

# CLASSIC DRIVER

## The 2008 Le Mans 24 Hours



Over 250,000 spectators witnessed a spell-binding, race-long battle between Peugeot and Audi at this year's Le Mans 24 Hours. In what must have been the most consistently close-contested battle ever, where the leaders were never separated by more than lap for the entire race, the wily experience of the Joest-run Audi team beat the faster outright pace of Peugeot.

Both manufacturers fielded three-car teams packed with ex-Grand Prix drivers and past Le Mans winners. The fact that the two front-running manufacturers were diesel-powered would have made the headlines a couple of years ago - in 2008 it was taken as normal. How times have changed.

As ever chasing *la gloire* for France, the coupé **Peugeots** had set the pace in qualifying and it was clear that on speed alone **Audi** would be in trouble. However, when you consider the German company's outstanding record (winning from 2000 to 2007 with just one glitch in 2003, when **Bentley** was supreme), you realise that Le Mans is all about reliability, team tactics and consistency - not necessarily lap times.



I spent some time during the race at the entry to the Dunlop Bridge chicane. It was only a few hours after the start, and the weather was dry and sunny. The speed that the French cars could carry through that series of bends was astonishing. Like all diesel race cars they are quiet, emitting a droning waffle rather than a high-revving shriek. Observers at the **Porsche Curves** or **Indianapolis** said the same: "low-flying aircraft", "guided missiles" were typical comments.

The Peugeots quickly set the pace and were lapping some eight seconds faster than the **Audis** but, thanks to some clever rule-making by the organisers and inherent differences in engineering, were forced to pit earlier than their German rivals - a significant factor over 24 hours.



Further down the field, the **Aston Martin-powered Lola** LMP1 prototype made an impressive debut, finishing 9th overall despite having lost much time in the pits with body damage after an early, quite serious, accident. On Sunday the car appeared to run like clockwork - maybe a portent for 2009?

Come early Sunday morning, rain hit the circuit. The **Peugeots** were now compromised due to their strictly dry-weather suspension set-up, while **Audi** had gambled on a damp track at some point and had adjusted the springs and dampers accordingly. Just fitting the appropriate tyres is only one part of the equation - a very stiff car will not drive as well in the wet.

Eventual winners **Capello**, **Kristensen** and **McNish** made best use of their car's better handling during this period, **Kristensen** in particular putting in devastating laps around dawn to pull a gap on the **Peugeots**; all suffering from overheating and poorer wet-weather handling.

The winning margin was just 4 minutes 31 seconds. That was less than one lap, an incredibly close finish after 24 hours. The top three were covered by two laps, **Audi** and **Peugeot** taking the leading six positions.





In the other classes, **Porsche** totally dominated **LMP2**, while **Aston Martin** won another close-fought encounter with arch-rival **Corvette**, repeating its 2007 **GT1** class win.



**Ferrari** saw off the much-fancied **Porsche** challenge in **GT2**, with **Salo/Melo/Bruni** in the **Risi Competizione F430 GT2** finishing an impressive 19th overall.

**Audi** has now completed two hat-tricks at Le Mans, and won three times in a row with a diesel. You had to feel sorry for the French company for fielding such a dominating car yet losing by such a small margin. Winner **Kristensen** sums it up:

“Thanks to Audi! They trust in us. They prepared us a race car which we could race and really push hard through 24 hours to win against great opposition from Peugeot.”



**Results:**



- 1 Capello/McNish/Kristensen Audi Sport North America Audi R10 381 Laps
- 2 Gene/Minassian/Villeneuve Team Peugeot Total Peugeot 908 + 4:31.094
- 3 Montagny/Zonta/Klien Peugeot Sport Total Peugeot 908 + 2 Laps
- 4 Luhr/Premat/Rockenfeller Audi Sport Team Joest Audi R10 + 7 Laps
- 5 Lamy/Sarrazin/Wurz Team Peugeot Total Peugeot 908 + 13 Laps
- 6 Biela/ Pirro/Werner Audi Sport North America Audi R10 + 14 Laps

*Don't forget the famous 'Circuit de la Sarthe' will be reverberating to racing engines once more in just a few weeks' time, when the track will host the **2008 Le Mans Classic** from 11 - 13 July. For further details, visit [www.lemansclassic.com](http://www.lemansclassic.com).*

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