

Le Mans 2018 with Corvette Racing

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TG editor drives own car to Le Mans to cheer on own car's team. This year, we won't be bringing you our regular race report...

"I've got the key to the highway" - B.B. King and Eric Clapton sing their blues into the night as I point my old, faithful Chevy's long nose toward France. To the rhythm, road markings flash past in the glow of the pop-up headlights. The small-block V8 rumbles serenely. There's not a living soul around. I'm on my way to the greatest race in the world in my all-time favorite car, and I couldn't be happier.

The 86th 24 Hours of Le Mans will be my seventh - and it's already my most memorable. A certain participating American sports car is celebrating its 65th birthday. The team built around this car has been racing for twenty years. And the one I'm in right now has recently reached the ripe age of thirty. You could call this an extra special occasion.

I attended the past few Le Mans races to bring you the stories you would normally read on these pages. Most of the time, I would hitch onto Audi's or Porsche's LMP1 wagon - last year, Ford invited me - to join their wonderfully organized media trips. Of course, at *TopGear* we're professional down to our toenails, so as a reporter I remain impartial. But we all have our weaknesses. As a life-long Corvette fanatic, at times I couldn't help quietly rooting for "my team." Last year, when Corvette Racing had to hand the top two podium steps to Aston and Ford after an exhilarating fight in the last few laps, you could spot me in the ecstatic Ford pits delivering an Oscar-worthy performance. "No, no, these are tears of joy."

This year it's the full fanboy experience I'm after. My own gray 1988 time machine will take me to the Corvette Corral campsite by the track, where I'll be sleeping in a small tent among the like-minded and their cars. I'll be wearing T-shirts and baseball caps bearing the crossed flags. And I will cheer loudly and freely if the number 63 or 64 C7.R ends up conquering its class.

Not that the odds are much more in their favor this year. With BMW joining, there are now six manufacturers competing in GTE Pro, running seventeen cars in total. During training sessions in early June, the Corvettes were right in the middle of the field, and this week they managed to qualify ninth and fifteenth - rubbing bumpers with Ferraris and BMWs, but trailing the leading Porsche 911 RSR by almost three seconds. BoP measures ("Balance of Performance" - added weight, restrictor plates, limited fuel capacity, etc.) are supposed

to bring this varied bunch closer together, but right now, they don't seem to be working very well.

Late on Wednesday, a short night's sleep before I was planning to hit the road, my car decided it needed a new alternator. This is a known weak spot with early C4s, and after years of trouble-free charging, apparently it was my time to deal with it. To be honest, I was glad it happened at home in the Netherlands, and not in a traffic jam somewhere around Paris.

I spent most of Thursday locating the new part and having it installed, so I could take off Friday at 4AM in order to make it to Le Mans in time for the drivers' parade. These miles across Belgium and northern France aren't the most interesting you'll ever cover, but to see the world wake up from behind the quintessential '80s dash, having swapped the blues for Guns N' Roses, is an event in itself. Every time I drive this car - my childhood dream ever since I watched my first *A-Team* episode - I fall in love with it all over again.

When I get to the campsite, I assemble my tiny tent and find Gérard, who has been putting the Corvette Corral together every year for eighteen years. He introduces me to Peter, president of the Swiss club, who will be driving his C6 Z06 in the parade this afternoon and kindly offers me his passenger seat.

We ogle a vast collection of Vettes by Mulsanne corner - the car's anniversary has not gone unnoticed here - and after we wait a while at the town square among blaring fanfares and shrieking Alonso fans, we join the line of cars creeping along the crowds and celebrating the drivers. If you think the internal combustion engine's days are numbered, you need a shot of this atmosphere. Every person, young or old, screams at the top of their lungs as we pass: "*Moteur! Moteur! Acceleration!*" They go nuts with every rev. Someone throws a T-shirt inside our car, clamoring for Peter, who is not a celebrity, to sign it. These people live on gasoline.

Getting up the next morning, I'm stared down by many exhaust pipes. I hit the showers to the sounds of the warm-up session and have breakfast at one of the long tables inside the Corral's main tent. Having shoved in a few pieces of baguette, I head to the paddock to meet with the people from Chevrolet Europe. They told me earlier they "might" be able to provide me with a way to follow the team a little more closely. Now, they hand me a pass that gets me into the team hospitality right above the Corvette pit stall, where they have food and drinks, where you run into members of the team and get to breathe down mechanics' necks from one floor up. It also gives me access to the grid walk and the stall itself, right before the start of the race. It's like a shiny red lollypop to this preschooler.

I find out the BoP has been changed after qualifying. The dominant Porsches and Fords have had some weight added to

them; the Corvettes, BMWs and the new, ill-performing Astons have been relieved of a few measures. We'll find out whether it's enough to make them all more evenly matched during the race. I can't help but feel it's a shame that in the end, the level of competition comes down to how severely technology is restricted. Having a rulebook is a good thing, but it's all too easy to make it into a caricature of itself.

I'm allowed all the time I need in the pit stall to look around and shoot a few pictures. The team casually takes on the calm before the storm. Team boss Doug Fehan sits back in his folding chair, looking through some papers. A man named John checks data on a couple of laptops. He smiles when I ask him if it feels right to him. "It's all very close. We'll take it as it comes."

One mechanic connects a huge, quintuple ship's horn to the air hose and aims it at the crowd on the grid. "Let's go!" he yells, and he backs it up with the most deafening sound I've ever heard. Holding my camera, I can only cover one of my ears, so I leave the stall half-deaf.

Jetfighters put the French tricolor in the sky and the cars take off on their formation lap. I watch the crowd go silent. The music plays and engine sounds take over as 60 cars come around the last corner and across the starting line. This moment will stupefy anyone who cares even the tiniest bit about cars - and it never gets old.

I catch rides to Indianapolis corner and the second chicane along Mulsanne Straight. These places are where the downright ridiculous difference in pace between the prototypes and the GT cars is most evident. The sheer force the LMP1s employ to launch themselves out of corners is other-worldly; with the Toyotas, the only hybrids left in this race, it's from a whole different universe. One hour in, they're over a minute ahead of the runners-up.

I watch an LMP2 car lose a wheel. Two 911s lead GTE Pro and keep closely inspecting each other's retro liveries - the "Pink Pig" and the Rothmans colors. The Corvettes are in seventh and thirteenth place. I refrain from jumping up and down like a giggling moron every time they pass. Their sound, anyone will admit, is still the mightiest of any car here: a deep, full, hammering thunder that reverberates inside your chest. The old Astons' V8 growl gave them a run for their money, but the new Vantages sound boring. The Porsches seem shrill and much louder than before. The screaming Ferraris are as impressive as ever.

As I join the Corral for dinner, I notice the 64 C7.R is down a few laps. Drivers Oliver Gavin and Tommy Milner both reported handling issues and the car received some repairs to the front suspension. Later tonight, it will lose more time getting its engine floor replaced. Running this far behind, its chances at a decent result have become very slim.

Earlier, when the Jackie Chan LMP2 car (Ho-Pin Tung's, among others) suffered a puncture and left shreds of carbon fiber all over the track, the leading 911 RSR was dealt all the right cards as he got caught behind a different safety car than the other GTE Pros. The rest of the field got squished together, spawning many fights among them. The 63 Corvette is holding its own against the Fords and Ferraris and seems to steadily hover around sixth place.

At the Corral, my car receives a Concours award: it's the second-nicest C4 at the campsite. I feel honored, even if there are only three C4s present. Top marks go to a spotless 1990 ZR-1 from Sweden; in third place it's Rick's car, which he brought all the way from California to drive on a trip around Europe on US plates. If you ask me, he should get all the prizes.

Darkness sets in and I'm back at the paddock, walking past a monitor - and making a cartoonish emergency stop as my eyes stay glued to it. Antonio García in the 63 car is now in fourth place with only three Porsches ahead of him, two of which are within grasp. I perceive a bubbling feeling of "anything is possible," but half an hour later, after a round of pit stops, the 63 is running eighth. Let's just say there's a lot going on.

It's way past midnight and I get a hold of a walkie-talkie, allowing me to listen in on communications with the drivers. The team hospitality's windows are wide open, cars are roaring past, so I really can't understand a word. I lean outside when the 63 comes in for a stop, and watch them change brake pads in a matter of seconds - this would take me at least an afternoon and a lot of cursing. Mike Rockenfeller rejoins the race in sixth place. The 64 car has made its way back up to fifteenth.

In past years I used to stay up all night, because I felt it was the right thing to do. The trouble is, this means you'll spend the best part of the race - early morning - propping up toothpicks to hold your eyes open. And you'll be roaming around like a zombie by the time the checkered flag drops at 3PM. Back at the Corral, some Danes have put up a big screen on the side of their RV, watching the race and drinking a beer or two, or three. It's tempting, but I'm thinking I should be sensible.

As it turns out, sleeping with just some wafer-thin tent fabric between you and a wall of noise is not as difficult as you'd think. I take a stroll along the grandstands in the morning and for a while, it looks like the Corvettes have made it through the night unscathed. Then, as I take in the sights and sounds along the first corner, I realize there's only one C7.R left running. I go to the pit stall and receive confirmation: number 64 is out of the race. Its engine had been overheating and the problem could not be remedied. A sad

end to the race of a car that seemed to have overcome its early troubles.

The Porsche leading the GTE Pro pack, driven in part by Belgian Laurens Vanthoor, has managed to hold on to its massive advantage. The cars giving chase are treating spectators to some great racing. Sébastien Bourdais in the number 68 Ford and Frédéric Makowiecki in the 91 Porsche are going at it, with the latter even engaging in some questionable blocking tactics (which go unpunished, to Bourdais' loud and clear dismay).

The one Corvette left is in fifth place and showing promising performance: when veteran Jan Magnussen takes the wheel, he immediately sets the fastest lap of any GTE Pro car - twice in a row. He's getting away from the Ford behind him, but he's over a minute behind the one he's chasing. For the Corvette team and supporters, there's nothing left to do but wait and see. Will the cars in front run into any trouble? Won't we get to bite our nails and witness some edge-of-our-seats action like last year? It doesn't look like it. Just cruising home now.

Two Porsches, two Fords and one Chevy - that's the GTE Pro top five when the clock strikes three. The team is outside along the pit wall, fists in the air. Fehan waves the American flag that has all of Corvette Racing's victories since the late '90s written on it - eight of them at Le Mans. It's too bad there was no chance at a ninth this year.

The ACO will later drop the 67 Ford back to twelfth because of breaking the driving time rule: each driver has to spend six hours behind the wheel, and Tony Kanaan came up 44 minutes short. This moves the Corvette up to fourth place - but based on a technicality like this, there's little satisfaction to gain from it.

All in all, this was not the most exciting 24 Hours of Le Mans. And I'm not just referring to the Toyotas, which in spite of repairs, driver errors and time penalties easily finished several laps ahead of the other LMP1s. Questionable new rules about maximum stint length and limited-capacity gas pumps eliminated a strategic element that can be extremely valuable in endurance racing. Here's hoping, after the considerable criticism they've received this year, the organizers will look at revising the rules once again for 2019.

Regardless, I will remember this race forever. When I load up my C4 and head for Holland, my ears still ringing, my sunburned face sizzling in the wind, I can't seem to stop grinning. For me, Le Mans is always a highlight. But if you live and breathe Corvette, a weekend like this will leave you done and dusted.

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