



# 24

What does it take to win the 24 Hours of Le Mans five out of the past six years?

Just ask Corvette Racing.

BY **SAM MOSES**  
PHOTOS BY **RICHARD DOLE** AND **RICHARD PRINCE**



Left: Pratt & Miller crewmen must be prepared for every contingency, stocking an array of spare parts and equipment. Top: Corvette Racing manager Doug Fehan says, "The human element is what wins these races." Opposite page: The Aston Martins and Corvettes ran hard and close for most of the race.



**ON** June 18, 2006, in the heat of a French afternoon, a battle-scarred yellow Chevrolet Corvette wearing the number 64 crossed the finish line at Le Mans, finishing fourth overall and first in the GT1 class. The scene has become a familiar one to the French crowd and the international television audience, yet the accomplishment is anything but ordinary. But what does it take to win a race of this magnitude year after year?

### Management

"Every day we come to the track we're writing a new page in Corvette history," says Corvette Racing's manager, Doug Fehan, on the day before the start of the 24 Hours of Le Mans. The statement isn't meant as a boast, merely recognition of the legacy that he considers his responsibility to protect and build upon.

This was Fehan's seventh Le Mans with Corvette (he had one other in 1996 with the Olds Aurora WSC car), and he had guided the C5-R and C6.R to four class wins in the previous six events. Better than anyone else, he knows what it takes to win.

When he's asked what it takes, he'll reply with a laugh. "Three hours just to go down the checklists," he says, as if to dare: Any more questions?

The answer can be further shortened to: detail. But that's still only the technical part. It takes people to execute the detail, and Fehan warms up to the subject of people. His gift is the ability to manage people. It's the secret to the team's success.

"The mechanical stuff is doable," he says. "The human element is what wins these races."

It's astonishing how unharried Fehan seems to be (although it might be merely an illusion). But there's no denying that he's a master of delegation, leading to successful time management.



### The French Connection

When an American racing team goes to Le Mans, the basic challenge is cultural. Americans adhere to the belief that everything that isn't specifically prohibited must be permitted, and the French believe that everything that isn't specifically permitted is therefore prohibited.

Enter Benoit Froger, that rare Frenchman with an appreciation and affinity for many things American, including attitudes. He began learning the ways of American racers from this side of the pond in 1973, when he worked at Daytona for Bill France Sr.

"My job is to baby-sit the team," says Froger. "Help them understand the rules. When they have a problem, I tell them where to go to get it solved. We avoid the booby traps, and the bad people."

"He's our most prized resource," says Fehan. "Our eyes and ears." — Sam Moses



"I can walk away from any job in progress, because these guys know what they're doing," he says.

Empowering the right people — with the checklists, for example — is what it takes to win.

### Morale

Those three hours of checklists translate to more than 16 tons of parts, tools, equipment and even comfort food unobtainable in France, from Gatorade to Pop Tarts, crammed into 39 big crates, not counting two cars and four engines. All of it had to be stored in a separate warehouse near the Pratt & Miller shop in Michigan, and some of it (the equipment that couldn't fly, such as fuel tanks) loaded onto a freighter in April, inside the semi truck. The crew arrived at Le Mans on May 28 to begin nearly a month of days, including 86 hours during the final five days.

"I try to get these guys to forget all the stuff they're missing by being away from home for three weeks," says Fehan. "I encourage them to bring their musical instruments along, for example. And I support their traveling on the days between testing and the beginning of practice. Some of them went to the coast of Spain, and a few others went to Normandy for the anniversary of D-Day. It's all about keeping their heads screwed on straight, to keep performances up."

The conversation with Fehan is interrupted by the Star Spangled Banner, an unofficial playing performed on the stage where the No. 64 Corvette will be serviced during the race. Friday is a day of preparation, no cars on the track, so fans are allowed into the pits. They're 10 deep around the Corvette garage as Mike West does Jimi Hendrix-at-Woodstock on his electric guitar, repeating the anthem of a generation.

The Corvette mechanics and engineers gape in fascination, awe and maybe even ecstasy. "Look at the faces of everyone," says Fehan. "Now there's a Le Mans moment."

But the reverberations of the amped-up guitar have scarcely died down before the mechanics and engineers pick up their tools and return to their laptops in the back of the garage.

### Execution

Two hundred and thirty-five thousand spectators, a new record, surrounded the eight-mile Le Sarthe circuit on a cloudless Saturday with temperatures in the high 80s. It was the 100th anniversary of the first race at Le Mans, held on some of these same roads, and the grid boasted the strongest GT1 field in history: four Aston Martin DBR9s, three Ferraris, three Corvettes including a French privateer C5-R, one Saleen and one Lamborghini. The two fastest Aston Martins had qualified slightly quicker than the Corvettes, with almost equal top speeds of about 185 mph. After the first hour, thanks to one very quick pit stop under yellow, Johnny O'Connell in the No. 63 Corvette held a slim lead, with the 009 Aston Martin in his rearview video screen.

What it takes from a driver to win Le Mans, again according to Fehan, is three things: Don't hit anything, don't break anything and keep it on the racetrack. He was right again. At 10 minutes past six, just 70 minutes into the race, O'Connell looped the 63 car in the Porsche Curves, where the first sweeping right-hander is approached at 185 mph.

### 24 Hours ... No Breaks

During the 24 Hours of Le Mans, Melanie Correll never leaves her post, a scoring stand the size of a phone booth on the pit wall. She chews coffee beans to stay awake and rations herself to one small bottle of water over the 24 hours. Her nickname became "Two Shoes" after she wore two different shoes by mistake years ago. When her team won the race that day, it became a superstition.

In the age of transponders, Correll knows she's a dinosaur: a human scorer who manually enters the lapping of every single car in the race. "We do it because the official electronic scoring usually goes down at least once during the race," she says. "When that happens we're the only ones who know what's going on."

"I'm a luxury, not a necessity," she adds; but she's selling herself short. Team decisions and strategy sometimes come from Correll's data, which goes beyond the official race scoring. It's just another example of the detail that it takes to win. — Sam Moses



Above: Timer and scorer Melanie Correll, nicknamed "Two Shoes," never abandons her post for the entire 24 hours. Opposite page: Olivier Beretta (top) and Max Papis focus themselves between driving shifts.

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The 63 car fell back after a pit stop to replace broken body parts; its fate was sealed in seventh place after midnight, when it pitted to replace a clutch that began slipping with Max Papis behind the wheel. "They changed the clutch so fast I barely had time to get a drink," says an amazed Papis. Even though the Corvette had never lost a clutch in a race, the team was prepared for it. More of what it takes to win.

"I've never seen a clutch melt down like that," says Fehan, taking a moment behind the garage afterward. Adds crew chief Dan Binks, "That's what happens when you have to dig yourself out of the gravel by going forward and back, forward and back, then do a burnout to finally get away."

Oliver Gavin had gained the GT lead in Corvette 64, but lost it after a tire puncture at the Dunlop Chicane. He has to slowly nurse the car back to the pits to avoid excessive frame/body damage. The crew got him back on the track with little lost time.

All through the night, the Corvettes chased the Aston Martins. They accelerated away from Mulsanne in the darkness, and the distinct sounds of the V8 Corvettes and the V12 Aston Martins were unmistakable: a torquely rumble relentlessly pursuing a spectacular shriek.

"I like racing those guys," says Dan Binks, who's now met them at Le Mans seven times. "They're top-notch. Really a first-class team."

For more than 12 hours, the 009 Aston Martin — its day-glo yellow paint rimming the open mouth of its grille like a lewd application of weird lipstick — led the 64 Corvette, driven by Gavin, Olivier Beretta and Jan Magnussen, although the lead was never much more than three minutes.

"The Aston Martins are pushing as hard as they can," says Gavin, turning the 64 over to Magnussen. "But the hottest part of the day is coming up. We seem to remember last year they suffered in the heat."

And then it happened, a virtual replay for Aston Martin at Le Mans last year and Sebring this year. The DBR9 failed with less than three hours to go. It had cooked the clutch. The Prodrive team needed 41 minutes to change it, compared to 17 minutes for the similar job on the 63 Corvette by the Pratt & Miller team. That's what it takes to win.

The 64 Corvette cruised home first in GT1 and fourth overall, behind the history-making Team Joest Audi R10 diesel prototype, a Pescarola prototype and the second Audi R10. It was the best overall finish in Corvette history, and third straight win at Le Mans for Gavin, Beretta and Magnussen. Five laps behind the 64 Corvette came the 007 Aston Martin, with the French Alphanad Adventures C5-R finishing third.

As the drivers waved from the podium to the tens of thousands of fans filling the front straight, Dan Binks, grimy and exhausted, stood alone in the back of the shuttered garage, leaning against a stack of tires. He finally took a breath, and downed a bottle of sports drink. It was a short break. His day had begun some 36 hours earlier, but now he faced two more hours of hard work. Everything had to be packed and the cars had to be loaded to be shipped back to the shop to prepare for the next race, immediately. That's what it takes to win that one. ■

Fast, routine pit stops are a trademark of Corvette Racing, which prides itself on flawless execution. Right: Steve Cole, race engineer for the winning 64 car, confers with driver Oliver Gavin in the back of the garage.



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