

THE THRILL OF THE RACE AT '24 Heures Du Mans' **By Tom O'Neill**

24 Hours Le Mans – it's one of the oldest, longest, and most prestigious car races in the world. It is to Europe what the Indianapolis 500 is to the United States. The name itself conjures up a special kind of magic, I decided to treat you, the reader, to a firsthand account of the famous race.

24 Heures du Mans is an almost indescribable scene of glamour, pageantry, excitement, and merrymaking. Mix in the quaint French countryside with the magic of a spectacle that draws a quarter of a million people from all over the globe, and you have an unrivaled happening. Some of the world's most exotic sports cars, painted with brilliant designs and bright logos of the sponsors, thunder through the rolling hills and forests of rural France at speeds as high as 240 mph.

It's a festival of speed where a county fair atmosphere meets a Renoir-like setting, a swirl of activity that goes on around the clock for almost a week, culminating with the race, which begins at 4 pm one on Saturday and ends a grueling 24 hours later. This year, the week's festivities began on Monday, June 13, and ended the following Sunday after the cars had travelled a distance roughly equivalent to the trip from San Francisco to New York.

Why should you care about a car race in France? Virtually all of the technical developments that make our cars so safe and comfortable come from this type of racing. In the quest for speed, manufacturers figure out how to make cars faster, stronger, and safer. Disk brakes, ABS brakes, traction control, power-assisted steering, computer monitoring and engine control, steel-belted tires, structural integrity, and more are all on the list of safety and convenience features that find their way to the cars we drive every

day. Without this type of racing, it is unlikely that most of these things that we take for granted would exist.

For me, a trip to LeMans is a dream come true, one that I've had since I was a freshman in high school in St. Paul, Minnesota. Scrolling back, the year is 1955. My vision of the world extends maybe 100 miles in any direction. I happened upon an obscure little magazine called Road & Track. It tells stories about exotic cars and even more exotic places where these cars race.

I knew Europe as the continent across the ocean where World War II took place. It was only 10 years since the end of the war, and I had seen Europe on the Movietone News as a devastated, backwards place. Yet these articles suggest that the most sophisticated cars in the world race there. And unlike American races, which are around closed tracks, these races are on open roads and through towns. One name leaps off the pages as the ultimate in European road racing – LeMans – a car race that goes nonstop for 24 hours! Is that possible?

Fast forward 50 years, and I am now in the lush green countryside of central France, an hour and forty-five minutes fast drive from Paris, on the northern reaches of the Loire Valley. Because I started planning late, I have been unable to secure a hotel room, so I am living this dream the way I envisioned it as a kid – camping out in a rented van.

The first race was in 1922 and had a field of 35 cars with Bentley the only recognizable name to the average car enthusiast today. The race was suspended in 1939, and when it resumed in 1949, 49 cars were entered. The winner was Ferrari. This year there are 50 cars with names that we see on Tiburon Boulevard and know well – Audi, Porsche, Ferrari, Chevrolet Corvette and Aston Martin.

There are three classes of cars in the race. The first, Prototypes, look almost like spacecraft in design. Some are from manufacturers like Audi, but are not cars you will ever see on the street. The out-of-pocket cost for the American team racing an Audi R8 Prototype is about \$2 million for this one race.

The most interesting class for me is the GT1 group, a Grand touring class. These are Corvettes, Aston Martins, Ferraris, and Porsches. They are pure race cars, akin to cars you can buy from local dealers in sheet metal skin and name badge only, and they are fun to watch because they look just like something you and I could actually own. While slightly slower than the Prototype cars, they easily reach 200 mph.

The final class is the GT2 group, which includes Porsches, smaller-engine Ferraris and cars from an American manufacturer called Panoz. They too look like vehicles we might drive, but are also pure race cars in this venue.

For Americans the thrill of Le Mans is open-road racing. The proportions are staggering. The roadways constituting the track are more than eight miles around. The inside of the track is so big that it contains farmland and many homes. There is an amusement park with spectacular rides and a village of concession stands that run for 24 hours a day, providing French, Italian, English, and German foods. Bar tents dispense beer at a rate that almost rivals Oktoberfest in Munich.

Over the village streets and narrow country roads surrounding the Carnival scene, the screaming engines transform this normally serene setting into a frenzy of power, speed, and danger. Spectators who manage to sneak close enough to the track feel overwhelmed by the sensation of cars streaming down the famous Mulsanne Straights at more than 200 mph. In contrast, down at the Arnage Corner, the cars are hunkered down in gut-wrenching braking to

get through this corner at about 50 mph before disappearing up the road to the next curve.

It is hard to conceive that cars can run at race speeds for 24 hours. During that time each car will have four to six driver changes, and the engines will turn over some eight million revolutions. The thing that makes a long-distance race so unique is that a car can suffer a fairly serious crash, be rebuilt within an hour or so and still win the race.

It is the nighttime that really bedazzles the spectator. The speed and sounds remain the same, but the visual sensations become almost psychedelic. The flashing headlights searching the dark roadways and the trails of red tail lamps create a kaleidoscope of light that trails off into the damp night air, bewildering the senses. Fire that you didn't see in the daytime belches from the tailpipes, and the brake rotors glow red-hot like molten steel. It is all quite unimaginable until you actually see it.

Finally, it's Sunday night, and it's all over. By Monday morning, the roads surrounding LeMans will be back to normal, and the people of LeMans will be cleaning their streets and returning to peaceful lives in the upper Loire Valley – until next year, when it will all happen again.

RINGSIDE AT THE BIG RACE

**More on the Thundering Excitement of Le Mans.....
By Tom O'Neill**

To continue last week's story of my experience at the 24 Hour Race of Le Mans, I arrive on site at about 7 pm on June 15.

Two spots of luck added dimension to the trip. First, because all accommodations within fifty miles of the track are full, I decide to try anyway and adjust to circumstances as I go.

A rented SUV becomes my hotel room, and for the other basics – food, washing and other necessities – I will figure it out as the needs arise. This turns out to be the key to really seeing and experiencing this great event, because it's the 24-hour festivities that go on in the campgrounds that provide a backdrop to the race and that aren't available to people who stay in hotels.

There are upwards of 100,000 people in half a dozen camping areas which form an international enclave of British, Italians, Scandinavians, Germans, Americans, Spanish, Dutch, Swiss and French. The common language spoken here is carspeak. The common food is sausage on the Barbie, and the mainstay beverage is beer. One British group two camp spots from me that numbers about 30 people of obvious affluent means, judging from their cars, have a huge bar tent with an actual wooden bar and beer drafts to dispense the 15 thirty-gallon kegs they brought with them.

While buying my event ticket the first day, the second bit of luck occurs. Waiting in line I strike up a conversation with an English chap who invites me to join him and his two friends in their camp. This is their sixth trip to LeMans and, as serious race fans, they

have scoped out every possible trick to managing a race event of such huge proportion. Their knowledge and generosity afforded me opportunities I would never have encountered on my own.

On Wednesday the 15th and Thursday, practice and qualifying runs go from 7 pm to midnight. When they finish we head to the village for dinner and beers returning to the camp at around 2:30 in the morning. It's so warm out that I toss my sleeping bag on the grass and crash for a few hours until sunup. Initially, falling asleep is hard because of the cacophony – music, loud talk, fireworks, and roaring car engines – that rages on through the night.

Dawn comes early as I am about 10 degrees of latitude north of Tiburon. This pace will go on for the next couple of days and then get more frenetic on race day.

On Friday night we attend a traditional event that would send our local police into spasms. The Brits tell me it is a wild event, somewhat dangerous and a must see.

When we arrive I can't believe what I see or that I am actually in the midst of it. There are probably 10,000 people packed shoulder to shoulder and 20 people deep, pressed up to the pavement surrounding a large traffic roundabout. What happens next is analogous to a bullfight in Madrid. Participants in fast cars (the bull) come speeding into the roundabout and circle it as fast as they can. The more out of control, the more sliding and squealing of tires, the more the crowd shrieks with delight.

At times cars slide within a few feet of the packed crowd, eliciting riotous approval from the spectators (the matadors) without even causing a flinch from the people almost crunched by the wannabe racers. The gendarmes stand by, talking nonchalantly as if this is quite a normal event for a summer Friday night. Good judgment prevailed, and I withdraw from potential death after watching a

couple of cars pirouette around the circle almost crashing into the crowd. Try this at our own roundabout at paradise Drive and you would get a free ride to the Civic center from our boys in blue.

Saturday – Race Day – dawns hot and humid. By four pm race time It's in the mid-90s. My new English friends and I spend the next several hours going from one vantage point to another to watch. The racecourse is so big that it takes real stamina to view the action from the many vantage points. There is one, however, that will forever stand out in my memory – the Mulsanne Straight. Initially, I am disappointed that this section is no longer open to spectators. My English friends, however, know a secret path through the wooded property of an abandoned farm. We sneak through it and approach the track in a remote stretch of the straight. I am a kid again, doing something mischievous like I did 50 years ago at the Road America track in Wisconsin.

Standing no more than 5 feet off the famous straightaway, the sensation of cars racing by at over 200 mph is overwhelming. Famous in racing lore, this section of the LeMans road is almost dead straight for over three miles, providing some of the fastest sustained race speeds of any course in the world. We climb an old iron gate and stand precariously, feet wedged into its rusty cross members, 3 feet away from the thundering cars.

I am almost dumbstruck as the first Prototype comes up the roadway, like an earthbound airplane. It screams by – a rush of wind and ear-splitting banshee sound that is almost disorienting to my senses. Other cars whip by, then the beautiful form of an Aston Martin comes into view and rockets toward me like a bullet. Within seconds the ground-pounding throb of the Corvette gets my attention even before I can see it. It flashes by in a blur of yellow.

We are spotted by some track workers in the distance who us wave off our private spot. Like kids stealing watermelons, we scamper

away into the woods before the gendarmes come to shag us away. Dangerous as this escapade may have been, we are silly with the satisfaction of being five people out of some 200,000 to have experienced this view.

It's the nighttime, though, when sound transforms the speed of the cars to fill your senses with an almost horror show like forbidding. Unlike normal sound that comes to you from somewhere identifiable, the sound of LeMans at night becomes a meditation-like mantra that comes from nowhere and everywhere at once. It's no longer heard but felt. Lying down to sleep for a few hours at about 3:30 in the morning, the sound provides a rhythm that takes me initially seems to keep me awake, but followed by deep exhausted sleep.

The race within the race that has developed through the night is between the Aston Martins and the Corvettes. Qualifying has put the Aston Martins in first and second on the starting grid. Corvettes are third and fifth, with Ferrari in between. The two Astons jump out in the lead and hold it for hours. The Corvettes rather quickly dispatch the Ferrari and for the next 23 hours, the Astons and the Corvettes run nose to tail exchanging the lead continuously. It is Beyond comprehension how two cars can go at race speed for 23 hours and stay with seconds of each other!

By the race end, many cars have fallen by the wayside, but these four cars punish each other in an all or nothing struggle for victory. The Astons and Corvettes relentlessly dog each other, like a trombone and clarinet clamoring out a symphony that is harmonic only in its fierceness of sound and the grit of its orchestration. For much of the race all four cars run on the same lap within only a tenth of a second of each other in lap times. But, with less than one hour to go, disaster strikes.

One Aston is stopped on the track with fuel flow problems and is never to return. Almost simultaneously the other Aston is in the pits with overheating problems for both the engine and the driver. The radiator is changed and the driver is doused with water to cool him down. The Corvettes thunder on relentlessly, now firmly in first and second place. The last Aston struggles back onto the track to finish the race in third place in class, but now six laps behind the Corvette juggernaut.

The Corvettes take the checkered flag running side by side, first and second in class and fifth and sixth overall. It's a devastating blow to the Aston Martin team but demonstrates that they pose a serious challenge to the dominating Corvette cars. The brute force of the Corvettes has just won Le Mans for the fourth year.

After the race, the two-lane country roads are clogged with happy, tired people. It takes nearly six hours to get to Paris for a shower and the luxury of a bed that I have not experienced in five days. My dream is over and it's been all that I thought it would be. I have lived like a kid for five days, seen the greatest car race in the world, developed a wonderful relationship with three new British chaps, and come away with memories that will bring me joy forever!