

CLASSIC DRIVER

Aston Martin Racing at Le Mans 2005



1959 it wasn't, but for the 1000s of Anglo-Saxon fans that made the annual pilgrimage to the event once described as "a British race held in France", the enthralling duel between GT1 protagonists Corvette and Aston Martin was worth the 34 deg C temperatures alone.

Fastest in practice by a useful margin, the DBR9s were race number 58, driven by Tomas Enge (Czech Republic), Peter Kox (Netherlands) and Pedro Lamy (Portugal), and number 59 having David Brabham (Australia), Stephane Sarrazin (France) and Darren Turner (UK) in the car. Local team Pescarolo were fastest overall, but the road-based machinery was not so far behind, and multiple (past-, and as it turned out present-) winners Audi were slower - but handily placed.

The traditional 4.00pm start saw the number 58 car lead sister number 59, very often ahead of much faster prototype machinery. The cars were sporting special 'Le Mans' bodywork of revised front air dams and the deletion of the louvres over the front wheels. All changes no doubt to gain extra speed on the very fast straights and curves in France. Early minor driving infringements had impeded the progress of number 59, with the start driver Darren Turner incurring two time penalties - the second of three minutes.

After six hours the Team was running head to head with Corvette, all four cars being just a lap or so apart. The heat was a problem for all drivers. Tomas Enge said after his first stint in number 58: "The heat is just incredible. There is very little fresh air in the car, and what makes it difficult is that you are breathing in hot air." Three hours later, at a sweltering 11 pm, the Astons had formed a 'Corvette sandwich' with the green cars running 1st and 4th in class.

At half distance the situation was the same and George Howard-Chappell, Aston Martin Racing Team Principal, said: "It's close but it's fun - that's why we go racing." And that's why the 24 hour gruelling event attracts so many spectators from all over the world, attracted by the ultimate test of man and machine.



As dawn broke, the 58 car was still leading its class, with ex-F1 driver Pedro Lamy at the wheel. He said just before his latest stint: "It is most difficult when you drive through the night, as you have no reference points on the track, so I look forward to driving again in daylight." With just six hours to go, number 58, with Tomas Enge at the wheel, was three and a half minutes ahead of number 64 Chevrolet Corvette and seventh overall. The second DBR9, number 59 driven by Darren Turner, was third in class and had climbed in the previous hour to ninth overall.

But that was the best period for the green cars, because with just three hours to go minor problems meant the chasing Corvette was able to move into the class-leading position - although incredibly all four cars were on the same lap after 21 hours of hard racing. Within a short space of time both Astons were practically out of the running.

Number 58 (pink nose) dropped down to fourth due to a damaged splitter and later succumbed to a fuel related problem in the final ninety minutes of the race, finishing stationary by the side of the track, while number 59 took the chequered flag at 4pm with Stephane Sarrazin at the wheel in front of his home crowd. The car had experienced a problem with its radiator with less than ninety minutes to go, but this was repaired in time to allow Stephane to complete the final stint up to the chequered flag and so take third in the GT1 class and ninth overall.

The Corvettes finished first and second in class, the leading car an impressive 5th overall.



Team Director, David Richards said: "One must accept these things in motorsport. We gave it everything, but it wasn't to be this time.

"We need a bit more testing and a few more races under our belts but we will be back. We were determined that number 59 would finish as a thank you for the tremendous support Aston Martin Racing has received over this weekend.

"We thought it fitting that Stephane should finish the race on his home circuit."

Spending the whole race close to the team, one can only be impressed with the totally professional approach to the event, a race that in 2006 will be treated to a much higher profile from Aston Martin with a multi-team entry. On show at the Team's hospitality area was the blue Russian Age Racing car, while ex-Ferrari GT team BMS Scuderia Italia will be running a pair of DBR9s in FIA GT. The many high-level supporters in the team's box above the pits were devastated when it was obvious the anticipated 1 - 2 in class was not to happen. The end of the race saw all members of the Team, who had been working non-stop for many days, totally washed-out and exhausted - but ready for next year.

Final words must go to Dr Ulrich Bez, Chairman and Chief Executive of Aston Martin, who said: "We arrived with tremendous enthusiasm but with the recognition that this was a development year for us. We came here to learn, and despite some setbacks we gave them a run for their money and finished the race with a credible podium finish in our class. We'll be back!"

Editor's note: Aston Martin Racing at Le Mans took the opportunity of launching the exciting [DBRS9, a competition car for club and national racing series](#) that, finished in a simple blue metallic (with a white nose) wowed potential buyers.

Story: Steve Wakefield

*Photos: Aston Martin Racing **strictly copyright.***

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