

CLASSIC DRIVER

[Aston Martin at Le Mans and the 'Ring 2006](#)



It may well be just twenty four little hours but it's an awfully long time in the ferociously competitive arena of sports car racing. And due to a clash of dates, Aston Martin found themselves racing two DBR9s at Le Mans and a production V8 Vantage at the Nürburgring on the same weekend, the latter driven by a multi-driver team that included the company's CEO, Dr Ulrich Bez.

The two Aston Martin Racing works cars at Le Mans were the spearhead of a four-car Aston entry. Wearing the familiar light metallic Aston racing green, with the rare honour of also carrying special race numbers ('007' and '009') the two regular ALMS (American Le Mans Series) cars were driven by Pedro Lamy/Stephane Ortelli/Stephane Sarrazin, and Tomas Enge/Darren Turner/Andrea Piccini. In addition there were two other DBR9s in GT1 entered by BMS Scuderia Italia (Gollin/Babini/Pescatori) and Russian Age Racing/Team Modena (D.Brabham/Piquet Jnr./Garcia) as super-quick back-up to hold off the two yellow Corvettes most likely to challenge for the class win.

2005 was the debut year for the team and resulted in the two works cars just failing to beat their American arch-rivals on a blisteringly hot Sunday morning. 2006 was hot, but not as bad as before and the cars had been extensively tested and improved, as well as raced several times in ALMS in the US. Proceedings went well in qualifying with a dominant performance by the Czech driver Tomas Enge in 007 just heading Sarrazin in 009. The two privateers were handily placed a few slots lower on the grid.

Come the start at five o'clock, it was battle royal between the two Aston Martin Racing cars and the yellow Corvettes - a tussle that was to last until lunchtime the following day. Drama struck after just a handful of laps as an accident to the BMS Scuderia Italia DBR9 (spinning on oil and sustaining too much damage to be repaired) meant a Safety Car period that saw the 007 car pit and in the process damage an oil pipe on a high kerb.



007's driver, Darren Turner, explains "I'd been having radio problems and only heard the instruction to pit after I'd passed the pitlane entrance. I then crossed the kerbs to get into the pitlane, and that damaged the sump. It's very frustrating, but it's still early in the race and anything can happen."

Come late evening and the order had settled into a Corvette first in class with 009 applying constant pressure ahead of the other American car, all on the same lap or so after six hours of racing. At 2300 hours 009 was in tenth place overall, just 26 seconds behind the class leader, while the No.62 Russian Age Aston Martin DBR9 was third, two laps in arrears.

As always at Le Mans the cooler night time racing really allows the professional drivers to get the hammer down and by 0500 hours number 009 was now in the lead by virtue of some very quick lappery by ex-F1 driver Pedro Lamy. 007 had suffered from a puncture but was 5th in GT1 (+ 6 laps), 10th overall, a position improving to 3rd in GT1 (+ 6 laps) and 7th overall come 0800 hours.

By late-morning some clever use of a Safety Car period meant that 009 now had almost a whole lap on the pursuing Nr. 64 Corvette and it looked, with just a few hours to go, as if Aston Martin would take the win.





However with just four hours remaining, disaster struck with 009 suffering clutch failure while Ortelli was behind the wheel, resulting in the car losing 45 minutes in the pit garage while a new clutch assembly was installed. It rejoined the race in fourth place in GT1, 11 laps behind the leader and unless the yellow cars suffered a similarly serious problem it was game over for another year.

They didn't, so at the finish it was 2nd in GT1 (+ 5 laps), 6th overall, having completed 350 laps for 007, and 5th in GT1 (+14 laps), 10th overall, on 341 laps for 009. There was also a strong performance by the gunmetal grey Team Modena DBR9. The David Brabham, Nelson Piquet and Antonio Garcia car finished ninth overall and fourth in GT1.



The second-placed drivers were philosophical about the result –

Tomas Engle: “We could have won this race, so I don't get any satisfaction from finishing second. I'm proud of my qualifying record here, but it's only the race that counts. We came here to win.”

Darren Turner: “It's good to have got the car to the end of the race and to be on the podium. But what happened at the start was a big disappointment and we were always playing catch-up from there.”

Andrea Piccini: “It feels good to finish my first Le Mans 24 Hours on the podium. Le Mans is Le Mans, and it

was already great to be here with Aston Martin Racing. To be on the podium feels great.”

David Richards, Chairman of Aston Martin Racing: “We have a sense of déjà vu about this result. For the second year in a row we’ve had the speed to win the race, but not for 24 hours. We’re disappointed, but it will be only few days before we start looking ahead to next year’s race.”

And final word goes to **Pedro Lamy**, who for so long looked a likely winner: “We were leading for a long time and it was a real shame that we had the problem with the clutch. We knew then that we could not win, which was very frustrating. In a 24-hour race, sometimes you are lucky and sometimes you are not.

We were unlucky.”



Nürburgring 24 Hours -

While it was all action stations in France with an impressive multi-car Aston Martin entry and an extensive corporate presence, things were a little lower-key at the ‘Ring where a production V8 Vantage had been prepared at Gaydon and entered in the 24-hour endurance race, among a field of largely motorsport-homologated cars.



Negotiating a field of 220 cars, the four drivers: Dr Ulrich Bez, Aston Martin’s Chairman and CEO; Chris Porritt, Aston Martin’s Vehicle Engineering Manager; Horst von Saurma, editor-in-chief of Sport Auto magazine, and development driver Wolfgang Schuhbauer, all raced flawlessly through more than 130 laps on one of the most demanding circuits in the world.

Built at Aston Martin’s Gaydon headquarters the V8 Vantage was almost entirely production standard, including the engine and transmission. The only modifications made were for safety and pit-lane efficiency, with the full mandatory safety cage, special fuel tank and fire system, racing seat, and built-in air jacks.

Conditions tested the drivers to the extreme with track temperatures reaching 43°C and from the initial 220 cars on the starting grid, only 141 finished. Despite these conditions, the V8 Vantage kept a steady pace avoiding traffic, resulting in a smooth race from start to finish.

Dr. Bez said: “We delivered exactly what we set out to do by finishing the 24 hours without any technical problems or team issues. It is a real achievement to complete the race in the top 25 with a standard

production V8 Vantage and shows the true capabilities of both the car and the team.”



Chris Porritt added: “This has been a real test of endurance for the car and the whole team. It’s been a thrilling 24 hours and a real challenge for us all.”

Dave King, Aston Martin’s Team manager concluded: “We are all delighted with the team’s progress throughout the event, it is a testament to all the members to finish with this result considering it is our first 24 hour race.”

Editor's Note: *Special mention must be made of the excellent organisation put on by **James, Sadie, Caroline** and the rest of the **Aston Martin Racing Team** giving those participating in hospitality packages at Le Mans 2006 a truly memorable time. Special thanks too to [P&O Ferries](#) for their customary efficient Club Class service from Dover to Calais.*

Story: Steve Wakefield

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