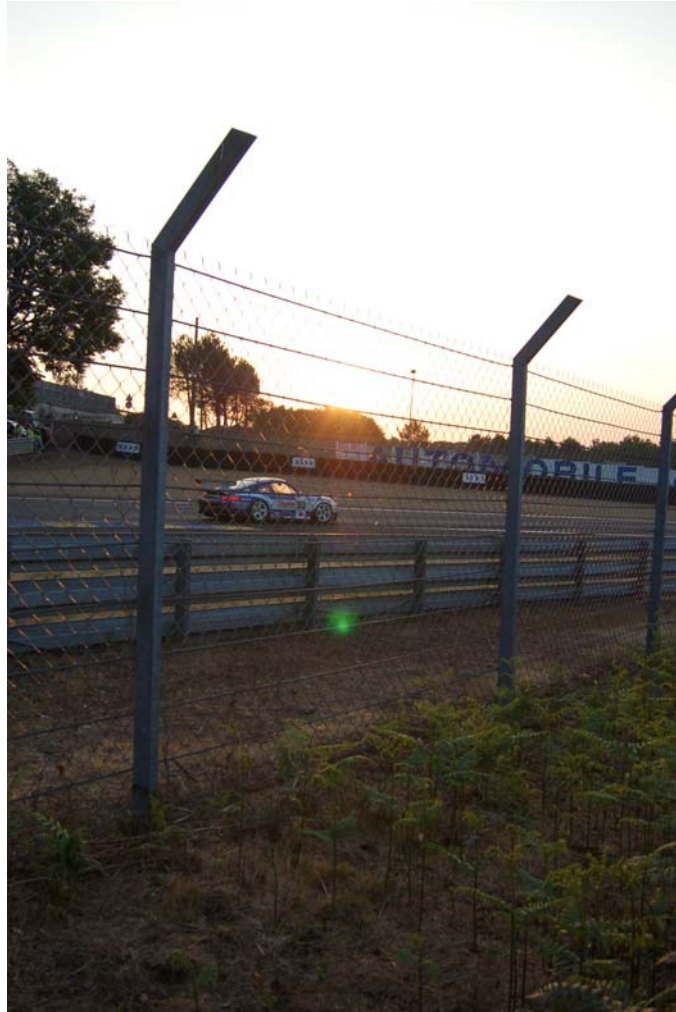


La Sarthe 2006

A tale of diesel, Peter Crouch and one battered sofa



The Beginning

Marquee, sofa and cool beer; our 4th visit to La Sarthe promises comparative luxury. It's 5.30pm on Sunday 11th June and this means the start of the first leg of our journey that will take us from the greenery of Worcestershire to the Portsmouth docks and the home of the Royal Navy. Of course, the planning began months ago as every effort was made to top all previous trips. To the delight of the team, we have procured an aging brown sofa, which was collected last night from a dusty stable and rapidly demanured. This represents the icing on the cake of this year's preparations and optimism is high! The advance party is made up of Neil (Leader and Author), Will (Driver and Mechanic) and Ed (Afro Man). Our vehicle of choice is a '01 Mercedes Vito, given an aesthetic uplift with the Race Tours livery. The obligatory one for the road is a sign of things to come and we are off, the adventure begins.



Ready for the off: Neil, Ed, Will & the Vito

The radio bombards us with an array of England world cup songs, all welcome after the crushing (!) 1-0 defeat of Paraguay 24 hours earlier. Eventually we tire and the radio makes way for the tones of The Automatic, carefully selected from Will's rather too well organised CD collection. After the anal organising is given the mocking it deserves, talk turns to the race and the prospect of the British teams this year. The consensus is that it



LNT Automotive in the British GT Champ

could be Aston Martin's year to pip the factory Corvettes to the post in GT1 such are our expectations of the Prodrive run outfit. Hopes are also high in LMP2 where the dramatic looking Rollcentre Radical AER looks like being competitive and last year's class winners, RML, have once again entered their MG-LOLA AER. In GT2 Scuderia Ecosse's Ferrari 430 and Team LNT Automotive's Panoz Esperante may have the pace to beat the strong American Porsche teams. However, we are all resigned to an LMP1 and overall victory

for one of the factory TDI powered Audis. It won't be long before we realise the extent of Audi's diesel assault on motorsport with regards to advertising alone. We prefer to give our backing to local hero Henri Pescarolo and the two cars carrying his name in the hope that he can take the fight to the might of Audi.

Progress in the Vito is good and buoyed on by the sunny weather we are soon entering Portsmouth. With hours to spare before the ferry departs we decide to stop at a chippy. It doesn't pan out as expected, as the chips are a joke. If I could remember the name of the



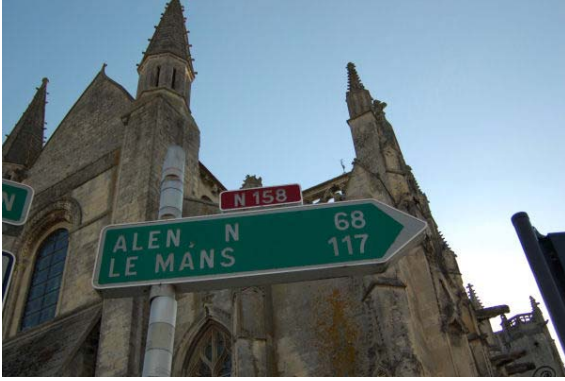
Trying out the camera in the ferry queue!

place I would warn you against it! We are consoled by the fact that it has to be better than Brittany Ferries best offering. We roll into the docks around 10pm and join the back of the queue. There is plenty of Le Mans bound traffic, although this early in the week it's mostly the advance parties in vans and campers, as we are. Time for some experimentation with the new camera and some last minute shopping (FHM and Neurofen: essential items for Le Mans campsites.)

By 11.30 we are safely on the ferry and straight up to the bar. Shortly after, the rumble of the engines signals we are Caen bound. We have a few quiet drinks as the DJ selects the Dirty Dancing medley, awesome! By 2am it's time to get some kip but to our horror an army of school kids have stolen all the blankets rendering our reclining chairs useless! We are forced to take shelter under some tables next to the restaurant. Surprisingly, Will and I manage to drop off but no such luck for Ed who is unable to deal with the cold. Unfortunately it's too much for him to take and he decides to wake us up out of spite. So at 4am we take the decision to pool our resources and give Will our towels as make shift blankets in the hope that he will be bright eyed and bushy tailed for tomorrow's drive. Ed and I are left to amuse ourselves for 3 hours, not an easy thing on a ferry in the middle of the night but we manage it by inventing a game based loosely around 90s classic, The Crystal Maze!

The dawn of Monday morning breaks. Finally the nightmare is over and we have arrived in Caen. We are waved off the ferry and onto French soil. It's the first time driving on the 'wrong' side of the road for Will and in his panic and confusion he decides to boost it through passport control. We are unceremoniously hauled back but they see the funny side, it is obvious we are heading for Le Mans!

Within 20 minutes we are ambling through the Normandy countryside with blue skies and bright sun above. It's 8am and the roads are typically quiet, it's obvious this is going to be a textbook road trip. With a whole week of petrol (and diesel) fuelled entertainment on the horizon I wonder if there is anywhere I would rather be. Our path takes us through Falaise (birth place of William the Conqueror) where we stop for croissants and strong coffee and then on through the forests north of Argentan and down to Alençon where we join the famous N138 that will take us all the way to the circuit. It's great to be back on this familiar stretch of road that will carry so many iconic and exotic sports cars over the next 7 days.



Falaise Cathedral



Taking a break on the N138 to Le Mans

By 11am we are skirting around Le Mans on the ring road, following the ‘vert’ signs that will lead us to green parking and Houx Annexe, our home for the next 7 days. On our final approach we steal the opportunity to drive the first part of the Mulsanne straight before peeling off and into the circuit confines. An empty Houx Annexe is stretched out in front of us. It has a distinctly alien feel to it, being so desolate compared to the noisy party venue it will become in just a few days. We pay the 16 Euro ‘suplement’ and we’re waved onto the campsite and off in search of the best pitch, there is a lot of choice! We settle on a tree-lined pitch in anticipation of hot weather and set to work erecting the base camp. One marquee, 3 tents, many heat exhaustion induced breaks on the sofa and much cursing later the camp is more or less complete. We kick back and pay homage to our work! Sitting there in the baking sun with an empty field bigger than a football pitch all to ourselves we could be anywhere. But we’re not, we’re at Le Mans and we know all we have to do is sit back and wait!



Marking out the pitch

Re-energised, we set off for the Carrefour Supermarket just up the road. They sell everything here and during race week it’s stacked out with British Le Mans fans that fill the car park with Caterhams and Porsches. Amongst our noteworthy purchases are a football and a giant pork fillet that later defeats us all with its massiveness.

The afternoon and evening is spent supping on warm Kanterbraus and cooking meat on the bbq (including aforementioned fillet of pork covered in garlic!). As the sun goes down the temperature doesn’t and we stay up for many hours discussing the likelihood of getting intimate with Intersport Racing’s Liz Haliday, the race’s only female driver! Eventually, last night’s lack of sleep catches up with us and we turn in. It’s been a successful first day in Le Mans.

We rise reasonably early on Tuesday and it looks like being another scorcher. We head off for breakfast at Bar Bugatti beyond the circuit's main entrance only to discover that they don't actually serve breakfast so we settle for a round of Croque Monsieurs and Heineken. It's a relaxing start to the day. Fuelled up, we head into Le Mans town centre to see the official scrutineering. This is a first for all of us so we don't really know what to expect. We discover that the atmosphere is incredibly relaxed and it's possible to get right up to the cars as they queue up to be examined. We catch our first glimpse of the Japanese entered sole Lamborghini Murcielago. It looks impressive and draws a great deal of interest from the predominantly local crowd. Will grabs the opportunity to get the



Murcielago: impressive

autographs of Saleen drivers Terry Borcheller and Johnny Mowlem. The latter is happy to chat about the team's prospects, which "could be better". I complete the Saleen autograph set by bagging Christian Fittipaldi's who totally blanks me, something I am not allowed to forget! After strolling amongst the drivers and cars in Quinconces des Jacobins for a while longer we retreat to the sanctuary of the trees to watch the first of the GT2 cars come through onto the weighing ramp. The crowds are

minimal and from our spot we get a good view of the numerous 911 entrants filing through. Simultaneously, Will spends the best part of an hour explaining the Porsche notation system to Ed who has been having trouble with it for years apparently! I could find this tiresome but somehow I don't mind and I lie back and absorb the major differences between a 930 and a 964 as the day rolls slowly by.

In the early afternoon we follow the narrow road that leads up to the city's cathedral entrance and from there we explore "La Vieux Mans" or the old town of Le Mans. It's easy to forget what a lot Le Mans has to offer other than the pinnacle of sports car racing but the old town in particular is a beautiful and historic location. Its maze of cobbled streets and steps provide an ideal backdrop for aimless wandering. We resist the temptation of a beer in one of the many bars we pass and, feeling particularly glad we took the time to explore our host city, we head back to the campsite.



La Vieux Mans

As the afternoon draws on there is no let up in the heat so there is nothing for it but to crash on the sofa and get stuck into the Kanterbraus! The evening is marked by another huge bbq, overeating is becoming a habit! The food has barely had time to settle when we decide to make an impromptu inspection of the new Village and Dunlop Chicane. Our resident mechanic, Will, readies the bikes and we are on our way, albeit slightly clumsily on overfilled stomachs. We find our way in via the Houx campsite and it isn't long before we are across the Bugatti circuit and up to the heavily revised Dunlop Chicane, bathed in floodlights. It's apparent that some of the spectacle of this corner has been taken away, not least because the viewing enclosures seem to have been drastically reduced on the infield section. Still, there is something special about seeing the circuit so tranquil, a definite quiet before the storm moment. We push on down through the new Village and notice that most of the public viewing area overlooking the pit exit has also vanished. The new buildings are for the most part taken up with merchandising for the teams or hospitality suits inaccessible by Joe Public. Fortunately, it's not all bad, the Village just about seems to have retained its character and the giant TV screen that serves the main square is a plus point. There is also much development still to be done so judgement is reserved at least until this time next year. We cruise down past the vast Audi, Corvette and Aston Martin hospitality areas and arrive at the entrance to the back of the pit lane. To our surprise we are granted access (presumably because it's so deserted) and we free wheel down past the transporter trucks occasionally passing mechanics and engineers working into the night. As we approach the head of the pit lane and the Racing for Holland pit we brush past Jan Lammers and Alex Yoong getting into a Kia hire car, we can't help thinking Jan could do better!

It's 11pm but the night is still young so we head back and crack open the rosé and the talk quickly moves onto Liz Haliday again! A couple of hours later and Ed has crashed in his tent. Unperturbed and fuelled by alcohol, Will and I decide to ride down to the Alain Prost Karting circuit with the hope of cycling the track. We are in luck and manage to bag one flying lap, which is both exhausting (it's a long lap!) and challenging (it's pitch black!). There is overtaking at every corner and contact more than once. Will takes the honours, just! Excitement over, day two in Le Mans draws to a close.

We rise late on Wednesday due to last night's exploits and no sooner are we up than 3 more of our team arrive; Bill, Dave and Phil from the Bradford and District VW club. They could have come in any plethora of old skool Dubs but, like us, opted for practicality this year and arrive in a Transporter van. Safely packed away in the van are the generator and the fridge (plucked from its usual spot in Bill's kitchen). I had promised them lunch on their arrival but our slip in schedule puts pay to this. Dave and I head out to the Super U at Arnage to pick up some supplies. It's smaller but much more



The Dubs: Dave, Bill and Phil

pleasant than Carrefour and the drive takes us along the pretty main drag through Arnage village. On the way we swap stories about the trip so far, their journey down seemingly being as trouble free as ours with more spectacular Le Mans traffic to boot. They were joined in the ferry queue by a couple of camper vans and topped this by somehow managing to get some sleep on the ferry!

Back on Houx Annexe lunch comes and goes complete with ‘nose incidents’ for some of us due to an overdose of ‘moutard’. The Dubs start to unpack the Transporter, revealing Bill’s brand spanker of a bike. Ed has already briefed Will and I about the “tank” so we all set about trying to lift it, professing that the cast iron frame is simply too heavy to get off the ground! Bike mockery over for now, the 6 of us head off for the pitlane walkabout.

The crowds are still to arrive in any great number so this provides an easy opportunity to get close to the racecars. As we enter the pitlane the 009 factory Aston Martin is wheeled



Prodrive’s Aston Martin DBR9

out in front of us providing a great photo opportunity and the mechanics are happy to explain a few intricacies of the car. This relaxed tone is reflected across the paddock, it’s always possible (with a little endeavour) to get to speak to someone from each of the teams and these discussions are usually very insightful. After much perusing we head back to base and prepare ourselves for the first action of the week in the form of qualifying session number one.

By 6.30 and with half an hour to go it turns decidedly overcast and cool so it is with trepidation that we head out to Tertre Rouge. We take up position at the exit of the corner and Bill gets in a round of beers from the tented bar. The anticipation to see the cars in anger for the first time builds steadily around us until finally the clock ticks over to 7 and we hear the roar of a V10 winding its way through the undulations of the circuit towards us. The noise grows ever louder until, some 15 seconds later, a Pescarolo bursts out of Tertre Rouge and on its way up to Mulsanne; the battle has started! The clouds overhead look ominous and sure enough the rain comes down within 5 minutes of the session start. This only adds to the spectacle as the no. 27 Miracle Motorsports Courage slides gracefully into the gravel followed minutes later by the Murcielago and finally the number 17 Pescarolo. The Pierre Bruneau Pilbeam Judd holds provisional pole for the best part of an hour, its driver being the only car to put in a genuine hot lap before the rain came down. However, as the 2-hour session rolls on, the rain eases off, the track begins to dry and the timing sheets take on a more familiar look with the Pescarolos and Audis assuming ascendancy.

We return to base, jump in the vans and drive out to Auberge des Hunaudieres, a legendary restaurant as much for its location as its food and drink; it is situated right on

the Mulsanne straight! We intend to get our fill at its less illustrious neighbour, Shanghai des 24 Heures, as it's far easier to get a table. Unfortunately, an insistent member of the gendarmerie turns us away on the final approach. Continuously changing and unfathomable road closures are all part of Le Mans but they can be frustrating none the less. There must be another way in but we decide to abort and head to Arnage village instead. Navigating around the surrounding area of the circuit is remarkably easy on Wednesday night and within 10 minutes we cruise into Arnage. We cross the railway tracks and leave the vans in a car park just before hitting the main road. Having never eaten here before we spend a few minutes checking out our options. Nowhere looks phenomenal but we find a place with tables on the street and quickly order 'entrecote et frites' and other simple dishes. It does the job! The 'grand bières' are almost downed when the air is split by the sound of rumbling V8s, it's 10pm and qualifying session number 2 is underway.

We drink up and make the short journey to Virage d'Arnage where there is free official car parking in 2 fields. Although it traditionally gets completely stacked out on Saturday causing huge tailbacks on the narrow lanes, it is easily accessible for now and the vans are parked up without any drama. We walk towards the entrance under the darkening sky with the crackling of race-tuned engines screaming at us from over the fence as the drivers down shift for the tight right-hander. Ed and Phil haven't had the pleasure of visiting Arnage before so, as we pass through the gate, I tell them simply "You're gonna love this!" We find ourselves right on top of Arnage corner but head for a spot 50 yards or so up the track towards Indianapolis where the crowds thin out and we can get to the front. Here the cars are rapidly decelerating for Arnage, which is easily visible, being bathed in floodlights. The Luc Alphand Corvette dives past with brake discs glowing and flames licking from the exhaust, it's fantastic to be standing hear once again! The rain comes down heavily with 40 minutes of the session remaining and the guys run for the cover of the vans. But I am able to stick it out thanks to the waterproofs and make my way to the apex of the corner to see prototypes and GT cars



Virage d'Arnage: spectacular

alike pirouetting in the treacherous conditions. The Murcielago (presumably unsighted) turns in on one of the little LMP2 cars. There is a crunching of carbon fibre before both drivers manage to collect themselves up and blast back into the forest and out of sight. The drama continues until midnight when the day's action comes to a close with the no. 16 Pescarolo driven by Frank Montagny holding provisional pole. Slightly waterlogged, we cruise back to the campsite whilst listening to Radio Le Mans. We stay up for a couple of hours drinking chilled beer from the now fully functioning fridge, a fitting way to end day three in Le Mans.

I'm up at 7.30 to grab a shower before the queues start to bite. For the next few days an early rise will be a necessity for anyone wishing to spend less than half an hour in the shower queue! Will emerges shortly after but the rest of the team opt for a smelly lie in. The 2 of us ride out to explore the shops and souvenirs on offer in the Village and as we exit Houx Annexe we pass a steady stream of exotic cars fully loaded with camping gear, the place is really starting to fill up now. We make our way up to the Dunlop Chicane and then coast down the hill into the Village before diving through the new underpass and on towards the tribunes opposite the pits. There is a plethora of shops down here in addition to the offerings at the infield section of the Village. One Gulf Racing t-shirt to the good we head off for a ride around Maison Blanche to see some of the crazy camping set ups and vehicles on display. We are particularly envious of the groups that have constructed scaffolding towers overlooking the circuit. For frivolity the 'Beermountain' team never fails to disappoint; for the second year running they have 10 choppers parked up on display, ready for a formation flight around the circuit. Lift off will be at 11am tomorrow according to their detailed information board! I notice a sign inside the entrance to their pitch that reads 'no fully clothed females beyond this point'. Lovely stuff! A team from Holland also boast an impressive setup with a gateway constructed from Heineken boxes! Amused, we retreat to the infield via the pedestrian underpass just outside Maison Blanche. It brings us out under the shadow of the media centre and the first of the pit buildings and from there we head onto the Bugatti circuit for a quick blast back up to Houx Annexe. It's almost midday so the rest of the guys are up (just about!).

The early afternoon is spent relaxing in the sun as the team slowly get themselves ready. England is playing this evening so we make time for a token kick about in the rapidly diminishing space adjacent to our pitch; the Carrefour football is up to the job! The day is meandering by when we get a call from the final 4 members of our team who inform us they are on the final approach to Houx Annexe after doing the slog from Boulogne. A couple of hours later (it sure is a long final approach) they cruise onto the pitch in a silver Elise and a yellow VX220. Out of the Lotus clamber Olly and Rich, Max and Andy do likewise from the VX. These guys, who I refer to as the Lotus boys, are all new to Le Mans and have been enticed down by the promise of 24 hour drinking. It's worth noting that it's Yorkshireman Andy's first time out of the UK and he has already burnt his arms and face in a stereotypical fashion! Introductions are made and plenty of Kanterbraus are sunk to welcome our latest arrivals.



Max's VX220 arrives at basecamp

By 5pm attention turns to today's track action and whilst Will escorts the Lotus boys to the Super U, the rest of us head out to the Esses to catch a part of the Historic Qualifying. We've missed the first session and have to wait around for grid no. 2 but eventually we find ourselves looking on as a steady stream of Austin Healeys and Jaguar C Types file

down towards us and go quietly on their way, drifting up through the trees and on towards Tertre Rouge.

In that direction Bill and I soon follow as we have plans to see England trounce the might of Trinidad AND Tobago at the Stella Bar. We head to the lively open air bar at the back of the building, arriving on the stroke of kick off where we find the atmosphere bubbling out onto the road; the joint is rammed! We squeeze into a spot from which the screen is just visible in the distance as the accommodating waitress battles the crowds to bring us our “deux Stella”! Now we are fit to enjoy the game and we soon engage in some banter with our fellow England fans, including one who has brought a Welshman along for the ride! Unfortunately England delivers another flat performance in the first half but it does little to dampen the spirits. The Stella continues to flow freely as the evening’s first qualifying session roars into life above us. Only yards away Corvettes rumble as the second half kicks off with hope a plenty. England stumbles on until beanpole Peter Crouch finally breaks the deadlock late on with a storming header. The bar erupts in predictable fashion, 1-0! Steven Gerrard adds a sublime second to complete the get out of jail and the game is over. Delighted, we head back to the campsite to regroup and fire up the bbq. In the hour between qualifying sessions all 10 of us are assembled for chargrilled merguez sausage and ‘steak hachés’ with the exception of Dave who is unluckily a vegetarian!

As the final qualifying session creeps up the light starts to fade and I decide to head out to Arnage on the trusty bmx accompanied by Bill and Phil. It’s a fair way to Arnage on a bmx with a rucksack full of beer weighing you down but Radio Le Mans via mobile and earphones provides entertainment enough to keep me going. However, as the journey nears its end I’m struggling to keep up and so, with only a couple of hundred metres to go, Bill makes a token gesture to take the rucksack, that’s what friends are for! We lock the bikes to a telegraph pole and make it into the enclosure with 10 minutes of the session gone. Ear defenders are donned so it is actually possible to hear the radio over the noise of the racecars and we manoeuvre ourselves into a spot against the spectator fencing. The session rumbles on and the pace gets noticeably quicker as each team tries desperately to



Final qualifying at Arnage

elevate themselves up Saturday’s grid. The prototypes in particular are able to carry a breathtaking amount of speed through Arnage despite the intimidating tyre wall on the exit. We crack open the beers and settle in for the qualifying battle. Radio Le Mans brings us news of Dindo Capello sticking the number 7 Audi on provisional pole with the sister car close behind. The Pescarolos are barely in touch at over 2 seconds a lap down. By 11pm the contest appears to settle down as the track gets slower and with an hour to go the MG-Lola run by

British outfit RML sits on pole in LMP2 with the 2 factory Astons locking out the front

row in GT1 and the Matmut 911 heading the GT2 field. We stroll up towards Indianapolis to see out the session with the hope the Astons can hold on. There are no major changes as the clock ticks towards midnight (the Audis march on to dominate the overall front row) but with the chequered flag dropped we get news that Ron Fellows in the number 63 Corvette is putting in one last flying lap in an attempt to wrestle the GT1 pole from Aston Martin. A few seconds later, Fellows comes rumbling by, the C6-R snaking around underneath him as he puts the power down out of Indianapolis. Minutes later we hear it is only enough for 3rd and the Astons are set to start Saturdays race in first and second, phew!

In jubilant mood we begin the cycle back to the campsite. Of course it is now pitch black and as only Bill has lights our visibility is atrocious. No matter though as there are hardly any cars on the road and the barmy evening weather and Kanterbraus in our bellies makes for an incredibly tranquil ride. There is a laid back approach that permeates everything at Le Mans; the marathon nature of the event dictates that there is never a need to rush. With this thought never far from our minds we continue merrily on our way back to basecamp! Our path is soon lit by the colossal fireworks display in the distant ACO Village, a fitting way to mark the end of a spectacular qualifying session. We are almost back in the confines of the circuit when one of the Gendarmerie stops Phil and I due to our lack of lighting! A few courteous 'pardons' with Bill looking on disdainfully and we are allowed on our way (on foot until we are safely out of sight!).

Back at basecamp the rest of the guys are steadily topping up the beermountain that Will and Rich assembled earlier in the day from the weeks carefully salvaged Kanterbrau bottles. The base weighs in at 26 bottles wide (our most ambitious yet) which leaves us with a requirement to sink a total of 351 bottles before the week is out. There follows an hour's valiant effort from everyone. Amidst all the drinking, Will tries to sneak his horrendous glasses on without anyone noticing (apparently contact lenses need to be changed after 4 days). Obviously I spot them almost instantly and the massive rims are methodically ridiculed. The resemblance to Harry Potter is uncanny! Eventually the exploits of the day catch up with us and the team disappear off to bed one by one. Day four in Le Mans draws to a close.

Friday brings another early start as Will and I head off to the Super U for some more supplies. On our return we find the Lotus boys ready to leave for the circuit cruise (the road section of track is traditionally reopened to public traffic on Friday). They ease the Elise and VX220 off the pitch and they're away. Will starts panicking that we are going to miss out but to his annoyance, I am unwavering in my determination to eat before we go. So it is not before another mustard induced nose incident and a lot of waiting around for the lazier amongst us that the 6 of us finally set off for Indianapolis (centre of the action) on the bikes. This proves to be a lonely ride for me as after 2 minutes the guys seem to grow tired of my slow pace on the bmx and they leave me for dust. I find them waiting 2 miles down the road. Next year I need a bigger bike!

We finally cruise up the road and into Arnage corner about 11 where we chain the bikes to the armco. As it turns out the cruise is just about at its peak. There is a phenomenal amount of machinery on display at the side of the road and a steady stream of sports cars file through Indianapolis and down through Arnage. There is the occasional distant sound of squealing tyres followed by applause as somebody decides to light the blue touch paper for the crowds. We spend the next couple of hours wandering amongst pearlescent paint jobs, polished steering wheels, carbon fibre wings and chrome bumpers. It is all too easy to become spoilt, as you know that the next 911 or Tuscan sighting is only seconds away.



Bill: sweaty

Ed and Will alert me to an orange Esprit with doors open and Bond music coming softly from the sound system. The Esprit has an interesting mod to the rear panel. I take a closer look, trying to figure out its purpose. To my surprise the device rotates and then squirts



Not much traction at Indianapolis!

me with water, it's a miniature water cannon! I look over my shoulder and see the owner standing 20 yards away laughing and waving with the cannon's remote control in hand. Our wandering takes us through Indianapolis (where we hook up with the Lotus boys) and some way up towards Mulsanne corner. An unofficial traffic restriction has been assembled here which consists of 2 huge flags being dangled across the road only to be raised on the premise of a burnout.

Many drivers oblige and the air is filled with tyre smoke and the smell of burning rubber! Eventually the gendarmerie can take no more and they roar in to confiscate the flags. To be fair to the gendarmerie they get the balance between enforcement and discretion about right. The crowds disperse and we make our move to leave. Bill, Dave and Phil are nowhere to be seen but these guys are quite big enough to fend for themselves (or so we think) so we leave without them!

We make it back to basecamp intact, having safely avoided all water pistol fire. As we chill under the shade of the marquee, the option of heading into town for the official drivers' parade is considered. Of course, it is an event worth seeing thanks to the thronging bars surrounding Place de Jacobins. This is where the drivers are paraded by on the back of vintage automobiles accompanied by bands, dance displays and the legendary Tropicana girls. However, I've been there twice before and with nearly 5 days of sleep deprivation beginning to take its toll I decide I would prefer to stay and soak up the

unique atmosphere on Houx Annexe. My minions are never comfortable thinking for themselves so they all agree to stay at basecamp for the rest of the day as well!

By late afternoon the crowds begin to gather on the Houx Annexe roundabout. They are there to watch the annual display put on by the obliging public. It starts as usual with a few controlled drifts and some comical vehicles like a car converted into a pirate ship! We are away for a few hours, safely supping beer in the sun but when we return at about 9pm the crowd has swelled to over a thousand and the unfortunate British mob culture takes over. The general idea now is to try and impress the crowd by being as big a twat as possible. On the road this means understeering off the roundabout (we actually saw someone get run over) and wild donuts within inches of the crowd. For the mob themselves this means throwing water and beer into vehicles (particularly any with French plates), sitting on and getting into passing cars, pulling cyclists off their bikes and vandalism of road signs. The majority are drinking so there is also a mountain of discarded beer bottles to contend with. It is tiresome to see so many taking the fun too far and I wonder how much the old Le Mans vibe will be compromised as more and more of this behaviour is witnessed each year.

Still, there is still plenty of legitimate entertainment to be had. We retreat to our tented haven and crack open another crate of Kanterbrau. Tonight is wine and cheese night in honour of Max's birthday but before it all kicks off the Dubs make a long awaited return. It seems that after the circuit cruise they pushed on and cycled the circuit, spending the afternoon at Hunaudieres eating pizza and getting considerably lashed. It is the senior Dubs, Bill and Dave, that have taken things over the edge. As they blabber on incoherently, young Phil conveys to us with a roll of his eyes that he has had to mind them for the best part of the evening! It quickly becomes apparent that Dave, the big trickster, laid his bike down whilst attempting to descend a particularly treacherous curb; the Le Mans tarmac came off a lot better than old Dave who now sports cuts and grazes to his shins. He proudly displays his wounds for all to see before collapsing to bed. Bill is still on a mission though and he joins us for more beers. Unable to sit without being very ill, Bill sways around dangerously and proceeds to utter a string of filthy lies. It is uncharacteristic for Bill but obviously very entertaining! However, the night has only just begun for some so at midnight and under a plethora of fireworks the quaffing of red wine and the devouring of French cheese begins! Tiredness takes a grip on me shortly after and I am forced to leave the guys to it. My fifth day in Le Mans is over at 1am as parties rage all around me on the Annexe.



Fireworks on Houx Annexe

Finally race day has arrived! By 8.30 I'm on my way up to the Village with chocolate brioche in my belly and in search of a print out of the official qualifying results. I try the ACO welcome area but am told they don't open till 10 so I give up and head towards the track knowing that the morning warm up is due to start at 9. I slip into the empty hospitality area overlooking the pit exit to see the Paul Belmondo Courage heading a small queue of cars waiting impatiently behind the white line for the session to start, engines idling and bodywork glistening in the early morning sunshine. The tribunes opposite are deserted and only 3 other spectators accompany me in this spot, leaving me with a feeling of exclusivity to be catching the first wheel turned in anger on race day. The quiet is shattered as engines explode into life further down pit road, exhaust notes reverberating around the garages and tribunes. In what feels like an instant, the pit lane comes alive with activity as all the teams move to get their cars onto track before the lights go green. Finally the circuit opens and the noise rises to an exhilarating crescendo as thousands of horsepower is released and the pack hammers up the hill towards the Dunlop chicane and out of sight. I stay long enough to see most of the teams put in a couple of hot laps then head back to base camp filled with an overwhelming anticipation for this afternoons race.

On my return some of the guys are up and Dave is admirably frying bacon for his comrades (I'm convinced he secretly wants to eat some). With breakfasts out of the way an event of great importance approaches: the annual go-kart race! The Lotus boys go off in search of supplies so it is just the 6 of us that ride out to the kart track. We arrive at 'Circuit de Alain Prost' at 10 just as it's opening and climb the steps to the top of the pit building. Here we can scope out the track before racing as well as take advantage of the aspect over the Le Mans circuit that will stage the first of the two historic races in only 15 minutes. Ed is unable to race thanks to ongoing back problems so he devises a brilliant method that will enable him to act as my spotter for the race. I dutifully set my mobile to automatic answer and plug in the earphones enabling Ed to relay any useful information or general bollocks from his vantage point. With that sorted, Ed's attention turns to other things and he is inexplicably convinced that he sees *the* Alain Prost walking towards the queuing customers below us. He calls out "Alain..." longingly time after time but is only met with a bemused and worried look from the random Frenchman!

By now the pre war historic race is under way below us; a long train of Bentleys, Talbots and Lagondas pass gracefully through the Porsche curves. Unfortunately they are largely unspectacular on this wide open section of circuit and as our knowledge of Le Mans in the 30s is sketchy none of us are able to stay interested for long. So we head down to the kart track, pay the 20 Euros each and try to select a crash helmet that doesn't smell too gruesome. With the previous session coming to an end I pull on a pair of gloves and don the helmet, remembering to wedge the mouthpiece from the earphones of my mobile under the visor. After clambering into the karts we are left waiting in grid formation for 30 seconds or so. I use the time to nudge Phil's kart a few times from behind until we are eventually let loose on the circuit! I appear out of the pit lane last of all but with my foot planted firmly to the floor. I have the advantage of knowing this circuit already and I make light work of dispatching Phil, Dave, Bill (who bottles it coming into the chicane) and a couple of random punters but Will has used the time to make his getaway. The final



Bill grabs some curb

together as we approach the hairpin again but I snatch the brakes and the back steps away from me. I'm busy gathering it up when I faintly hear Ed shouting down the phone at me. Unfortunately it's too noisy to make it out. I slowly reel Will in again as does he to a 'random'. The result is we are all running within a few kart lengths of each other as we approach the hairpin for the last time. Random holds the inside line and, as Will tries to stick it around the outside, Random locks up and the two of them almost tangle as he drifts wide. I take the opportunity to dive down the inside and Will and I emerge out of the corner side by side with Random out of contention. I'm trailing by a matter of inches! I have the line for the approaching chicane but we never get there as despairingly the session is over and we are waved into the pits. I concede the spoils to Will for the second year running. With the karts coasting the noise levels drop off and I hear Ed through the earphones telling me I should have tried harder!

corner, a double apex hairpin, is pre and proceeded by long straights enabling me to monitor the gap between us each lap. I think I'm closing but it's obvious I'm not going to make it. Gallantly, Will eases off the throttle until I'm in touch and the battle begins. On the next lap I'm faster out of turn 4 and as we approach the next corner the gap comes right down. Will has the line so I give him a gentle punt. His head lolls about wildly and I find myself laughing into my helmet! We are running close



Session over, the berating begins

We exit the karts (some of us ungracefully) and spend many minutes berating each other over the incidents on the track! Eventually we decide to head up to the Village for a wander around and some lunch. We cycle back through Karting Nord and drop through the new underpass that takes us inside the Bugatti circuit and on towards the Village. I still have my earphones in and receive the news that a Talbot has won the pre war race, presumably to the satisfaction of the growing French crowd! Keeping to the Eastern perimeter of the Village we ride up the hill behind the dozens of Advan and Dunlop tyre trucks until we find ourselves at the ACO Welcome Area. The guys are able to come in as my guests by paying a one off 5 Euro fee for the weekend. Once inside we get some baguettes in and kick back in the spacious surroundings. There is a big screen that will later show the main event meaning this could be a good location to catch up on the action and recuperate away from the crowds. After the French sticks have settled we spend a few minutes trying to blag as much official merchandise as possible (you can never have

too many 24 Heures du Mans bumper stickers!) before embarking on a stroll around the Historic Paddock.

By this time the second historic race has come to a close and all the competitors have returned leaving the paddock full to capacity. Amidst the many legendary marques of



Sir Stirling Moss

yesteryear I spot Stirling Moss discarding his racing overalls. He is then helped up onto the rostrum at the head of the paddock where he presents the driver of the winning Jaguar C Type with his trophy. Good to see old Stirling still doing what he loves best! I bring the troops together at the head of the paddock and we ride off to Houx Annexe to begin our preparations for the big race. The start is only 4 hours away now and I realise that after a whole week of anticipation and merriment it is almost upon us.

Back at basecamp we hook up with the Lotus boys who are back from their successful supply run. I find somewhere to lounge and with beer in one hand and FHM in the other I subliminally run through what I need to take to the circuit (being away from the sanctuary of the basecamp for such a long time in the searing heat without absolutely all necessary items to give the race its full attention could be potentially disastrous). The remaining void before the race start is filled typically kicking about in the sunshine, chilling out. I relay to Rich my opinions on who are the key runners in the race as he has started to show an interest in following it. I try my best to arm him with the knowledge he'll need but this isn't an easy feat once you get trackside even with the help of Radio Le Mans. However, he seems content with the small amount of info I've been able to convey! Meanwhile, Olly and Max aren't looking too fresh after all of last night's cheese (and wine!) whilst Andy nonchalantly displays his expertly evened up tan; flaming red all over. Bill simply takes the time to sweat some more into the cap that I lent him. I can't see me ever wanting that back.

Eventually I declare to the camp that I'm going to head off to Tertre Rouge at 3pm, a full two hours before race start. This has become something of a ritual for me, as I prefer to find a spot trackside and seize some space before watching the crowds build around me. However, this news is met with little enthusiasm! When the time comes Will and Ed alone agree to head out with me. The three of us load the rucksack up with beer, water and whatever else before I adjust my mobile and earphones setup to comfortably bring me a hands free live Radio Le Mans feed for the rest of the day. Now we are fit and to Tertre Rouge we go!

There are only a few people dotted across the bank on the inside of Tertre Rouge when we arrive so we find a spot at the front and lay back on the scorched grass. We crack

open the first of the Kanterbraus under clear blue skies and blazing sun and settle in for the build up. We are treated to a monotonous stream of Audi A4s and TTs parading past on the track; it's very easy to get tired of seeing the Audi badge at Le Mans this year! I find myself drifting off (a product of the Audi induced boredom) only to be woken by the traditional playing of the competitors' national anthems that is being piped through the loudspeaker system. Ed and Will rise to their feet for the turn of the British anthem. Their patriotism has never extended to them learning the words I notice.

Shortly after the anthems have ceased, the rest of the boys arrive and pile into the space behind us. With our backs to them we are sitting targets and Rich, the cheeky blighter, deposits clumps of grass on my head. He shows no sign of stopping despite my protests! No matter, as the race is nigh and it isn't long before the competitors are out on track. Excitement builds as the racecars cruise past in dribs and drabs, gleaming and ready for action. Another period of waiting and then the unmistakable din from over the hill signals the reappearance of the pack on the circuit for the green flag lap; the start is now just minutes away. The procession of 50 cars, lead by the no. 7 and 8 Audis, snakes by us with some drivers weaving around wildly to get some heat into the tyres as they make their way onto the Mulsanne. I listen to the radio intently for the next few minutes as a wave of excitement passes through the crowd in electric anticipation of the race start. Months, maybe even years of planning all hinge on the next 24 hours for each and every team and the nervous energy this creates is not just felt in the paddock, but on every conceivable inch of ground around this most famous of circuits. As the train approaches the Ford Chicane Radio Le Mans' Geordie commentator 'Hindy' gets increasingly vocal until, at 5pm precisely, the tricolore is dropped and the 2006 24 Heures du Mans is under way. History is made as a diesel powered car leads the field for the first time ever. The crowd around me rise to their feet simultaneously as the sound of the pack draws ever closer, rising to an exhilarating intensity. Two helicopters pass overhead and then finally the phenomenal sound of rapidly down shifting boxes signals the arrival of the leaders into Tertre Rouge. The Audis appear in a flash from the apex of the corner and accelerate blisteringly past us, totally drowned out by ever more spectacular Pescarolos that pursue them on the run out to Mulsanne. As the rest of the field scream by I am faced with a sensory overload of colour and noise that sends a wave of adrenalin through my body. Amidst all this I see that the 007 and 009 factory Astons have got away without drama and head the GT1 field with Corvettes, privateer DBR9s and Ferraris in tow. Still the cars come streaming through and Scuderia Ecosse's 430 proudly heads an ultra competitive GT2 field. I catch sight of the brutal sounding LNT Panoz near the back of the pack and then as quickly as they came, they are gone. I listen to the engine notes singing out above the trees for a long time as the racecars put some distance between us and then I turn to the rest of the guys to exchange looks of incredulity and of course enjoyment!

The first few laps are a demonstration of just exactly what the Audis are capable of with the no.7 and 8 cars pulling out a considerable lead over the chasing pack. Remarkably though, the first major incident arrives with the race only 20 minutes old. The BMS Scuderia Italia DBR9, whilst running fourth in GT1, falls off the track at the Porsche Curves and, according to the radio, strikes walls on both sides of the track, damaging the Aston beyond repair. It must be an unbelievable disappointment for the Italians. The

appearance of the safety car throws the race into some disorder as many teams choose to pit under caution. The next time the GT1 field emerges out of Tertre Rouge we are dismayed to see that the two Pratt & Miller Corvettes have jumped the factory Astons out of pit road to take a 1-2 class lead. More disappointing is to follow as Turner's 007 car fails to even make an appearance on the following lap. Radio Le Mans' man in the pit lane reliably reports that the DBR9 left a trail of fluid in the pit lane during the opportune stop and is now back in the garage having the leak investigated. It transpires that Turner ripped an oil line and possibly damaged the sump by jumping the curbs whilst navigating the pit entry. We wait patiently to see the 007 car back on track but it doesn't emerge until it is over 6 laps down. It's a massive blow so early in the race, especially given the low rate of attrition in GT1.

With almost an hour gone it's time for a culinary delight: merguez sausages and fries from the Tertre Rouge food stall. I fight my way through the crowds to claim this crème de la crème of French cuisine and then retreat to an empty area of grass where I can sit down and inspect it. Unbelievably the merguez oozes even more orange grease than in previous years and the first taste confirms a staggering amount of salt. This is perhaps not the wisest thing to eat in such high temperatures but it's all part of Le Mans so it has to be done. The cholesterol intake separates the men from the boys as only Bill and I remain with everyone else returning to base. We decide to switch locations and head out in an anti-clockwise direction around the track. Our route takes us to the outfield via the pitch-black underpass where we have to keep our wits about us knowing that any number of French scoundrels could be lurking in the darkness! Safely on the other side we scuddle to the front of the crowds to get within close proximity of the cars as they power down the hill from the Esses and jump on the brakes for Tertre Rouge. Good news filters through to us regarding the promotion of the 009 Aston to second in class owing to a spin from Johnny O'Connell in the 63 Corvette. The resulting kiss with the barrier at the Porsche Curves and subsequent pit stop costs the no. 63 car a couple of laps and drops it down the early GT1 running order.



The run down to Tertre Rouge

Bill is getting missed calls and messages from the rest of the group who have finished tarrying around at basecamp and are now trying to locate us. Trying to hold a phone conversation within 15 feet of a Panoz Esperante with the throttle wide open is nigh on impossible and Bill gets rather stropy at the prospect. Eventually though, he does manage to arrange a rendez-vous just up the hill at the Esses. In that direction we head and find the guys amongst the crowds at the exit of the corner. Here, we hang about in the shade of the trees, marvelling at the sight and shear noise of the racecars as they are thrown first left and then right through this natural amphitheatre. At this point I admittedly long for the sanctuary of the adjacent tribune where I could sit down and



A Pescarolo blasts through the Esses

Tom Kristensen. On the contrary, I now have raised optimism for the plight of Henri Pescarolo.

We press on, picking our way through the crowds with the Village our general heading. We pass the heaving Dunlop Bridge and the adjacent stage (venue for this evening's Charlatans concert) and then begin the decent through the Dunlop chicane. Passing in front of the Dunlop tribune allows us to maintain a view of the circuit and as we amble along in single file I also keep an eye on the giant TV screen on the circuit infield that serves this whole spectator area. A replay of an earlier incident flashes up that grabs everyone's attention due to its spectacular nature. The no. 37 Paul Belmondo Courage is shown in slow motion on the run down towards Indianapolis, the fastest part of the circuit, where it suffers a sudden and catastrophic failure that rapidly destroys the rear body work and pitches it sideways into the armco. It's a big impact and means instant retirement for the Courage. I strain to hear any information through my earphones about the incident. After 3 or 4 minutes I am able to piece together that the no.37 car unsurprisingly suffered a blowout but more interestingly that the resulting debris impacted the tailing no. 7 Audi of Dindo Capello, hence the reason for the Audi's lengthy stop. Further, it seems the damage sustained to the no.7 car was related to the ECU as well as the fuel filter and both items were replaced. This clears up the confusion over the Audi's eventual 20+ minute stop and the reason that Kristensen now finds himself out on track in 13th place and over 7 laps down.

By now we are strolling through the circuit's main underpass and, emerging out of the darkness, we find ourselves at the head of the Village. Disarray quickly ensues, as nobody is capable of making a decision on what to do next. Bill uses the confusion to do some opportunist shopping and goes off in search of some Le Mans related clothing. Over the last 5 years Bill has made the incredible decision to strictly reserve all clothes shopping for automobile events such that his wardrobe is now exclusively car related. With this in mind it is easy to appreciate that the Le Mans Village to Bill is like Oxford Street to the next man. He reappears beaming 5 minutes later having bagged a TVR t-shirt and a very unofficial looking 24 Heures du Mans t-shirt. Having completed his clothes shopping for the summer Bill is ready for a beer so we make the easy decision to stroll over to the Welcome Area for a couple of relaxing pints whilst the Lotus boys hunt

watch the race unfold. However, I can never justify the cost so instead we find ourselves meandering by and up the hill watching the racecars carve their way through the landscape far below us. As we walk I'm hearing reports of the no. 7 McNish/Capello/Kristensen Audi being wheeled into the garage. The information is sketchy but there has been some mention of a fuel filter issue. Whatever the problem, it is a huge blow to the thousands of Danes who are here to support record breaking Le Mans star

down some dinner. Once inside we head for the bar and, whilst waiting for the cold Kronenbourgs to be poured, we are kept updated on the track action thanks to the big screen. The no. 8 Audi has pulled out a healthy lead of just under a lap from the two Pescarolos at the head of the race with the Racing for Holland Dome in 4th. In LMP2 the British RML team find their MG Lola in a familiar class leading position with a comfortable 3 minute cushion over compatriots Rollcentre Racing with their debuting Radical SR9. The no. 64 Gavin/Beretta/Magnusson Corvette maintains a slender 20 second GT1 class lead over the 009 Lamy/Ortelli/Sarazzin Aston, an advantage gained in the earlier pitstops. An incredibly diverse and competitive GT2 field is led at this early stage by, perhaps surprisingly, the no. 86 Spyker Squadron car. Only a minute further back are the Porsche 911s of Seikel Motorsports and the experienced White Lightning Racing.

With the chilled beers successfully purchased we head to the beer garden and find some chairs on which to recline and watch the sun go down. The roar of the racecars heading up the pit straight dominates everything but I am paradoxically peaceful. It stems from the knowledge of the enormous efforts being exerted by drivers, mechanics and engineers alike that is in stark contrast to our own state! As we sit chatting and drinking I know that each competitor has completed barely 20% of this marathon event and as day turns to night around us the cars will keep lapping relentlessly despite the new challenge brought about by the failing light. There is something inexplicably reassuring and calming about that and it is the best way I can attempt to describe the almost magical feeling of sundown at Le Mans.



The magic of sundown at Le Mans

After another couple of pints the Dubs decide to head off to Arnage whilst Will goes off in search of the Lotus boys. So, Ed and I are left to explore the General Enclosure and our first port of call is the tartiflette stall! At 5 Euros a pop it probably represents the most food per Euro and we figure you can't go wrong with simply potato, cheese and bacon! It hits the spot and so it is with full bellies that we meander down to the Ford Chicane. We take the pedestrian underpass to the circuit outfield and find our way onto the steps in front of the first of the pit straight tribunes. This spot looks out over the last corner on the circuit (the Ford Chicane) and has the added benefit of being served by another giant TV screen. Talking is out of the question here so we do our best to pick up some race info through the combined mediums of radio and TV. Apparently, the no. 16 Pescarolo, that had been vying for second place with its sister car, has been forced into the garage with Nic Minassian at the wheel after intermittently losing power out on the circuit. It has already been a lengthy 30 minute stop and the Pescarolo has dropped down the running order with the Racing for Holland Dome moving up to a class and overall third position. In LMP2 the Rollcentre Radical has apparently taken over the class lead from the RML

MG-Lola but as we watch we see both British cars enter pit road within a lap of each other and seconds later the radio reports that the slick RML team have taken back the class lead. There is no change at the front of the GT1 field but the 009 DBR9 continues to run within spitting distance of the class leading Vette. Meanwhile in GT2, Spyker Squadron have surrendered the class lead to Seikel Motorsports and the Scuderia Ecosse team have driven their Ferrari 430 to a promising third in class.

It's extremely busy in our current spot so as the clock ticks towards midnight we make the decision to move on and in the direction of home. Our path follows the pit straight tribunes where we stumble across a Chi-Chi stall and feel obliged to buy a portion. I don't know exactly what this stuff is but it's deep fried and covered in sugar. Sweet! We cross back under the circuit at the main entrance and head up the hill to catch some action at the Dunlop Chicane. On the horizon bright lights signal the ongoing Charlatans concert that we forgot about! More importantly Ed catches news over the radio of the intensity of the battle at the head of the GT1 field. Pedro Lamy has brought the Aston to within 13 seconds of the leading no. 64 Corvette of Oliver Gavin. The two of us are leaning on the spectator rail, unable to talk due to the circuit noise but animated at the prospect of seeing the Aston swallow up the Vette and lead GT1. Ed starts counting the gap each lap and he signals to me that it's coming down. Gavin is being reeled in and within a few laps the gap is down to only 9 seconds! The next time they come round the Aston is lapped by the prototype Creation Autosportif car under braking into the chicane. As they accelerate through the apex of the corner the Creation's driver squeezes the throttle a bit too eagerly and the back steps round leaving him broadside in the middle of the track. Lamy is forced to stamp on the brakes to avoid collecting the stricken Creation. Ed and I exchange a knowing glance that reflects the near miss. It has cost the Aston driver a few precious seconds in the fight for the lead. By now, fatigue is just beginning to set in on us so we make the decision to head back to basecamp and leave with the real hope that the Aston will make the pass at some point through the night. I realised many years ago that trying to actually stay awake for the whole 24 hours is just not an option and this year, instead of trying to stave off the sleep long into the night, I intend to crash early (relatively) and try to get up for Sunday morning's dawn. Ed has no intentions of getting up early tomorrow morning; he just needs a lot of sleep, probably to channel his energy into growing the afro! Back on the Annexe I set the alarm on my phone for 5am and retire to the tent amidst a cacophony of noise emanating from the nearby Mulsanne. This is the end of an exhilarating sixth day in Le Mans.

I am woken from deep sleep by the unsympathetic alarm and after a few bleary seconds I register the intense noise of the race that fills the air. Any thoughts of going back to sleep are replaced with renewed excitement to return to the circuit and discover what has happened in the 4 or so hours I've been away. I throw some clothes on and scramble out of the tent into the warm night air. It's still dark but there are the first signs of a pale glow in the sky. I grab a quick wash that banishes the last dregs of tiredness and wolf down a pain au chocolate to rid me of the slightly faint early morning feeling. Then I jump on the bmx and ride away in the direction of the circuit. Every tent I pass is zipped up tightly and there is virtually no movement across the Annexe. The ghostly feeling is difficult to comprehend given the enveloping sound of the race. I press on towards the General



The race thunders on as dawn approaches

Enclosure and the Dunlop Bridge where I cross the circuit and pause to take in its iconic form in the first light of the day.

By now I'm starting to piece together the Radio Le Mans commentary and I arrive at the realisation that the 009 Lamy/Ortelli/Sarrazin Aston leads GT1 by just under a lap! Apparently the hard slog taking place in front of me has been played out relentlessly through the night. My only regret is that I've had to miss any of it! In LMP1 the no. 8 Audi has extended its lead

over the no. 17 Pescarolo to over 3 laps. I patch together the scarce information on the LMP2 fight and deduce that the RML has a commanding 6 lap lead over the Miracle Motorsports Courage thanks in part to problems that have beset the one time leading no. 39 Chamberlain Synergy car during the night. In GT2 the running order at the top remains unchanged but the battle has obviously been raging through the darkness with the Seikel 911, Spyker and Scuderia Ecosse's Ferrari 430 still within 2 laps of each other.

I coast down the dusty path towards the Esses where I stop briefly to take some pictures from the usually packed vantage point at the corner's exit before continuing on to Tertre Rouge. The approach to the corner is practically deserted with only a handful of spectators there to accompany me and half of those are sleeping peacefully in camping chairs as the race roars on only feet away. On the circuit I notice one by one all the teams that are still running and I am delighted that the majority of cars that I'm looking out for have made it through the night. The Murcielago is still running and continues to emit a vicious sound from its V12 block as its Japanese crew blast it around the famous circuit as recklessly as ever. In fact, as I watch, the current Murcielago driver turns in on one of the prototypes who's driver is attempting to make a pass through Tertre Rouge. There is a painful scraping sound as the two cars lock together through the apex of the corner. No apparent damage done, it's just another typical sportscar incident of which this race has had more than its fair share. Indeed, the night has obviously claimed some victims as the racecars are noticeably more spread out thanks to the declining field. In particular I haven't seen the Racing for Holland Dome that was running third overall when I went to



The Esses: spectacular as ever in the gloomy morning light

bed. I am left to wonder about its plight, as it's incredibly difficult to get a rundown on the retirements so far despite listening to the radio constantly.¹



Diesel and Audi reign supreme as the sun rises over Tertre Rouge

At about 6am I switch to the Tertre Rouge infield where I plant myself at the corner's apex. I hear news of significantly falling lap times across all 4 classes, a result of the return of the daylight and the rising track temperatures. At a little over half distance, it is a real defining point of the race. The lack of spectators leaves me feeling particularly lucky to witness the spectacle unfolding before me and it serves to add to the unique charm of dawn in Le Mans. To cap it off I get some great shots of the sun rising over the trees behind Tertre Rouge (spoiled as ever by the catch fencing!).

Back on the bmx I feel it's time for a more serious excursion so I head out to the 'Porsche Exterior' via the Dunlop Chicane, the Village and the Karting Nord campsite. As I'm ambling along I zone into the radio and hear news of the Scuderia Ecosse Ferrari in pit road for an unscheduled and already lengthy stop. The Radio Le Mans reporter tells of mechanics grappling with a rear wheel that has apparently bound itself to the drive assembly. With the Ferrari stranded, the Scots see a GT2 podium finish disappearing before their very eyes. I share in their disappointment as I drop down into Karting Nord.

There are a few more people about now and the smell of bacon and sausages fills the air as I traverse the campsite. I arrive at Porsche Exterior and make my way past the vast Danish village of identical tents and up the short embankment to the circuit. From here it's possible to see the long approach to the Porsche Curves (almost as far as Arnage) as well as the first of the Porsche Curves itself that sweeps uphill in front of the enclosure. I dump the bike and join a few of the Danes who are watching the race in the early morning sunshine. Radio Le Mans returns to the live broadcast from the Scuderia Ecosse pit box where it seems that attempts to free the troublesome wheel have become increasingly desperate. After unsuccessful attempts to drill it the mechanics are now going at it with a hammer and chisel! Eventually the Ferrari appears back out on the circuit over an hour after the problem was first discovered and a bitterly disappointing 20 laps off the lead.

I stroll down to the perimeter of the enclosure where I notice the catch fencing has been eased down. It's too good an opportunity to miss so I step over the flattened fence and walk along the grass verge until I have a completely unimpeded view of the corner. I am

¹ It is not until I get back to the UK that I eventually discover how the Dome's race met an unsavoury end when it collided with the armco at high speed at one of the Mulsanne chicanes around 5am. Alex Yoong was behind the wheel and blamed a stuck throttle.

only there for a couple of minutes when a Ferrari 550 gets things ever so slightly wrong and runs wide. Once both nearside wheels have fallen off the road there is no chance of a save and the car plunges head long into the gravel. This is a very fast part of the circuit and the gravel can only wash off some of the Ferrari's speed; the resulting impact with the tyre wall is a big one. After the dust has settled I realise the stricken racecar is the no. 67 Convers Menx 550, one of the privateer GT1 cars that was running way down the order. Marshalls rush to the scene as Alexei Vasiliev clammers out. He is quickly up and over the tyre wall and stomps over to the embankment where I am standing. His helmet is tugged off, his gloves are thrown to the ground in despair and he sits with his head in his hands, presumably trying to think of a way to explain this away to an angry team and a couple of drivers robbed of the chance of completing the 24! Meanwhile, a less than courteous steward is harassing me to return to the public enclosure. It's fair enough! I wait around (on the correct side of the fence), transfixed by the trashed 550 as it is hauled out of the gravel. Once I've had my sadistic fill of mashed up Ferrari I pick up the bmx and leave the Danes to their patch.



Vasiliev considers what might have been...



...meanwhile, the 550 Marenello is hauled from the gravel trap

By the time I've cruised back onto the Annexe it's 8.30 and Rich is up, driven from his tent by the rising temperatures. I regale him with news of the 009 Aston leading GT1 and as we converse the rest of the crew appear slowly from our own small village of tents. The pace is leisurely as the guys try to come to terms with being awake but this I welcome as an opportunity to seriously chill after the day's early start. The remaining food reserves are piled onto the small camping table and steadily depleted over the next couple of hours, as we do nothing more strenuous than contemplate the dismantling of the basecamp as the race thunders on all around us.

The consensus is that we will get everything packed up before the end of the race, allowing us to follow the climax knowing that all is in place for a relaxing drive back up to Caen for the night ferry. The arduous task is put off for a little longer as we give the Vito its final run into Arnage with the Elise and VX220 in tow. We make a beeline for the village petrol station where we brim the vehicles with cheapish petrol and diesel in preparation for the journey home. Careful planning also necessitates the purchasing of many snacks! Loaded up, we burn back to the campsite on the remarkably quiet roads and with the radio locked in on Radio Le Mans I catch up on some key retirements in GT2. I hear of the demise of the plucky Spyker team who lost their second car a little after 9 this morning with a terminal engine failure. This promoted the Taisan 911 into second and the LNT Panoz into 3rd. However in the last few minutes the Taisan Porsche has also given up the ghost with gear selector problems allowing Team LNT to steal into a credible second, albeit 8 laps off the comfortable class leading Seikel Porsche. With RML extending their lead to a huge 15 laps in LMP2 and the Aston continuing to stave off the threat of the chasing Corvette in GT1 the race updates provide extended optimism of British success this year. Elsewhere the lead Audi of Biela/Piro//Werner has started to rebuild its advantage over the no. 17 Pescarolo at the head of the race.

Back at base there can be no more procrastination, as the packing must begin. Ed makes the first move by dragging all the kit from his tent and I soon follow his example by attempting to make some sense of the mess that my sleeping quarters have become in the last week. We all amble about in the sunshine making slow progress until a realisation dawns upon us; the beermountain is still over 10 rows from completion! This means that urgent drinking is required from the whole team to produce the 50+ empty bottles to complete the mountain. From this point on all packing must take place in conjunction with frequent Kanterbrau intake, a rule enforced by a determined Andy. In the now blazing heat the regime is punishing such that by the time all the tents have been disassembled some 45 minutes later, most of us are fairly bladdered. We have however



The prestigious 'topping out' ceremony

succeeded in completing all but the last three rows of the mountain. We sit back and savour the last stages of our most remarkable creation. Andy deals out the final Kanterbraus and the honour of 'topping out' the mountain is bestowed on Rich. As the bottles are sunk Will carefully places them atop the dangerously listing structure until only the cap of the mountain is absent. Our French neighbours look on with undoubted admiration as we line up and sing the Rocky theme to celebrate Rich's approach to the mountain. An arm is extended...

there is a glint as the sun catches the slowly descending bottle... then there is the heart warming chink of glass on glass as the Kanterbrau stubby touches down in its final resting place. It is over, for the bearmountain is complete.



Bottle number 351 touches down and the 'glueless' beermountain is completed



After the wild applause has died down we set about dismantling the marquee and squeezing the two van size piles of kit into the vans. As we work I hear the news that I've been dreading over the radio; the 009 Aston is in pit road for an unscheduled stop. I down tools and give my full attention to the live commentary. It seems that the Prodrive team have been dealt a momentous blow with the demise of the Aston's clutch. They have no alternative but to garage the DBR9 and change the clutch, thereby handing over the class lead to the primed Corvette of Beretta/Gavin/Magnusson, something that comes to pass within a matter of minutes. Next, the recovering 007 DBR9 takes over second in class from its sister car but with the gap to the new class leader sitting at over 3 laps, an Aston victory can now only be realised through a failure to the ultra reliable Pratt and Miller car. Our hopes of trouncing the yanks have been dashed and with this comes an inevitable feeling of deflation. The packing is completed with a noticeable lack of spirit but by 2.30 everything is in save the sofa that sits forlornly by the trees, never to return to the stable from whence it came. With everything set for a quick getaway, everyone except the Lotus boys (who haven't quite filled their two seaters to the gunnels) stroll off to the Esses to relish the final few hours of drama that the 24 Hours has to offer.

On arrival there are very few spectators trackside because most are drawn to the pit straight as the finish looms ever closer. We too will head in that direction but for now we stay and enjoy an unimpeded aspect over the circuit. Things have settled down at the front of the race as the no.8 Audi now benefits from a 4 lap cushion over the no. 17 Pescarolo in second with the second Audi a further 9 laps back. RML continue to dominate LMP2 with a 15 lap lead over the intense battle for second involving the Miracle Motorsports Courage and the Binnie Motorsports Lola. In GT1 the problems for the 009 Aston have also benefited the privateer Corvette of Luc Alphand Aventures who now occupy the final place on the podium. There is no change in GT2 although the Panoz of LNT Automotive has managed to cut the Seikel Porsche's lead down to 6 laps.

The past 30 minutes has failed to hold Ed's interest and when I look round he is lying down in the reddish dirt that makes up the viewing embankment. Ed has stayed uncharacteristically clean throughout the week so I presume he sees this as one of his last opportunities to absorb some Le Mans grime. When the time comes to move on a reluctant Ed rolls onto his front to ensure a full covering!



Ed loves the Le Mans dirt

We take an extremely leisurely walk across the sparsely occupied circuit infield towards the Village, stopping every so often to check on the remaining contenders on the circuit. Many have noticeably eased off the gas, obviously trying to nurse the battered racecars through the final couple of hours. All are carrying signs of the battle, be it taped up bodywork, cracked windscreens or side panels caked in black brake dust. Empty spectator areas and a depleted and battered field emphasise the longevity of this event. However, as we pass through the Interior Musee campsite and beyond the Dunlop Bridge the crowd steadily builds and by the time we get to the Village the familiar circuit buzz is apparent once again. Our first port of call is the Welcome Area for some lunch but they are disappointingly out of food. Unperturbed we head for the tried and tested tartiflette stall. With the cheesy provisions purchased, we find a spot of shade adjacent to the hospitality suites and sit down on the tarmac to eat. The tartiflette hits the spot once again. I do, however, find it necessary to supplement the main course with a Grand Marnier covered crêpe and I am very glad I did!

Finally it is time to leave the sanctuary of the Village and head for the tribunes to see the race finale. We drag our tired and overheating bodies through the underpass one last time and trudge on to join the heaving masses in front of the pit straight tribunes. With concentration waning in the heat Dave gets separated from the strung out pack, something that remains unbeknown to us until it is too late. About that time Will also gets a message from the Lotus boys to say that they are already on the road and in search of an air-conditioned hotel somewhere en route to Boulogne! So it is that just the 5 of us find ourselves amongst the crowds just opposite the end of pit road to see out the final half an hour of the 2006 24 Heures du Mans. It has been a remarkable week and as I sit cramped in the dirt, dehydrated and exhausted, sun unabatedly beating down, I find myself wishing that the whole incredible festival would just roll on and on and sweep me along with it. Alas, we can't stay here forever as we all have jobs and/or girlfriends to go back to! I zone into the commentary for the final time, not expecting there to have been any

significant developments. But, to my great surprise, LNT Automotive now lead GT2, an astonishing performance with their debutant Panoz Esperante! The change in class lead came to pass through a failure to the Seikel Motorsports Porsche out on circuit. It lay stranded at Arnage as the Panoz gobbled up its lead much to the anguish of the Seikel team. The 911 eventually got going again, apparently thanks to some heroics from the driver, but not before the LNT car had roared into the lead. Now, with less than half an hour remaining, a famous victory for the Yorkshire based team must surely be realised and with RML leading LMP2 so convincingly there is much to cheer for the British fans.

And so it is, with the race exhausted of incidents and the clock showing 4.57, the two British cars dart past us for the final time with their respective class wins all but in the bag. The sight of each of them is met with raucous cheering from the British contingent in the heaving terraces and tribunes. We are then treated to formation drive-bys from the Audi, Corvette, and Pescarolo pairings. Although I'm sad to see the Astons beaten again in GT1 I do have huge admiration for the Pratt & Miller run Corvettes. As they rumble past nose to tail looking undeniably menacing it is obvious what a well polished outfit they are. I cant help wondering just how many Vettes GM have sold of the back of their Le Mans exploits. As for the Pescarolos, they deservedly draw a standing ovation up and down the pit straight in recognition of their titanic effort in LMP1. Sadly, they have been beaten by an Audi research and development programme, incomparable to their own in terms of investment. The big screen opposite beams images of the Biela/Pirro/Werner Audi slowly leading the massing bunch of cars down the Mulsanne for the final time, an image presumably met with courteous approval and another glass of champagne in the vast Audi hospitality areas around the circuit. The final lap is more than just an appreciation of the Audi machine however; it is a chance to pay homage to the efforts of each and every finisher. So, as the gaggle of cars winds it's way through Arnage and the Porsche Curves I relish the buzz from the jubilant crowd that are rising to their feet all around me. The no. 8 racecar is threaded through the Ford Chicane for the final time and the PA system goes into overdrive. As the Audi leaps forward under the shadow of the famous clock and the frantically waving tricolore the crowd erupts into wild celebrations, the atmosphere is electric! Audi, RML, Corvette and LNT win Le Mans!

Due to the length of the circuit at Le Mans the finishers do not head out on a warm down lap, instead they are shepherded into a holding area at the end of the pit lane by numerous marshals who manically wave their assortment of flags. A queue of racecars, waiting to make the u-turn into the pits, forms in front of us. The driver of the 007 Aston performs an impromptu burnout when his turn to manoeuvre arrives. This is greeted by rapturous applause from the crowd and furious gesticulations from the marshals. Further down the line the privateer Luc Alphand Corvette waits patiently on the blistering tarmac with the drivers door wide open, a reminder of just how hot it must be in inside the cabin with a full race suit on!

Eventually, the last of the competitors leaves the hallowed circuit. This signals the start of the next stage of the celebrations and is the main reason for our quite deliberate location. At the front of the terraces lies a 10 ft drop down to the catch fencing where lies a bolted gate. Similar gates line the length of the pit straight and now is the time for the marshals

to trot along and open them all up signalling a mass track invasion. We hop up onto the wall, leap down to track level and pass through the adjacent gate onto the circuit. Thousands attempt to pile through after us and as we glance up the hill towards the Dunlop chicane we see a further host of spectators sprinting towards us. I clamber over the pit wall and haul a broken Ed over after me and then the 5 of us march down pit road to the podium gantry. On passing the LNT pit box it is impossible not to get caught up in the elation that the mechanics exude as they spill out into the pit lane congratulating each other and literally jumping for joy. Further down the pit lane, promotional cards are thrown from the hospitality suites above the garages to flutter down to the crowds below. We get as close to the podium as we are able and stand with the thousands of others waiting for the ceremony to start. The next half an hour consists of national anthems, presentations and a buoyant Henri Pescarolo tossing his cap to his adoring fans below. And with that a truly exhilarating event sadly comes to as close, at least until next year!

We turn our backs on the pit lane and tribunes and make the slow walk along the rubber strewn circuit as far as the Dunlop Bridge, savouring our surroundings for the final time. It's fascinating to get a drivers eye view of the Dunlop Chicane and, pausing to reflect on the drama that happened right here over the last 24 hours, it's almost possible to imagine what it must be like to approach it in the middle of the night doing better than 180 mph! Eventually it is time to leave the circuit (at least until next year) so we take the path down through Interior Musee and across the Bugatti circuit. We arrive back on the Annexe and find a weary Dave waiting for us on the sofa! We are in no great hurry so we take 20 minutes to get refreshed and refuelled before piling into the vans for the off. As we pull onto the dusty Annexe track our final act is to wave goodbye to the sofa that has served us so valiantly. Its fate now lies in the hands of the local scavengers who will pounce upon it before dusk. With farewells fulfilled we are away, Houx Annexe and the 'Circuit des 24 Heures' disappearing in our mirrors.

At 18.30 the traffic is nowhere near as bad as expected and within half an hour we are moving freely on the N138 towards Alençon. Locals line the streets of the villages en route to see the exotica cruise by allowing the carnival theme to roll on a little longer. Progress is steady and it doesn't seem like long before we are climbing through the forests above Argentan. It's still warm but not uncomfortable as we pass the army tank at



A war memorial in the forests above Argentan

the top of the climb. We descend into the sunny valley on the tail of the Dubs in the Transporter Van and begin to reflect on the highs and lows of the trip. A particular highlight this year was, we all agree, the karting that was exceptionally entertaining even for Ed who was only watching! As ever, sitting around in the sun sipping on an endless supply of cheap beer also ranks highly! On a personal note, heading out to see the racing at dawn on Sunday morning was a memorable experience and something I will definitely repeat in the

future. The only gripe from the three of us is that we regret spending too much time on the campsite, especially considering the alcohol fuelled travels of the Dubs! We decide that we must make an effort to explore bars and restaurants further a field next year. All things considered though, the last week has been relaxing, exhilarating and above all a phenomenally enjoyable holiday. We'll be back!

By 21.30 we are pulling up into Caen harbour having failed in our quest to find some wine to take back home. The local restaurants are busy and we figure we don't quite have enough time for a leisurely sit down meal so we grab some fast food from a burger van. It doesn't compare to tartiflettes and Grand Marnier crêpes but it'll do. With the sun waning we wander back to the vans and join the boarding queue. I decide that now is a good time to raise the fact that we have one 4 man cabin between 6 of us, the result of trying to trim the costs of an extortionate ferry crossing. All agree that I can get first use of the shower if I sleep on the floor. I'm more than happy to forgo a comfy bed, particularly as I don't fancy the prospect of using a bathroom devastated by 5 very sweaty and very dirty men! By 11.15 we are all piled into the tiny 4 berth cabin having safely parked the vans in the bowels of the ferry and successfully found the way to our most basic of quarters. I send the guys off to the bar and make use of the tiny shower before heading up the stairs to join them in spending the last of the Euros on cool beer from the bar. Dave takes the opportunity to make a massive duty free purchase! A couple of pints are sunk very slowly as we relax on the weather deck in the mild summer night air, the ferry carrying us steadily on to Portsmouth. Dirty Ed is last to get a shot in the shower before the rest of us descend the decks and crowd back into the cabin. As the youngest, Phil is cajoled into going without a bed and as I've taken the prime location between the bunks he is left with an awkward piece of carpet up against the door. Without enough space to lie down Phil dismisses any concerns by stating defiantly in his thick Yorkshire accent "I've slept in worse places"! And with that our seventh day in France is over.

We are woken at 6.30am UK time by some nasty music that is piped uncontrollably into the cabin. We try in vain to switch it off, finally deciding to just get out of the stifling room as quickly as possible. We trudge up the stairs and reconvene in the lobby as the ferry navigates the final approach through Portsmouth harbour. To starboard lie a couple of RN frigates and the covered berths of the enduring shipyards. The industrious Portsmouth coast and the sunny June morning make for a welcoming return to the UK. After a seemingly endless wait the doors to the vehicle decks are opened and we split up in search of our respective vans. Safely back in the dependable Vito we await the final leg of the journey. A mechanical clamour reverberates around the decks and bulkheads signalling the opening of the stern doors and the vehicle deck becomes flooded with sunlight. The Vito fires into life and we ease forward onto English soil.

By 8am the convoy has reformed and we are making steady progress north. The drive is broken by a stop at a Little Chef that is predictably low on quality and hard on the wallet but inexplicably just what we are looking for! As we eat it's comforting to see some Le Mans traffic pull into the car park. A Mustang and a Corvette are the last evidence of a monumental gathering of sports cars that are now dissolved across Europe, some of them destined to lie untouched until the next pilgrimage to La Sarthe. With breakfast

completed it's time to say au revoir to the Dubs who will now head up the road to Leeds. In the car park hands are shaken and assurances made about next years trip before we speed off, leaving the Transporter van in our dust!

All good things come to an end and at 12.30 we finally reach the end of our long and eventful road; a small village in Worcestershire that is home to my parents who have kindly watched over our cars whilst we have been away. Their hospitality doesn't end there though as the 3 of us steal in and prepare a feast that befits the conclusion of such a momentous expedition. And so ends Le Mans 2006. But as one chapter closes another begins; planning starts for the 2007 expedition next week!

The End