

WHEELSPIN

24 Hours of Dusting Wheels and Rolling Tires

By NICK KURCZEWSKI

SOMEONE told me that there is no sleep better than the sleep after the 24 Hours of Le Mans. But 23 hours into the race, which took place last weekend on 8.4 miles of public roads about an hour and a half southwest of Paris, no one on the Corvette Racing team was close to doing.

Every pair of bloodshot eyes stared at the banks of television monitors on either side of the team's garage. The No. 63 Corvette was one lap down, running second in class, but gaining 30 seconds a lap on the leading Aston Martin. A few hours before, any chance of victory looked more distant than a hot shower and cozy bed. Yet, as the clock ticked down, every Corvette team engineer, mechanic, security guard and caterer watched and hoped as rain fell and the cars roared down the soaked racetrack.

Months before, I had politely turned down an offer from Chevrolet's Corvette Racing team to watch the 73th running of the race from the comfort of the V.I.P. lounges. I really wanted to experience the race as a member of the pit crew, no frills attached.

The team said yes, and it was agreed that from 3 p.m. (9 a.m. E.S.T.) June 16 to 3 p.m. June 17, I would trade my pen and notepad for a fireproof suit and a pair of work gloves.

The morning of the race, suited up in a Corvette team uniform, I couldn't resist walking through the paddock to watch the hundreds of thousands of fans streaming in. Many had camped in muddy fields nearby, and almost all wore the bright colors of their favorite team or driver. Over the loudspeaker, the national anthems of every team on the starting grid were being played.

Out of nowhere, a curly-haired French teenager dashed over and asked for my autograph. He paused after I explained I wasn't a driver, then pushed his red racing helmet and black marker back in my face. "It's O.K.," he said in a thick accent, a smile from ear to ear.

Back in the pit lane, I was introduced to Chuck Miller, my boss for the day. He gave me a slap on the back and explained my role as wheel-cleaner and tire roller, cleaning the brake dust off the wheels and handling the new and used tires. "We're going to have some fun now," he said with a laugh. Mr. Miller said that it's his job to set the inflation pressure of each tire with nitrogen, which is less susceptible to changes in heat and humidity than regular air. The amount of preparation is daunting; everyone has a specific job to do.

The team was an army of engineers, mechanics and technicians; the catering staff alone numbered 34. Jimmy Schmidt, a chef from Detroit, had the job of ensuring that every driver, team member and driver's dog

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RUSH JOB Corvette Racing's crew dashing through a pit stop at Le Mans last weekend.

V.I.P.'s were well-fed for the entire race. Forty-eight crates and more than 25 tons of spare parts and equipment, enough to build another car, were air-freighted to Le Mans weeks before the race.

As the two Corvettes completed a warm-up lap, nearly two dozen engineers began their long day of staring at laptops and processing data. Everything from fuel consumption to tire pressure — even the driver's temperature — was recorded. Not a single gearshift — 45 shifts a lap and more than 15,000 during the race — goes unchecked. One engineer pointed out that each Corvette C6.R racecar was equipped with air-conditioning. This allowed the team to run a less restricted (more powerful) engine to offset the weight of the system. Each Corvette had a 7-liter V-8 producing 590 horsepower.

Then the green flag was waved and the air-splitting sound of 54 racing engines erupted as the cars flashed past.

The Corvettes competed in the GT1 category, one of four classes. The top two categories — LMP1 and LMP2 — feature pure racers unrelated to any you see on the road. The GT1 and GT2 classes include production-based cars like Corvettes, Aston Martin, Ferraris and Porsches.

For the first 30 minutes, everything was calm. But with the first round of pit stops, everyone sprang to action. A new set of tires was rolled to the pit stall. A mechanic shouted "Get ready!" as the car pulled into the pit lane. Nervous facial adjustments were made to the helmets and goggles worn by the refuelers and tire-changers.

Le Mans rules dictate that only seven team members can work on a racecar when it's in the pits. Refueling and tire changing

G.M. Racing Photographs by Richard Proulx



DILIGENT The author earns his keep.

cannot be done at the same time. The Corvette C6.R rumbled to a stop. The fuel nozzle went in immediately. The 21.7-gallon tank took 25 to 30 seconds to fill as the tire changers waited, poised at each corner. As soon as the tank was full, hydraulic jacks lifted the car and the wheels were replaced.

Air wrenches shrieked. The crew jumped out of the way. The all-clear was given to the driver. Barely 40 seconds after it pulled in, the Corvette was back in the race. The three other members of my wheel-cleaning team maneuvered the old tires to the back of the pits. Because the Corvette's carbon-fiber brakes can reach 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit, touching the wheels without work gloves



RUNNER-UP The team's No. 63 racecar.

was not recommended. After scraping bits of goopy rubber out of the wheel rims and wiping brake dust off the spokes, each wheel was tossed onto a golf cart and driven to the Michelin tents where new tires were fitted. Each Corvette goes through 30 pit stops and 120 tires (30 sets) during a typical 24-hour race. Each car had three drivers, each handling about two-hour shifts.

Two hours into the race, television monitors showed the No. 64 Corvette stopped on the track. A tight, tense circle of about a dozen Corvette mechanics discussed the problem and radioed the driver. Le Mans rules state that a broken car must make it to pit lane under its own power for repair. The driver cannot walk away from the car to get spare parts, and no mechanics can touch the car outside of pit lane. A small tool kit is placed in every racecar for the driver to make emergency repairs.

But that was terminal: a broken driveshaft. The mood was glum, though professional. So the garage door for No. 64 was closed and effort refocused on the remaining car, No. 63. Car 64 would sit until it was towed after the race.

As the afternoon stretched into evening, my duties were a welcome relief from looking at the clock. My hands and face were black with brake dust, my arms sore from lugging wheels. By morning, many mechanics had caught a few minutes of sleep, sprawled on the garage floor or collapsed in folding chairs. Had it been the 25 Hours of Le Mans, the team might have won. After 342 laps and more than 2,800 miles (about equal to a day's drive from New York City to Seattle), time simply ran out.

The No. 63 Corvette finished second in GT1 about a lap behind the No. 809 Aston Martin DBRS. A diesel-powered Audi R10 won the race outright. The Corvette team cheered and waved American flags as No. 63 crossed the finish line, driven by Ron Fellows, a Canadian who has been with the team for nine years.

My teammate, Ian MacBeth, celebrating my Le Mans induction by tipping a cold beer over my head. "We'll get them next year," was the rallying cry as equipment was packed and I reluctantly traded the racing overalls and work gloves for my pen and notepad.