

24 HOURS OF LE MANS – IT'S MUCH MORE THAN A RACE

By Dan Sokol © 2005

There I was, immersed in a fantasy last June. Foot to the floor, revs rocketing up the tach and rapidly reeling in the speck that was the car in front of me on Le Mans' Mulsanne Straight. The engine in my Porsche GT3 RSR screamed as I hit redline and snicked the gearbox into the next gear throwing me back in my seat. Would I catch him before the Michelin Chicane, second of the two chicanes added in 1990 to slow the speeds of the fastest cars below 230 mph? If not, could I maintain enough exit speed and have the power to pass before we had to brake hard for the almost hairpin Mulsanne Corner?

As I came up on the car I was chasing in less time than I had thought, I was forced back to reality. It was just a Volvo 4 banger station wagon with a family of tourists leisurely cruising along probably the most famous stretch of two lane public road in the racing world. Okay, so I was not driving a Porsche race car. My not quite screaming, but nonetheless redlined engine was the 1.6 liter diesel in my rented Peugeot 407 sedan. None of that really mattered because I really was in Le Mans, France. The 73rd running of the 24 Heures du Mans had ended at about 4:00 p.m. the preceding day. If I closed my eyes I could still see and hear the incomparable sights and sounds of a field of some of the fastest road racing cars ever built, driven by some of the best drivers in the world, racing through the daylight into the night and then back into the next day. In my mind I could still feel the heat from the cars and see the red hot glowing brake rotors as the cars emerged from the midnight blackness of Indianapolis Corner and hurtled, with their super bright lights momentary restoring daylight, into Arnage Corner where I had watched from perhaps 20 feet off the track. As dessert after that automotive feast, here I was actually driving the Mulsanne Straight, braking and down shifting into Indianapolis and accelerating as fast as discretion (and that little diesel) allowed into Arnage, the sharp right hander for which Bentley named its fastest model.

It was all there. The names I'd read about in the car mags since I was a kid. Dunlop Bridge, Tertre Rouge, Porsche Curve, and yes, there were the Ferraris, Porsches, Bentleys, Maseratis, Ford GT40s, and even Sir Stirling Moss who drove in the "Le Mans Legend" support race and graciously signed autographs.



ALEX JOB RACING'S GT3 RSR TOOK 1st IN THE GT2 CLASS



FLYING LIZARD MOTORSPORTS FINISHED 3rd IN GT2

Of course the Le Mans “newbies” were there too. GM’s two factory Corvette C6-Rs with their perfectly orchestrated and obviously well financed teams dominated GT1 holding back serious challenges from the virgin Aston Martin factory race teams to the delight of the Yanks and the frustration of the Brits in the stands. Indeed, it was a very good day for the American teams. The US LM1 Champion Audi R8 team was first overall, racing more than 3,000 miles and stopping for a total of just 30 minutes for fuel, tires, maintenance, repairs and driver changes during the 24 hours. The first three GT2 finishers were Porsche GT3RSRs entered by American teams: Alex Job Racing, White Lightning Racing and Flying Lizard Motorsports.

It was quite inspiring to see our flag raised and our anthem played again and again at a French racetrack as the winners took the podium in three of the four classes.



AMERICAN FLAGS WAVE AS THE CORVETTES WON THEIR CLASS

I had come to Le Mans together with a fellow STL Region PCAer and an international group of 30 other Porschephiles from as far away from France as California and as close as Switzerland. Our common denominator was membership in *Hey Wait For Me Racing*, a “virtual” race team that originated for fun on the Porsche enthusiasts’ website, Rennlist.com. The group had booked out a nearby Chateau which turned out to be French for “very large old house with bats” and a much nicer B&B across the road. Despite the housing deficiencies, the experience, including the picturesque countryside, the twisty back roads, and the friendly locals, was simply amazing.



PORSCHE MOTORSPORT PROVIDED RACE SUPPORT SERVICES



JUST A FEW OF THE MANY MICHELIN TRUCKS FILLED WITH TIRES

The area surrounding Le Mans was buzzing with car nuts from around the world, although most were from the EU. The reported 50,000 English enthusiasts who drive down each year arrived in hordes of old MGs, Triumphs, Jags, and Morgans as well as newer TVRs and Super Sevens. Exotics from Ferrari, Lamborghini, and Aston Martin were regularly parked outside the Hotel de France, a famous race driver hangout filled with priceless Le Mans memorabilia and serving among the best Crème Brulee to be found. Oddly, there were fewer Porsche's on the roads than are seen on an average day on Rodeo Drive.

A "must see" is the Le Mans museum just outside the track. It is filled with many of the actual cars that raced at Le Mans over the decades, as well as other cars of historic importance. Porsche's race winning Le Mans experience was well represented.



THIS PORSCHE 911 GT1 TOOK 1st OVERALL AT LE MANS IN 1998

Although the Le Mans museum had been packed on the days prior and during the race, we were among just a handful of people visiting the day after the race. As a result we were able to convince a young staffer (who turned out to be quite a knowledgeable racing enthusiast) to allow us to lift the body of the 1971 Martini Racing Porsche 917 LH to examine its 5 liter, 12 cylinder engine and to open its doors for a better view of the well worn cockpit. That historic car holds the Le Mans absolute distance record, covering 3,313 miles at an hourly average of 138 mph set in 1971.



12 CYLINDER ENGINE OF PORSCHE 917 LH No. 21: 1971 MARTINI RACING TEAM

A trip to the 24 Hours of Le Mans involves more than a long race. It is an automotive experience unlike any other I could imagine. If you ever get the chance to go, don't hesitate. It's a car lover's Nirvana.