

Repeat performance

TRACY BARKER looks back to Le Mans

Pictures by DARREN MAYBURY





Most of this year's race was run under appalling conditions.

HAVING dominated last year's race and been unbeaten for nearly a year, Audi returned to Le Mans as clear favourite. Four Audi R8s competed — the two factory-entered Joest cars driven by Frank Biela, Tom Kristensen & Emanuele Pirro (number one) and Laurent Aiello, Rinaldo Capello and Christian Pescatori (number two), plus the Johansson Motorsport car of Stefan Johansson, Tom Coronel and Patrick Lemarie and Champion Motorsport car of Johnny Herbert, Ralf Kelleners and Didier Theys. Huge media attention was directed at Bentley, returning to Le Mans for the first time in over 70 years, with two EXP Speed 8s driven by Martin Brundle, Guy Smith and Stephane Ortelli, and Andy Wallace, Eric van de Poele and Butch Leitzinger. These cars were expected to provide a major threat to Audi dominance, since they have the same basic bullet-proof engine as the R8.

'Audi totally dominated the race for the second consecutive year...'

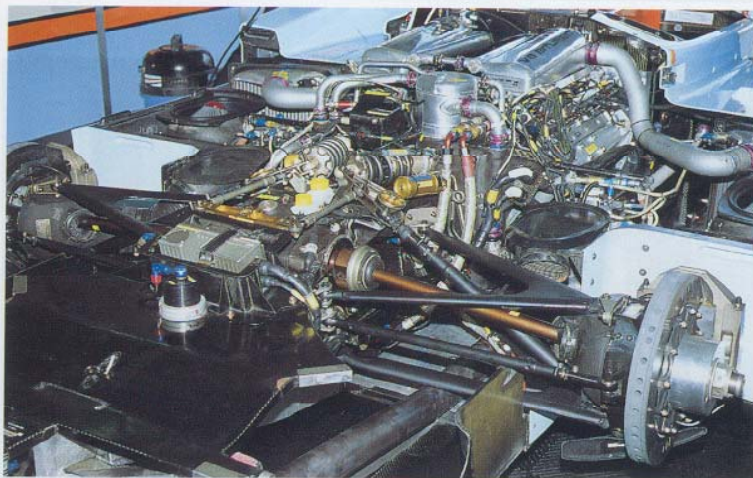
After qualifying in the top three positions on the grid, Audi was never seriously challenged and totally dominated the race for the second consecutive year, recording a one-two finish for the Joest Team. Reigning champions Frank Biela, Tom Kristensen and Emanuele Pirro were victorious once again, only the fifth driver line-up to win more than once in the history of the race. Laurent Aiello, Rinaldo Capello and Christian Pescatori in the sister car finished second, a lap behind, while the Bentley of Andy Wallace, Eric van de Poele and Butch Leitzinger finished third on its debut appearance, 15 laps behind. The winning drivers dedicated their second consecutive victory in the classic endurance race to their late team mate, Michele Alboreto, who was due to drive for Audi at Le Mans this year, but was killed during testing in April.

Weather conditions throughout the race were appalling, with torrential rain flooding the track and making racing extremely dangerous. For hours, the rain was so relentless that drivers could use only half throttle on the long straights of the circuit, but both cars managed to complete the 24 hours without serious problems, to record the 13th consecutive victory for the Audi R8.

The opening laps were chaotic as heavy rain fell on one side of the circuit, soaking the track and making conditions treacherous, while it remained dry and sunny on the opposite side. This caused many incidents, as some drivers elected to remain on slicks longer than others, resulting in a lengthy safety car period until conditions stabilised. The only Audi driver to keep out of trouble during this critical time was Frank Biela, who was extremely cautious and successfully kept his car on the track, enabling him to take the lead during the second hour. From this point onwards the number one car headed the field until the end of the race.

The customer Audi teams were less fortunate, the Johansson R8 being the first to encounter problems, during the third hour, with an electrical problem which proved terminal. The Champion R8, which had inherited third place when Brundle's Bentley retired with engine problems, retired after six-and-a-half hours due to clutch problems, leaving the remaining Bentley in third place, albeit six laps down on the lead Audi.

Around midnight, both R8s were fitted with new sets of front and rear bodywork, for increased downforce



Above left: Engine of the Johansson Motor Sport R8.

Above right: Workshop of the Johansson R8.

Left: Bentley is back, courtesy of Audi's V8 engine.

Below: Biela, Kristensen and Pirro drove the winning car.

and successfully survived an extremely tough night, despite dreadful track conditions caused by torrential rain. However, the night was not without incidents — there were spins for both cars and the number two car had gearshift problems, resulting in the entire rear end being changed in less than six minutes!

Both cars continued to run like clockwork throughout Sunday, until halfway through the 21st hour, when the lead car lost fourth gear, due to continually changing gear at half throttle in the appalling weather conditions. The entire rear end of the car was changed in just over five minutes and it returned to the fray without losing the lead. As 4pm and the completion of 24 arduous hours approached, the two Audis were totally in control at the front of the field, with Bentley lined up for an impressive podium finish on its return to Le Mans. 🇩🇪

