

CLASSIC DRIVER

The 2011 Le Mans 24 Hours - Audi victorious in tense finish

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Audi Sport Team Joest Audi R18 TDI - 1st overall

Only 13.854 seconds separated the winning Audi Sport Team Joest R18 TDI of Marcel Fässler (CH), André Lotterer (DE) and Benoît Tréluyer (FR) from the first of three factory Peugeot diesels. It was a stunning end to what had been one of the closest races of all time, marked by dicing all the way down the field, two colossal accidents involving the #1 and #3 Audis, and a high attrition rate that saw only 27 of the 56 starters classified at the finish.

With the stratospheric budgets available to the diesel-powered Audi and Peugeot factory teams (the German company was rumoured to have invested 27m euros on trackside hospitality alone...) there was only ever going to be a French blue or German silver winner.

The Automobile Club de l'Ouest (the event's organisers) had, for 2011, dramatically changed the rules. For all-new LMP1 entries, the big diesels were restricted to 3700cc engine capacity and 65-litre tanks. Petrol-powered cars could carry 73 litres but be limited to a turbocharged 2000cc or normally aspirated 3400cc engines.

Complex equivalency formulae ensure that most LMP1 cars produce around 520bhp and lap no faster than 3min 30sec (pole was actually 3min 25sec).

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BMW Motorsport, Farfus/Muller/Werner BMW M3 GT - retired

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Larbre Competition, Bornhauser/Canal/Gardel Chevrolet Corvette C6 ZR1 - 20th overall, 1st in LM GTE Am

In addition, the previous year's cars were accepted so the top, LMP1 category was bolstered by several Pescarolos and the Kronos Racing Lola-Aston Martin driven by Vanina Ickx, Maxime Martin and Bas Leinders. And the latter proved to be Aston Martin's salvation, as terminal engine problems with both boldly designed AMR-One's put the factory cars out within the first 10 minutes of the race, an excruciating – but not entirely unexpected – result for the ever-popular British team.

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Kronos Racing, Ickx/Martin/Leinders Aston Martin DBR1-2 - 7th overall

The pole position, #2 Audi was to lead for much of the race. In normal circumstances the German team could rest happy with this, safe in the knowledge of a pair of supporting cars able to back the leader up and foil any attack from the equally dramatic-looking Peugeot 908s. This year, however, first Allan McNish (#3 Audi Sport North America), and then Mike Rockenfeller (#1 Audi Sport Team Joest) had accidents of such ferocity that only a few years ago they would have had a tragic outcome.

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AF Corse Srl, Fisichella/Bruni/Vilander Ferrari 458 Italia - 13th overall, 2nd in LM GTE Pro

Both very high speed crashes involved glancing contact with slower Ferrari GT cars which sent the Audi prototypes spearing into (and almost over, in McNish's case) the Armco. One has to remember that the Ferraris, Porsches and Corvettes are capable of travelling at 185mph, yet without the same level of grip as a prototype which, in truth, has the responsibility to drive around the slower car.

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#007 Aston Martin Racing, Klien/Mucke/Turner Aston Martin AMR-One - retired

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Lotus Jetalliance, Rossiter/Mowlem/Hirschi Lotus Evora - 22nd overall

After Rockenfeller's crash near Indianapolis around midnight, the pressure on the sole remaining Audi must have been unbearable but, despite the best efforts of aggressively driven Peugeots, the drivers maintained their cool and pulled out a stunning victory for Dr. Wolfgang Ullrich (Head of Audi Motorsport)'s team. The margin a mere 13.854 seconds, with the third-placed Peugeot only a couple of laps in arrears.

In LMP2, the class for slower cars restricted in engine size, in overall performance, and to a price which must not exceed 345,000 euros (chassis only), victory went to the #41 Greaves Motorsport Zyteck Nissan of Ojeh/Lombard/Kimber-Smith.

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Team Peugeot Total, Lamy/Bourdais/Pagenaud Peugeot 908 - 2nd overall

With attention focusing on the front-running prototypes, it was easy to miss out on some nail-biting action in

the GT categories, both of which were dominated by new-for-2011 Ferrari 458 Italias, Porsche 911 RSRs and Chevrolet Corvettes. Aston Martin was represented by solitary V8 Vantages in both classes (LM GTE Pro, for cars with more than one full-time professional driver, and LM GTE Am for amateurs).

In LM GTE Pro, BMW Motorsport, via Schnitzer, had two immaculate M3 GTs and Lotus Jetalliance had entered two Evoras – one of which finished in 22nd spot, a terrific achievement on debut.

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Jota racing, Dolan/Hancock/Buncombe Aston Martin V8 Vantage - retired

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Rebellion Racing, Belicchi/Boullion/Smith Lola B 10/60 Coupe-Toyota - retired

The BMWs looked fabulous but could not convert pole position in LM GTE Pro into a win. That was achieved by some brilliant driving in the #73 Corvette Racing (Garcia/Milner/Beretta) Corvette, which crossed the line in 11th place overall, on the same lap as AF Corse's Ferrari 458 Italia (#51, Fisichella/Bruni/Vilander).

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Corvette Racing, Garcia/Milner/Beretta Chevrolet Corvette C6 ZR1 LM - 11th overall, 1st in LM GTE Pro

In the amateur category it was another Corvette win, with Larbre Competition's #50 Bornhauser/Canal/Gardel entry besting its team-mate #70 Porsche 911 RSR (Bourret/Gibon/Belloc) by just a single lap. Classic Driver readers will be interested to note that regular historic racers Shaun Lynn and Roger Wills were behind the wheel of the #62 CRS Racing Ferrari 458 Italia in this category, sadly retiring after six hours 40 minutes of racing.

All in all, the 2011 Le Mans 24 Hours was a truly great event. Watched by almost 250,000 spectators at the circuit, in perfect motor racing weather, it was the largest piece in a weekend jigsaw of exciting motorsport that climaxed with a gripping Canadian Grand Prix.

Who says motor racing is boring?

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Greaves Motorsport, Ojeh/Lombard/Kimber-Smith Zytek Nissan - 8th overall, 1st in LMP2

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Larbre Competition, Bourret/Gibon/Belloc Porsche 911 RSR - 22nd overall, 2nd in LM GTE Am

Postscript: Prior to the main race, Motor Racing Legends put on an exciting 45-minute historic race. [The 2011 Le Mans Legend was also the setting for Sir Stirling Moss's announcement of his retirement.](#)

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