

Audi's eighth

Historians will have to delve deep into the history books to establish the last time the winners in all four categories at Le Mans had a completely reliable race, but in 2008 Audi, Porsche, Aston Martin and Ferrari achieved just that in their respective classes. Audi had a strategically superb race to take its eighth win at Le Mans, its third since it introduced the diesel-powered R10 TDI in 2006, ahead of the superior Peugeot 908. The two manufacturers, each fielding 5.5 litre V12 diesel-powered sport prototypes, left the gasoline cars far behind as their competition escalated over the first six months of the 2008 season.

In qualifying, two of the three Peugeots were more than five seconds clear of Audi's best, and nearly eight seconds faster than in 2007. Stephane Sarrazin set a pole position lap of 3m18.513s, 247.16 km/h (153.57mph). Having established the Le Mans regulations to provide a test bed for new technology, all cars, including the diesels, ran with high performance biofuel incorporated into the Shell-supplied fuel. Tank sizes were reduced by ten per cent for the diesel LMP1 cars, from 90 litres to 81, and the air restrictor sizes for gasoline powered cars were increased by three per cent. Homologated engines were also permitted in LMP1, including Aston Martin's 6-litre V12 taken from the DBR9, which was mated to a Lola chassis. Air restrictor breaks were awarded for road-car based engines, and for air conditioning systems in the closed cars. The ACO confirmed its commitment to increasing lap times for the LMP1 cars to three minutes, 30 seconds in race conditions to avoid having to make major changes to the 13.629km circuit, and to do so would reduce the turbo boost pressure of the diesels, along with the air restrictor sizes of the gasoline powered cars. During the Le Mans week, Hideki Noda and Mike Newton were victims of a phenomenon new to sports car racing in 2008 when their Lolas slid sideways, and took flight. No fewer than five such accidents happened prior to the race, prompting the ACO to promise an urgent review of its aerodynamic rules and consider rushing through new rules, reducing downforce and increasing drag.

Andrew Cotton reviews the race and the winning teams

3:18.513 against 3:23.847: over 5 seconds separated the fastest Peugeot from the fastest Audi, underlining the superiority of the French cars in qualifying.

