

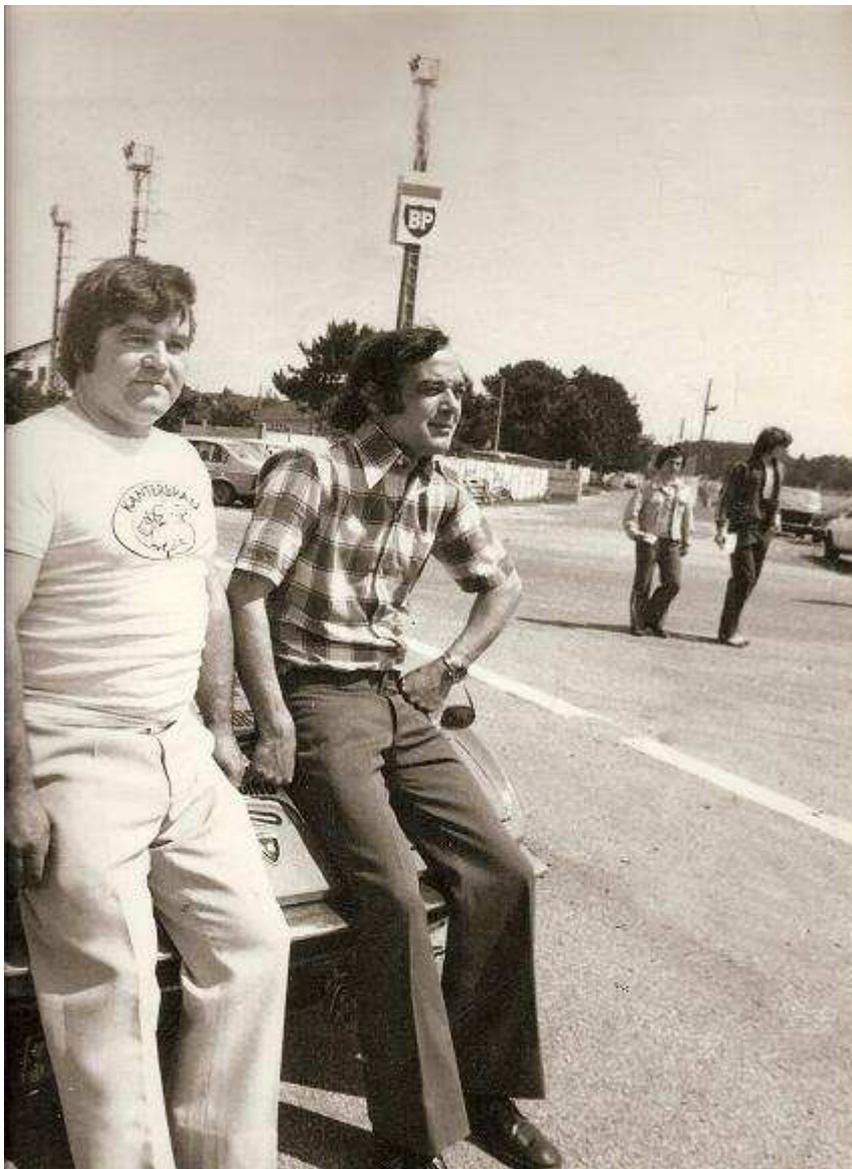
ISLERO LE MANS 1975 – PAUL RILLY

by Olivier Nameche

Back in 1975, the 24 Hours of Le Mans faced its first “internal crisis.” Car categories were technically defined by the FIA, but the ACO managing the Le Mans race decided to restrict fuel consumption due to the international gasoline crisis of the '70s. Therefore, the ACO limited fuel quantities for each category without FIA's approval.

Among these categories was the GTX or Production GT.

A local French team got involved in GTX, Paul Rilly and his friend Roger Levève, to accomplish their common dream: race at Le Mans once in their life.



Paul Rilly, left, and Roger Levève, right.

At first, Rilly planned to run his Ferrari Barchetta, but its engine blew up in March. So he decided to attempt the event with a Porsche 911 and filled in the entry form, ACO document #16086, signed on April 7 1975.

In early February, 1975, Paul Rilly bought Islero #6348 from Garage Europ Sport, near Monthléry race track (south Paris). It was a silver metallic car with black leather interior and meant for his everyday use. Although registered for Le Mans with his 911, he was now dreaming of racing his Lambo instead. That idea led him to contact French Lamborghini importer Garage Thépenier in Paris.

Entranced by Rilly's dream, in late April Thépenier invited him to the Lamborghini factory. There, Rilly also asked Ubaldo Sgarzi if he could borrow a racing car. As everybody knows, the answer was "no way" because the Lamborghini factory does not build racing cars. But, Sgarzi did offer to rent Rilly a special brake kit and a sport suspension to upgrade the Islero's performance, in exchange of a deposit of 15,000 FFR (around 12,000 euro or \$16,800USD at today's rates).

Back in France, Rilly started to piece together his Lamborghini puzzle. The silver color wasn't attractive enough to his taste, so he resprayed it in orange, a BMW 2002 Ti paint code. He also rebuilt the engine. However, the GTX category didn't allow too many modifications: a roll cage, a specific 100-litre fuel tank, harness belt, lighting for the "number" sticker on the door, quick straps for the hood, the upgraded brakes and finally, the suspension.



Rilly's Le Mans Islero and 911

Rilly modified the entry form for the Islero, ACO document #27251, signed on June 2, 1975. Islero would wear N°34.

The official tests started on June 11. Of course, Rilly and Levève were expecting to qualify, but they met with some troubles.

At first, the car was unstable at the end of the long “Hunaudières” straight while hard braking. In the second practice session, Edmond Ciclet (Thépenier importer’s chief mechanic) modified the air boxes in order to increase fresh air flow and tuned the Weber carbs. The following day, Rilly wanted to increase final engine power by replacing the original exhausts with shorter ones from a Ford Capri RS!

This was done without any other modifications. As a result, the Islero lost 1,600 rpm in fifth gear in the Hunaudières. Rilly called importer Thépenier and Edmond Ciclet, who provided instructions by phone to tune the carbs correctly in order to enrich the mix.

The top speed rose to about 265 km/h but a new problem emerged. Because of the racing tires’ ride height and the lowered suspension, the shorter exhausts were hitting asphalt on the curves. Again, the small French team was losing time. As you might imagine, other competitors in the GTX category were much more competitive and the gap separating the Islero from these cars grew wider and wider.



Paul Rilly's Islero at the 1975 Le Mans

Friday afternoon, Rilly left the driving to a Formula 2 racing driver hoping to improve the car's qualification time.

What a mistake...

First of all, lap time did not improve much. More significantly, the driver crashed the Islero on the Armco (safety rails).

Rilly was very disappointed. His mechanics tried to fix the car without success and, later in the afternoon, he received the last qualification time. Officially, the Islero would not start. With his best lap time of 5:28.00, Rilly withdrew, and left Le Mans for home with his Islero on a trailer, while his mechanics took care of his tools.

But worse was yet to come.

Luigi Chinetti, of Ferrari NART, also qualified for the 24-hour race, but, unfortunately one of his Ferraris didn't qualify: N°17 308 GT4 - S category, with a lap time of 4:32.90. He requested the ACO officials to admit his Ferrari and threatened to withdraw all the NART cars if they failed to acquiesce. The ACO refused and the upset Chinetti withdrew all his cars.

For the first time, none of NART cars were on the grid line: N°45 365 GTB/4 in GTS category; N°46 365 GTB/4 and N°99 365 GT4 BB, both in the GTX category.

With the vacuum left by Luigi Chinetti's actions, ACO officials reviewed the unqualified cars in order to fill the vacancies. They decided to accept the Islero in the GTX category

Someone came to Rilly's box to inform him of the decision. One of Paul's friends was still standing there among parts and tools. He tried to relay the great news to Rilly, but given that cell phones were not yet in existence, he was limited to calling Rilly's home many times but no one ever picked up the phone. On Saturday morning, he finally reached Rilly. But it was too late to bring the car back to Le Mans, warm up was already over and another car replaced the Islero.

Rilly's Islero could have been the first Lamborghini to attempt the 24 Hours of Le Mans, no doubt about it. This information was collected and confirmed by one of the senior Le Mans - ACO officials, Hervé Gyuomard.

Our dear colleague Lou Herrin, has been chasing the history of that Islero for the last 25 years, as have I, ever since I read in Serge Bellu's book "Lamborghini," edited by EPA, of Rilly's failed run at the 24 Hours of Le Mans. Since then, I've collected original comments in French magazines about that 1975 Le Mans edition. Journalists uniformly criticized the Islero 400GT entry, citing its age old (6 years), its weight (1,443 kg) and the fact that it was not adapted for such a long distance race.

Earlier this year, I discovered Lou's quest and we exchanged our collected data. The goal was to identify the VIN number of that Islero, because the entry document didn't show any chassis number. Spending months chasing it – I'll not relate you all difficulties or all disappointments I faced. But during my quest, I met Paul Rilly, Edmond Ciclet, spoke to Hervé Gyuomard and many others.

Here is so far its complete story:

Rilly's Islero was the first to be delivered to France. It was sent in early June '68 to French importer VPM (Voitures Paris Monceau).

The first French registration was on July 12, 1968.

French journalist José Rosinski tested it in June while it had 4,000 km on the speedo and published an article in the July 1968 issue of Sport Auto magazine.

He wrote in this article that the Islero was still considered a prototype and the one he tested was one of the first produced. The exterior was light green with a black leather interior, no A/C option. Rosinski wrote that the car handled poorly while braking. Then Mr. Lamy (commercial manager of VPM) asked his chief mechanic Edmond Ciclet to double check this. Ciclet tested it on the road and, unfortunately, wrecked the car. The Islero, however, would be ready by October 1968 to attempt the "Salon de Paris" exhibition. Ciclet went to the factory and spent 3 weeks there in order to have it fixed.

It was the first Islero presented to the French public at the Paris exhibition. Then, it was sold and delivered to an unknown party, and Edmond Ciclet never heard of it again.

The second owner, a Lord residing in the South of France, registered it on October 14, 1971. Apparently the light green colour didn't please him because he changed it to silver. In late '74, he sold it to Garage Europ Sport near Monthléry. Paul Rilly conducted a lot of business with that garage and, when he saw it in December '74, he bought it immediately.

Rilly used it as an everyday car but didn't register it, keeping the previous owner's license plate. By this time, as we know, it was orange. Rilly left the car as it was during the Le Mans qualification, enjoying the exhaust roar ... until he got a ticket for the noisy exhaust. He was obliged to register it in his name by the end of '75.

Finally he sold the car back to Garage Europ Sport at the end of the first trimester of '77.

The Islero was sold to someone named David living in the Paris area in 1977. That young man didn't register it either, keeping Rilly's license plate. A year or two later, he came back to that garage to buy a Jaguar or a Porsche, and the Islero was sold again. The young man committed suicide in the late '80s. At that point, that particular trail runs cold.

However, in the course of my research, I've discovered another Islero 400 GT orange in the Netherlands, leading me to speculate that it is the same car. It earlier had a silver exterior with a black leather interior and evidently came from France. However, I was disappointed to discover this car has no evidence of racing upgrade although I've noticed that, on the French title, it was registered in the Le Mans area. Its VIN chassis is #6348. In fact, the doctor who bought it in December '76 saw Rilly's car at the 24 Hours qualification, which was one of the reasons he wanted the car, which looked like the original racing Lambo. He sold it to a car trader in Dijon, Mr. Lalane. Then, Edmond Perry – a Belgian collector – bought it to that car trader and imported it to Belgium. Perry sold it straight away to Mr. Genarolli, a Belgian aristocrat, who stored it among his collection for the last 29 years. Pretty confusing, isn't it?

Now you may wonder how can I be 100% sure of Rilly's Islero VIN number.

Among all the trails and information collected was a letter I received which was an official document from French authorities. This letter attests to and matches the registration license plate written on one of the ACO documents to VIN #6009.

Paul Rilly helped me a lot providing me also with copies of all the ACO documents he's always held.



Paul Rilly today

We will have a thought for his friend, Roger Levève, who died unfortunately in a 1994 car accident.

My quest is not finished by now. I'm still chasing #6009 because it crossed "my road" one day. My father just collected his Jarama GTS in the beginning of 1977. While in France for a weekend trip ,we encountered Rilly and his Islero, without knowing what Paul did earlier in '75.

The young kid I was then never thought some 30 years later he would be chasing that car. With my racing experience, my goal is to race it again as it deserves recognition in Historic events like the Le Mans Classic. So if somebody can be of any help in locating it, if it still exists, that would be fantastic.

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