

HIGH PERFORMANCE DRIVING EVENTS A HIT **JULY/AUG 2006 \$2.95**

America's Sports Car

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL CORVETTE MUSEUM



Showdown at Le Mans

Corvette goes head-to-head
with nemesis Aston Martin
for the GT1 crown.



Corvette Snatches Le Mans Victory from Aston Martin — Again

Hard-Fought 24-Hour Win is Corvette's Fifth in Six Years

ANY CORVETTE RACING FANS that have come to expect a 1–2 yellow finish as their birth-right received a nail-biting reminder on June 17–18 of just how difficult a trick it is to pull off. Up against a faster rival and the merciless mechanical grind that is the 24 Hours of Le Mans, the C6.R crew would need to do everything right — and the competition would have to do something wrong — for Corvette to win the most hotly contested endurance race in the world.

In 2005, the Prodrive Aston Martin team was so close to a Le Mans win that they could practically taste the champagne. Poised to deliver the one-two punch to the arch-rival Corvette Racing team, the Brits' anticipated victory turned to bitter defeat when the second-place Aston Martin was forced to pit for repairs and the leading car ran out of gas with just 90 minutes left in the race. Corvette had outlasted the green cars to take the GT1 crown.



ALL PHOTOS BY RICHARD PRINCE COURTESY OF CORVETTE RACING

Nothing left to chance. Engineers analyzed mountains of data prior to the race (opposite page, lower right) and the pit crews honed their skills in daily practice. The winning No. 64 car recorded 25 flawless pit stops during the race (opposite page, lower left).

Now in 2006, primed and ready for revenge, the swifter Aston Martins grabbed the first and second starting positions with their blazing qualifying times. The No. 64 and 63 Corvettes qualified third and sixth respectively.

Those positions did not hold for long once the green flag dropped at 5:00PM on Saturday. Before the first half-hour had elapsed, Oliver Gavin in the No. 64 C6.R and Johnny O'Connell behind the wheel of No. 63 had moved into first and third in class. That was to be the high point for the No. 63 car. At 6:08PM, the car made a "slow, lazy spin" according to O'Connell, and piled into the guardrail of the Porsche Curves, damaging the wing, rear bodywork and left-front suspension.

The car came into the garage at 6:10PM and was out 11 minutes later, this time with Max Papis at the wheel. After half a lap he radioed back to the crew: "Everything's fine. Beautiful job, guys." But the damage to the car's standing would be harder to fix, as Papis, O'Connell and Ron Fellows struggled to lift themselves up from ninth place.

"That's not the way we wanted to start, so we have an uphill road," said Papis at the six-hour mark, "but we'll fight for it."

The No. 64 Corvette, on the other hand, held a 13-second lead over the 009 Aston Martin DBR9 a quarter through the race. Keeping it would be a different matter. As the night wore on, the 64 car had its own brush with destiny in the shape of an LMP that sent Gavin into the gravel of the Dunlop chicane.

"Miraculously I got out of the gravel without much delay," says Gavin. "I did have a puncture though, so I did a slow lap and came in."

Though brief the incident cost Corvette the lead. By the halfway mark, No. 64 was in second, two minutes behind No. 009.

The No. 63 C6.R had been closing the gap in the second quarter when misfortune struck again.

"The clutch started to slip on the gear changes," said Papis, "and then after my pit stop it was slipping a lot. The [crew] did an amazing job to change the clutch in the time that it took for me to get a drink."

It was now past midnight and driver O'Connell was feeling the frustration of two serious repairs in the first third of the race.

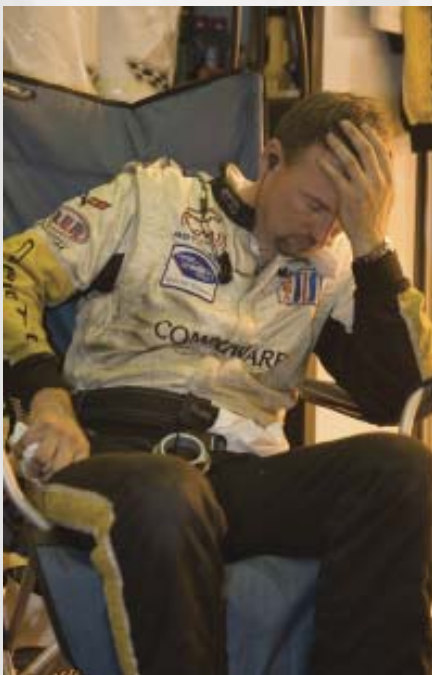
"We'll keep pushing as hard as we can," he told a reporter. "We've got a good car, but we need some breaks to go our way." **CONTINUED**





upper left Max Papis, Ron Fellows and Johnny O'Connell enjoy the pre-race parade. **above** Doug Fehan waves the flag for Corvette. **below** Ross Jeffries shows the strain of the 24-hour race.

“It looked like the Aston Martins were going to be



Over at the Aston Martin camp, the news was not all good either. The No. 007 DBR9 had jumped a curb coming into the pits on lap four, damaging an oil line. The repair cost the car six laps, a setback from which it could not recover.

But the 009 car was magic. Lap after lap, the Aston Martin turned in a flawless performance, holding the No. 64 Corvette at bay. A full-course caution at 2:13AM only added to its lead as the C6.R was caught behind the safety car. Gavin fought doggedly as Pedro Lamy in the No. 009 car sought to pass him and increase the lead.

At the end of 18 hours, No. 64 still held the Aston Martin in its sights but, as driver Olivier Beretta acknowledged, “We still have a long way to go before we can catch the Aston. But then again, there is still six hours of racing left. We’ll see. Anything can happen at Le Mans.”

Fellows, still back in the pack, tried to stay hopeful.

“We have to stay running at this point and get to the end. Ten laps is 40 minutes on the track and anything can still happen,” he said. Unfortunately for Fellows, O’Connell and Papis, something did happen, but it happened to their car. Shortly after 1:00PM, smoke started billowing from the transmission. The gearbox was fried.



upper right and right Team members struggle to keep the No. 63 car in the race after an accident and gearbox problems. **below** Neal Everhart stands ready for the incoming No. 64 car.

indestructible.” Oliver Gavin

Race rules did not allow Corvette Racing to replace the transmission, so crew members from both cars went to work rebuilding it. Any hope of a podium finish for the No. 63 car was gone. At this point, just to get back in the race would be a victory.

That left just the No. 64 C6.R to chase the unperturbed green machine, the No. 009 Aston Martin, which by now had held the GT1 lead for most of the race.

“It looked like the Aston Martins were going to be indestructible,” said Oliver Gavin.

And yet, just when it looked like Aston Martin was about to redeem their 2005 failure and hand Corvette a crushing defeat, in the twenty-first hour of the 24-hour race, it happened.

The Aston Martin’s clutch broke.

As the No. 009 DBR9 limped into the pits, Jan Magnussen in the No. 64 Corvette took the lead. It was 2:09PM.

“You have a one-lap cushion, the Aston is in the garage, and you are five laps ahead of the next car,” crew chief Ray Gongla radioed. “Do you copy? Can you hear us?” **CONTINUED**





Celebrating from the top spot on the podium.

"Yes," replied Magnussen, "I can hear you. I just can't believe it!"

For 45 minutes Corvette built its lead as the Aston Martin crew worked frantically on No. 009. It would return to the track, but the one-time leader would finish fifth in class. The No. 007 DBR9 managed to make up enough of its early deficit to cross the finish line in second place.

In third place, to the surprise of many, was—a Corvette! Not the C6.R, but a C5-R raced by former French alpine skier Luc Alphand. The No. 63 C6.R came in sev-

enth in class, finishing against all odds, a tribute to the never-say-die attitude of the Corvette Racing team.

And with 355 laps completed, 25 faultless pit stops, and a five-lap margin of victory was the No. 64 C6.R, giving Corvette the GT1 crown, an amazing fourth overall, and its fifth Le Mans win in six years.

"The key to our success," commented Beretta, "was to never give up."

"There were moments when you... felt the race falling away from you, but we just hung in there until it came back to us," Gavin agreed.

Exhausted but overjoyed, Corvette Racing program manager Doug Fehan paid tribute to their opponents.

"It was an epic battle between two great warriors, he said. "We've yet to come upon competition that can provide us the spirit of racing such as the Aston Martin Prodrive team."

George Howard-Chappell, team principal for Aston Martin Racing, could not suppress his frustration.

"It's very disappointing to be leading at the 21-hour mark, only to have victory snatched away from us," he told reporters. "This is the second successive year that this has happened and, to be honest, I'm fed up with it."

Now, as both teams return to the U.S. for the remaining seven races on the ALMS calendar, the level of competition promises to be fiercer than ever. Ron Fellows and Johnny O'Connell will also try to shake the monkey off their back and regain the top spot of the podium.

"The guys in the 64 car are continuing their amazing run of good results, and if Ron and I are going to beat them, we're going to have to do everything right," said O'Connell.

For information on upcoming races, log on to corvetteracing.com.

Me and You and the Michelin Man, Too

Before they boarded the plane for France, the Corvette Racing Team turned in their fifth straight 1-2 victory in ALMS at Mid-Ohio.

"The car was just magic," said Oliver Gavin, who along with Olivier Beretta drove the No. 4 C6.R to victory. Together they set a new record for most consecutive GT1 wins, extending their streak to eight.

photo left to right Olivier Beretta, Michelin Man, Oliver Gavin, Johnny O'Connell and Ron Fellows.

PHOTO BY COLLEEN EGAN



