

CLASSIC DRIVER

The 2007 Le Mans 24 Hour Race



In conditions that for much of the race resembled a tropical monsoon, the previous year's victors Audi duly completed its expected win. However, the rain - and intense pressure from fellow diesel entrants Peugeot - meant the 2007 race was one of the most exciting in recent years.

For those stunned by the devastating, whispering performance of the big **V12 Audi** open sports-racing diesels in 2006, the introduction of two extra 'oilers', in the shape of the closed cockpit **Peugeot 908s**, gave an extra dimension to the race and spectators were never sure which quietly-spoken missile was just about to arrive at their chosen vantage spot next.

The extraordinary power and torque developed by both manufacturers is a salutary lesson to those wedded to the idea that only petrol can power racing cars. You had to be there to witness it, but I had the opportunity to stand trackside at the exit of the pits when one of the Audis rejoined the race and gosh, the thing just took off. You were surprised it did not take half the tarmac with it.



If **Peugeot** was carrying the hopes of the nation, **Pescarolo Sport** were the local favourites, their **Judd V10s** and predominantly blue livery reminiscent of the Matras (that team principal **Henri Pescarolo** took to victory in 1972, '73 and '74), so dominant in the early 1970s.

With weather playing a big part in the whole weekend, it was the first dry session that counted in qualifying and **LM P1** top spot went to the **Peugeot** of ex-**Aston Martin DBR9** racer **Stephane Sarrazin**. In Thursday night's deluge the French team repeated the feat, with Scotsman **Allan McNish** for **Audi** second on both occasions.

Fastest in **LM GT1** was the **AMR Larbre Competition Aston Martin DBR9** in the hands of super-fast Frenchman **Christophe Bouchut**, comfortably besting the British manufacturer's nemesis - the **Pratt & Miller**-run works yellow **Corvettes**. **LM P2** saw the number 33 **Barazi Epsilon** fastest, while the **Scuderia Ecosse Ferrari F430 GT** driven by **Chris Niarchos** took top billing in **LM GT2**.



Come the start and as expected **Audi** took an early lead, hounded by the two **Peugeots**. It was the **Capello/Kristensen/McNish** car that held the other diesels at bay, a trick they accomplished over 16 hours before a loose wheel sent **Rinaldo Capello** (on his birthday) into the wall when in an unassailable lead. With extensive safety car periods to clear away cars and mend barriers, under skies alternating between bright sunshine and leaden cloud, the race ground on reminding everyone it is still the ultimate test of endurance, and is now run at a pace unheard of in previous years.

Two early shocks had a big bearing on the outcome of **LM P1** and **LM GT1**, both within two laps of one another. The **Gavin/Papis/Beretta Corvette** expired by the side of the track with a drivetrain fault after just 1 ½ hours' racing, during a safety car period brought on by **Audi** rookie **Mike Rockenfeller** losing his car in slippery conditions at **Terre Rouge**. From now onwards both **Astons** and **Peugeot** could push the opposition knowing that their chances were immeasurably improved.



And so the race went on, with **Audi** in a comfortable lead at the front, **Aston Martin** holding on in **GT1**, and the more fragile **LM P2** cars falling by the wayside while the battle for **LM GT2** was between the **IMSA Performance Porsche 997 GT3 RSR** and the **Risi Competizione Ferrari F430 GT**, once the **Scuderia Ecosse Ferrari** retired after nearly 18 hours of hard racing. These were the final positions with a special mention going to the **Ferrari F 430 GT** driven by [Classic Driver dealer Joe Macari](#), paired with **Red Bull Racing's Adrian Newey** and **Ben Aucott**, eventually finishing 22nd overall and 4th in class.

With the very real possibility of the most famous race in the world finishing under a pace car, the organisers pulled the **Audi RS4** course cars off with just 30 minutes or so to go and the cars splashed their way to the finish. **Aston Martin** finally achieved the class win they'd been trying for since 2005, starting and finishing six cars (a record) and finishing a fine 5th place overall. Top of **LM P2** was the **Binnie Motorsports Binnie/Timpamy/Buncombe Lola B05/40 Zytec** in 18th position.



Special mention must be made of the 4th overall for the private **Rollcentre Racing Barbosa/Hall/Short Pescarolo Judd**, a true 'independent' in the best traditions of the race.

Final words to **Dr Wolfgang Ullrich** (Head of Audi Motorsport):

"I think this was the most difficult race we ever did at Le Mans " even more difficult than the rain-soaked race in 2001. This was topped this time due to the strong competition, the many incidents and the rain in the final hours. We managed to get one car to the finish in these difficult circumstances winning against strong competitors. This was a fantastic achievement of the whole team. We wanted to prove that we have the best technology with **Audi TDI Power**, the best drivers and the best teams. We achieved that. This triumph shows one more time the meaning of '*Vorsprung durch Technik*'."

Results:

- 1 1 LMP1 Audi Sport North America BIELA F/PIRRO E/WERNER M Audi R10 TDI 369 laps
- 2 8 LMP1 Team Peugeot Total LAMY P/SARRAZIN S/BOURDAIS S Peugeot 908 Hdi FAP 359 laps
- 3 16 LMP1 Pescarolo Sport COLLARD E/BOULLION JC/DUMAS R Pescarolo Judd 358 laps
- 4 18 LMP1 Rollcentre Racing BARBOSA J/HALL S/SHORT M Pescarolo Judd 347 laps
- 5 009 LMGT1 Aston Martin Racing BRABHAM D/RyDELL R/TURNER D Aston Martin DBR9 343 laps
- 6 63 LMGT1 Corvette Racing O'CONNELL J/MAGNUSSEN J/FELLOWS R Corvette C6R 2342 laps



Story - Steve Wakefield

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