

Road Racing: Le Mans Adventure
French Fantasy
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If you can see only one 24-hour race in your life, make it Le Mans!

When I left for Le Mans last June, I had no idea of just what I was getting myself into. Oh sure, I was going to one of the two most prestigious motor races in the world – the other being the Indy 500, or the pre-1995 version of the 500 anyway! – to do something I love, attend a motor racing event and report on it.

I had all the necessary qualifications and I had ensured that I would have all the right credentials. So I was basically going to work!

Well, not quite...

Before I experienced Le Mans firsthand, the race was a series of mental images from the 1971 Steve McQueen movie of the same name – the infamous pink Porsche 917, the restaurant on the Hunaudière Straight, better known as the Mulsanne Straight, the fiery crash in the night. Then there was Michel Vaillant, a comic strip character who drove racecars and was a regular participant to the 24 Hour race. To my great surprise, there actually was a Vaillant car taking part last year!

There were also the photographs and race footage I had seen throughout the years.

The actual experience turned out to be all this and more. Les 24 Heures du Mans is quite an overwhelming experience. I have been to a lot of races in my short life, but nothing compares to Le Mans, nothing.

Le Mans is a 16th Century city with a huge cathedral in the center of its old section, and streets barely wide enough for two Renault Clio to drive side by side.

A driver's parade took place downtown during the week prior to the race. The racers were carted around in turn of the century Bentleys – 150 Bentleys, mostly from the 1920's, just happened to be in Le Mans for a reunion – and turned the whole downtown area into a massive parking lot.

One of the things that I didn't realize was that the qualifying sessions were staged at the end of the day, from 7:00 to 9:00 PM and 10:00 to midnight. You see, the Hunaudière Straight is actually part of a Route Nationale – secondary road - and as such, people use it to conduct business during the day. Consequently, the road must stay open until 6:00 PM before the organizing body, the A.C.O., can turn it into a race track. Amazingly, the whole process takes less than an hour thanks to the well-groomed technical teams and the assistance of the local Gendarmes (police).

The track is in absolutely splendid shape. I had the opportunity to drive it with my rent-a-racer and one cannot find a ripple in the surface, not even on the public road sections. I simply do not know how they do it. Granted, their winters are a far cry from the ones we experience in Canada, but their paving companies...well!!!!

And just to give you an idea of the size of the track, it is 13.605 km long and there is a forest with roads in the middle. At times, we were at such a distance from the actual race track that the whole place went quiet. And then, just around a corner, the cars roared by at more than 300km/h. That's fast, I don't care where you are standing.

Tricky to See

As qualifying starts, the first couple of hours are driven in relatively cool weather, the sun having sunk on the horizon. This does make it tricky to see, as one drives right into the setting sun, and apparently drivers do get used to not seeing the actual track momentarily, and felling their way around instead. Although spectacular because of the top speeds, this is something one becomes more or less accustomed to.

Night qualifying, on the other hand is totally awe-inspiring. The cars all have different light configurations, which makes them easier to recognize from far away. The GT2 cars have yellow lights, and both the GT1 and Prototype competitors have white lights. Some manufacturers even put colored lights on the sides of their cars to make it easier to distinguish them. The light show is quite awesome and makes for great photography if one is so inclined.

The sounds are very distinctive, from the big bad normally aspirated V8s (Panoz, Mustang, Marcos) to turbocharged flat 6s (Porsche), V6s (Nissan) and V8s(Nissan). There are V10s (Viper) and 12-cylinder (Ferrari, McLaren) configurations also.

Each sound is very distinctive and leaves a very different impression as the vibration takes hold of your whole being.

I will never forget the second night of qualifying, as we were sitting literally two meters from the track for dinner! We had made reservations in the Restaurant de Hunaudières, situated right alongside the straight. As we neared the restaurant, I immediately had a sense of déjà vu. But having been to Europe on a number of occasions, one sees a lot of small eating establishments, which tend to look alike.

Once inside, however, the whole place immediately looked very familiar, including a picture frame on the dining room wall. Steve McQueen and a Hollywood crew had spent nine months in the area filming "Le Mans" in 1971, and as the restaurant was conveniently located, it became one of their watering holes and made it into the movie.

The food and wine were, by French standards, "mezzo-mezzo", but the atmosphere was beyond compare. The "steak frites" barely needed chewing to find its way down with the vibration of the cars whizzing by. I could just image what it was like prior to 1988, when

two chicanes were installed to slow the cars down and the highest speed reached on this straight was 405km/h. These days, the cars pass by the restaurant at a much slower 300!

Only in France...pity!

Once the grid is set after qualifying on Wednesday and Thursday, there is no more race activity at the track before the 24 Hours starts at 4:00 on Saturday afternoon. Thus, Friday becomes a "touristy" kind of day where everyone can catch up in preparation of the race or go on a tour of the area and take in the sites. We went on a tour of the original Le Mans circuit, which actually brought the cars right into the town, and finished our excursion at Le Musée de l'Automobile, which is the French equivalent of the famed Museum of Motor Racing at Donnington Park in England.

That evening, we were invited for dinner by the Porsche factory team to meet with its drivers and top race management for an informal talk. Everyone was most cordial and quite forward with information about the new and improved GT1 cars.

The conversation took us into the finer points of handling, suspension set up, chassis safety, and with Hans Stuck, a look on the lighter side of motor racing. "Stucky" has quite a sense of humor and likes very much to be the center of attention. But who said motor racing had to be serious?

I also had the privilege of speaking at length with Bob Wollek, a racing legend who has competed at Le Mans for 27 years without ever winning the 24 Hours.

This French racer is a gentleman, accomplished racer and interesting character. He bicycles close to 700 km from his home in Strasbourg, in the Alsace region of France to the race track every year.

The track denied Bob once more in 1997. He suffered a crash in the wee hours of the morning after coming together with a backmarker. The car was too badly damaged to continue and Wollek was sidelined after leading the race for most the 16 hours he was driving.

He said he will be back, and as long as he finds enjoyment in driving, he will continue to do so.

Interestingly, although Wollek is as fast as the other drivers on his team, he manages to get two or three more laps than them out of a tank of fuel, which he invariably turns to an advantage.

Road havoc

On the Saturday before the race, all kinds of activities are organized and it is virtually impossible to get to the track quickly, unless you walk or bicycle. We got caught in the frenzy and the 10 minute trip from our hotel to the track turned into two and a half hours!

The reason for this road havoc is the flurry of pre-race activities. The fair is in full swing and one can barely see the front straight as the people invade the track for the chance to get an autograph, see a celebrity or immerse themselves in the crowd, which is just what I did. I hadn't seen so many people in a long, long time and at times I just had to go with the flow, literally.

The crowd was mesmerized as a team of French paratroopers flying those beautiful modern rectangular parachutes landed on their feet, right on the front straight, the crowd parted just in time for each man to land, and immediately engulfed him thereafter. One would never see that in North America – too much liability.

The days of the famous Le Mans start, where the drivers stood across the track from their cars, ran to them, hopped in, started the engine and roared away, are long gone, but a remnant still exists. Before the start, the cars are all parked diagonally on the straight, across from the pit lane, in the same formation as in days gone by. One can see the cars and drivers up close – eat your heart out F1 fans – to chat informally or get photos and autographs. The whole thing seems so anachronistic, yet is thoroughly enjoyable.

The rolling start itself is quite spectacular as 48 cars take the French National flag to go racing. The cars jockey for position as they wind their way up to the traditional Dunlop Bridge turn, but more as posturing than to gain any real advantage. After all, this is the start to a 24-hour race and gaining one position on the opening lap is not as critical as it is in a sprint race. Nonetheless, once the racing starts, the bulls*** stops, as they say in racing circles!

The race is one of strategy and endurance. Little victories are won against the ever fragile mechanical and human elements, bitter defeats are dealt due to human error or unfaithful mounts. Most of all, the 24 Hours of Le Mans is a tribute to history. The race has been run since 1906 and is a battle of man and machine against time.

As the race progresses through the night it settles into a more regular pace. The pit stops in the night are especially beautiful, even magical, as the cars pull into a completely lit up area, only to vanish into relative darkness a few minutes later.

The grandstand attendance starts to thin out around 11:00 at night, but the diehard fans will stay up all night, by hook or by crook. And there are plenty of things to do to distract fatigue, which invariably sets in about 1:00 in the morning. The fair and the village are abuzz with activity all night and this is definitely the place to watch the race and entertain oneself at the same time.

This year, the pace of the race is infernal, even through the night, and the racers are already three full laps ahead of the 1996 running of the event at the halfway point. By the time the checkered flag drops, the winning car will have completed seven more laps than the previous year's race total.

As Yannick Dalmas, driver of one of the leading Porsche 911 GT1s throughout the night, said, "The pace is just insane. One would never think this is an endurance race, certainly not a 24-hour race. It feels like an extended sprint. I fear the cars might not hold up. Although we did run two full 24-hour race lengths test days before this, we never anticipated it would be this fast."

Sadly, his prophecy would come true. The #26 Porsche GT1 blew an oil line barely two hours before the end of the event.

After the racing and the celebrations are over, one cannot help but think back to the sheer size of the undertaking. The whole event is very well run and although there were more than 2,100 media representatives present at this year's race, the staff treated each one with great hospitality, taking the time to listen and help whenever it was required. It was a truly refreshing attitude.

For North American racing fans who might be interested, and in a position to indulge, the 77th running of the 24 Hours of Le Mans in 1998 will not clash with the Canadian Grand Prix for the first time in seven years. So it will be possible to see the Monaco Grand Prix at the end of May, then Le Mans and travel back home in time for the Canadian Grand Prix.

Now there's an idea!

Repeat Performance

The 1997 edition of the 24 Hours of Le Mans promised to be very special and competitive. Porsche returned with a factory team for only the second time since 1988, fielding a pair of 911 GT1s. Nissan produced a dominant qualifying performance, the mighty Dodge Vipers were present for the second year and the British-built and NASCAR-sounding Panoz cars made an appearance.

Also back was the underdog Team Joest, which had won the 1996 edition of the famed French race. Could the team repeat its 1984-85 doubleheader?

Team owner Reinhold Joest had made a bet with Porsche in 1996. If he won the race with one of this two entries, he would keep the winning race car. The Porsche factory accepted the offer and he won, leading from start to finish.

This year he entered only one prototype Joest Porsche, the car he had won in his bet with the factory, and took the race after running in third place from the start.

The day went to the underdog, and Joest completed another superb Le Mans 24 Hours double.