**A roller coaster ride is far less exciting**

**In the following interview, the head of organization, Hanns-Martin Fraas, reviews the eventful past of Rad am Ring since 2003, offering a behind-the-scenes look at the event and sharing personal experiences. The facts can be used in excerpts for reports about Rad am Ring. Please do not take statements out of context.**

Q: How did you come up with the idea of organizing a 24-hour race for cyclists on the Nürburgring?

HM: The original idea was not mine, but Alexander Donike’s, our race director and now a very good friend of mine. He came to the Nürburgring in 2002. At that time, I was the marketing and sales director of Ring GmbH and immediately enthusiastic about the idea.

Q: Because you are a passionate road cyclist.

HM: No. I didn’t know anything about cycling. Alexander, on the other hand, knew a lot about it. But I had experienced the emotional intensity of a 24-hour race with motorcycles myself and especially the emotional intensity of the Nürburgring. I knew that this idea had tremendous potential.

Q: And it became a success story!?

HM: Yes, but only after many years.

Q: What were the obstacles and problems in the early years?

HM: In 2003, Nürburgring GmbH was still the organizer and structurally simply not suited for it. In 2004, I took over the organization of Rad & Run am Ring with my own agency and with the support of the local cycling club RC Herschbroich. This improved the structures, but the event concept still had weaknesses.

Q: Because the Nürburgringlauf (Nürburgring run) was still integrated into Rad & Run am Ring at the beginning?

HM: There was quickly a consensus that the 24-hour race would be the emotional centerpiece of the event. However, no one anticipated that the 24-hour race would ever attract so many participants that it could also become an economic pillar. Initially, we focused on initiating a multidisciplinary running and cycling festival. Besides the traditional Nürburgringlauf (Nürburgring run), there were also offers for inline skaters, walkers, Nordic walkers, and even hikers. Plus, a variety of cycling disciplines. We fundamentally got bogged down and produced high costs for few participants. The individual discipline ideas were not bad, but economically not very successful.

Q: So, the Nürburgringlauf (Nürburgring run) fell victim to economic considerations?

HM: Basically yes, but not until 2015. Between 2010 and 2015, we significantly streamlined the events offered. The cycling disciplines were reduced roughly to today’s level, and only three running distances between 5 and 24.4 kilometers remained for the Nürburgringlauf (Nürburgring run). Sometimes we made massive changes from one year to the next. While we could thus distinguish Rad am Ring as a unique experience for cyclists, the Nürburgringlauf (Nürburgring run) faced very strong competition due to the boom of city marathons. In 2015, we decided to focus entirely on cycling for future events. The participant numbers had long since shifted in favor of cycling, and we saw the risk of delivering comparatively poor work in the running segment in the future.

Q: By 2015, the 24-hour race already dominated the event – also in terms of participant numbers. How did the development process from a PR stunt to a top event with thousands of participants unfold?

HM: In waves! Until 2015, we reinvented Rad am Ring almost every year. It was more exciting than a roller coaster ride, and sometimes it really made us dizzy.

Q: Can you elaborate on that?

HM: In 2003, no one had thought about the fact that it gets dark at night. So we quickly had to allow escort vehicles on the track for all participants. In 2006, we had a German championship in inline skating on the program and had to live with the fact that a large part of the starters could not handle the topography of the Grand Prix track. In 2008, we switched to a registration system that we largely operated and supported ourselves – often until 4 a.m. before the event. When the lots were not yet bookable online, Andreas, our then-employee, sat in the office for 30 hours straight to place teams with a total of around 2,000 participants next to each other as desired. Back when we did not yet send the access passes by mail in advance, the access to the Nürburgring would be blocked for eight hours on the arrival day. We used to mark the parcels with chalk, which was not very helpful in in 2007 when we had heavy rain. In 2008, financial crisis hit, in 2012 the Nürburgring crisis, in 2013 we were facing freak weather, and then Corona stroke and posed continuing challenges until 2022. We survived economically thanks to the help of our participants and the government’s interim aid. The psychological challenge was harder to digest. And this is a mega-short version of what was going on.

Q: Did the participant numbers of the 24-hour race develop evenly?

HM: In 2003, we had 70 entries for the 24-hour race. At that time, it only existed as road bike version. The development stages were 300, 600, 1200, 1500, and then at some point over 2,000 participants. In 2010, we broke the 4,000-mark for the first time, and now we welcome over 6,000 24-hour participants per year.

Q: How did this affect the on-site planning?

HM: At first, all participants camped in the pits, later the paddock was added, and today we occupy almost the entire Grand Prix course. We had to adapt the planning year after year, and it became increasingly complex. In the early years, we met on-site on Thursday before the event, looked deeply into each other’s eyes, and asked, “What was the plan again?” Meanwhile, the entire planning is completed in October of the previous year, and we only adjust details. Due to the complexity of the event, this is already challenging enough.

Q: Are plans from 10 years ago still valid?

HM: Not so much. The development until 2016 was very dynamic overall. Since 2018, we have not changed much with regard to disciplines, schedule, and overall processes. So, plans can be continued.

Q: Does this mean less dynamism in the future?

HM: Regarding fundamental changes, yes! Everyone involved – organizers, volunteers, and participants – need certain routines for such a complex event to run smoothly and to remain in control when crisis hits. However, we continue to develop in nuances. A bit more service here, clearer communication there, and we must not forget the zeitgeist and market developments. Therefore, a lot will change in 2025.

Q: Will there be new disciplines in 2025?

HM: Absolutely! We are planning a gravel race around the Nordschleife with a lap length of about 26 kilometers and around 560 meters of elevation. The course will repeatedly return from off-road segments to the legendary Nordschleife, combining off-road fun with the Nürburgring myth. There will be races with different numbers of laps. We have enlisted Paul Voß as an advisor and testimonial. He participated in the Tour de France, won the first Rudi Altig Race at the Nürburgring, and is currently one of the most well-known gravel racers in Germany. However, there will no longer be a 24-hour mountain bike race.

Q: Why not?

HM: The participant numbers always amounted only to about 10 percent of the road bike participant numbers. And they have been declining since 2018. This is not due to the lack of attractiveness of this discipline in general, but rather because the Nordschleife is unique worldwide, and the experience there is unbeatable. Many mountain bikers ride road bikes at Rad am Ring.

Q: The 24-hour race is unique in the world, but not the only discipline at Rad am Ring. Where other disciplines do you focus on?

HM: We see ourselves as a multidisciplinary cycling festival. We’ve got offers for road cyclists, mountain bikers, or gravel bikers, and touring ride enthusiasts.

Q: Why is Rad am Ring nevertheless perceived by many mainly as a road cycling event?

HM: Because we have a unique selling point worldwide with the 24-hour race on the legendary Nürburgring Nordschleife. We also offer so-called “Jedermann”races (amateur races open to everyone) over 25, 75, and 150 kilometers, as well as touring rides on this fascinating course. They’ve meanwhile come to account for over 80 percent of all participants.

Q: What does touring rides mean?

HM: The Nürburgring with its fascinating Formula 1 arena and the legendary Nordschleife is fascinating. Period. It is always worth experiencing. Therefore, we offer time slots for e-bikes and touring bikes to ride the track stress-free and enjoy the atmosphere. Also some supporting program comes with tour offers, an action stage, and a catering area, not to mention the tourist offer of the Nürburgring. So, you can have fun for a day even without slipstream games, bend chases, and out-of-the-saddle efforts.

Q: What changes do you expect in the next few years?

HM: The most important thing for now is that we have planning security. Our contract at the Nürburgring has been extended until 2028, and both partners do not see this as the end of our cooperation. At the moment, we are noticing that road cycling is on the rise and that gravel biking is establishing itself as a new racing discipline. We have record numbers at the 24-hour race and are fully booked for the first time in 2024. For the road cycling disciplines, we can very likely expect stability in the coming years. The Gravel Race could develop further, maybe soon even reach three-digit participant numbers. I see great potential in the touring segment as well. So, in terms of disciplines, we are quite well-positioned. Organizationally, we need to maintain our high level. There are constantly new digital solutions, which need to be examined, adapted, and used to keep our organizational and service levels up to date.

**Vaihingen-Enz, July 1st, 2024**