

CLASSIC DRIVER

Le Mans 24 Hours 2002 notepad by Tony Dron



Just a few notes on Le Mans things you might not have picked up from the race reports. I was there, supporting MG as a guest, so inevitably I followed their fortunes closely and felt involved.

Those MG-Lola Le Mans cars are gems and the entire MG team, from the Chief Executive Kevin Howe down to the last employee, was hoping for a great result this time. With such neat cars, in the lighter, smaller class below the Audis, it's easy to think of the MG Le Mans Lolas as junior machines. That's wrong.

The drivers were also brilliant, incredibly quick and reliable. I asked driver team leader, Mark Blundell, what his car was like to drive: "It's

like an F1 car", was his enthusiastic reply. And he is one of a very small group qualified to make such a remark reliably.

That's a sobering thought. Standing still, the MG-Lolas are light cars with small turbo engines: but to fire them up and take them up to speed makes it a different matter. The downforce gives them the kind of grip that road drivers cannot imagine, and they are really quick in a straight line too.

View of the track from a helicopter	Winning Audis in line astern formation	Team manager Hugh Chamberlain talks to Warren Hughes, 'fresh' from car, and Anthony Reid	Flag time for the 4th placed Bentley

With no power steering, they take a toll out of the drivers in sheer physical effort, but all who drove them loved them and drove their butts off. To give an idea, those MGs make full-race Dodge Viper GTs looks slow, even on the superfast Le Mans circuit. From the helicopter, in which I had a ten minute flight over the circuit, the cars looked quick.

Watching the race, it was clear after the first round of pit stops that the Audis had the edge. Only the MGs, in the class below, challenged the dominant and faster German cars for overall honours, but the fact was that when they all made those first scheduled fuel stops the MGs were only able to run a lap further than the race leaders. It wasn't enough, so the Audis pulled steadily away with the MGs hot on their heels.

It was so depressing when they failed, well into the race. I hope that the world outside understands just how good those MGs were on the track, what a supreme effort was made by MG at Le Mans 2002. The company's willingness to get out there and have a real go, expose itself to that risk, deserves respect. It was more than a good try. The ability of the entire team to carry on a good party when their dreams had been shattered was also also impressive. There's a great spirit there.

It was cheering when the lone Bentley came in solidly behind the impressive Audis. British Le Mans fans, who went in their tens of thousands, must now look to next year.

Story and photos by; Tony Dron

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