and Marie-Claude Beaumont were in the A441-3, this time car 34, and they made it to tenth on the grid with 1min 47.19sec.

103 laps of the 3.673mile (5.911km) circuit lay ahead

on 29 June. It was warm and dry to start with, but a huge thunderstorm and torrential rain broke just before the off and all the teams had to rethink plans, change tyres and reset aero packages in the time allowed for the start delay. The race was to have started at 1pm, but at 12.45pm the track was suddenly flooded. Gérard Larrousse: "I remember the start of this race very well, because it was pouring with rain and there was so much water on the road that I jumped out of the car (I was on pole) just



Jabouille: superfast practice. (©R)



The engine: the team hoped it would now be reliable. (Photo CD)



The office. (Photo CD)



On through the night: Derek Bell. (©R)

Mirage, car 11, was by now four laps down on the leader. The prime 936 Porsche of Ickx/Pescarolo went out when its engine let go, and Ickx transferred to car 4 with Jürgen Barth and Hurley Hayward, which had had a problem early on. At this stage it looked like there was nothing that could actually challenge the A442s for the lead. However, by 9pm that Porsche was recovering rapidly, and with night setting in and the funfairs and bars in full swing, the 936 moved up to ninth place as Sam Posey in the 11 Mirage ran out of fuel on the circuit. In the race records it says: "Driver observed fuel under the fuel pump when tail opened by side of track." Their fastest lap had been 3min 50.23sec, set by Michel Leclère. Sam Posey's fastest was 3min 51.72sec.

The performance of the well-maintained A442-3 was so impressive that by the time darkness fell it was a lap ahead of its Laffite/Depailler sister car. Come midnight, the Renault Sport cars were in first, second and third, albeit on various laps, but the Porsche was still charging hard and went onto the same lap as the number 7 Jaussaud/Tambay car at 1am. However, car 7 was showing the first signs of problems: its engine started to stutter, lose power and emit an alarming plume of smoke, then slowed dramatically. They just managed to get to the pits, having covered 158 laps and 2155.2km. The mechanics set about trying to find the problem. An hour later, Gérard Larrousse was concerned; it looked like piston failure. "Sure, I was concerned – all the three cars for this race were set up almost identically."

THE SPORTS PROTOTYPES - 1973 TO 1978

By the fifth lap, Ickx had already conceded a lap. On the tenth lap, the works 935 stopped for refuelling. 'Moby Dick's' 750bhp swallowed more than 80 litres per 100km, and because tanks were limited to 120 litres in the Group 5 class, its relays were never longer than ten to twelve laps.

At 4.52pm, the radio between Larrousse and Jabouille crackled into life. On his 14th lap, Jabouille felt a suspicious vibration and called in to the pits. After 1min 14sec for refuelling and changing the rear tyres, the A443 went out again with Depailler at the wheel, now in fourth place behind Wollek's 936, which Depailler soon overtook.

At the end of the first hour, the order was as follows: first Pironi, second Jarier, third Depailler, then Wollek, Ragnotti,

Leclère and Schuppan. The Mirages were running OK, but slower than the Renaults at this stage.

By the 20th lap the leading cars had all refuelled – Jarier at 5.08pm (a 1min 06sec stop), and Pironi at 5.11pm (2min 12sec) when he came in with a blockage in the front vents that needed clearing. Ragnotti stopped for fuel at 5.13pm (1min 57sec). Shurti in the Porsche had already pitted twice by then. Taking the lead thanks to the refuelling stops, Depailler went back to his pit on the 24th lap for a wheel change, as the strange vibration was again in evidence. When he set off again at 5.39pm, the mechanics had refuelled the car and fitted new front bodywork. By 6.45pm the problem had been identified as the loss of balancing weights on the wheels, and the A443 was back in fifth

Jarier in car 3. (©R)

