

# EDGE



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# Corvette at Le Mans



From the famed Mulsanne Straight to Tertre Rouge, the Le Mans road race has long been a showplace for Chevrolet power. And 2006's competition was no exception, as Corvette earned its fifth GT1 class victory in six years. The No. 64 Compuware Corvette C6.R, driven by Oliver Gavin, Olivier Beretta and Jan Magnussen, finished fourth overall in the grueling battle. The No. 63 Compuware Corvette C6.R, driven by Ron Fellows, Johnny O'Connell and Max Papis, finished seventh after encountering drivetrain problems.

The No. 64 Corvette's win was the latest in a long line of successes for Chevrolet in the world's most famous endurance race. Chevy's Le Mans story began in 1960, when Briggs Cunningham fielded three Corvettes in the realization of a dream by Zora Arkus-Duntov.

The latter originally wanted to race a Corvette SS — a technological marvel with its magnesium body, tubular steel space frame, and a fuel-injected small-block V8 under its long, sloping hood — in the 24 Hours of Le Mans in 1957. The SS did race earlier that year at Sebring before suspension problems forced it out of the action. But then, opposition from the Automobile Manufacturers Association to factory involvement in motorsports meant the SS project had to be shelved and the car never made it to France.

Team Cunningham's Corvettes occupied the first three spots of the 1960 race's starting grid since cars lined up by engine size — 283 cubic inches of fuel-injected small-block power in the case of the Chevys. A fourth Corvette was in the race too, under the Camoradi USA banner.

For most of the Corvettes, the punishing race lived up to its reputation, but one of them — driven by John Fitch and Bob Grossman — made history. Team Cunningham's Corvette No. 1 was destroyed in a crash at the three-hour mark. A second Cunningham entry, Corvette No. 2, lost time when it had to be dug out of a sandpit and then suffered engine failure at hour 20. Team Camoradi's Corvette ended up 10<sup>th</sup> when the race ended, but hadn't completed enough distance to be classified as an official finisher.

And then there was the third Team Cunningham car. Fitch and Grossman's Corvette overheated near the end of the race and regulations prevented the team from replacing the lost coolant. Yankee ingenuity triumphed, however, when the team manager ordered the crew to pack the engine with ice from the



# T'es bien!



team's catering tent — and the result was an eighth-place overall finish and a first place in the GT class. It was the best finish by a Corvette until the C5-R arrived on the scene in 2000 in the factory-supported Corvette Racing program.

In the intervening years, a variety of Corvettes and Chevrolet-powered, or at least Chevrolet-supported, cars continued to compete in the fabled race, driven by legends like Phil Hill, Bob Bondurant, Dick Guldstrand, John Greenwood — whose co-driver was comedian Dick Smothers — and even Cale Yarborough of NASCAR fame.

When Corvette Racing picked up the torch in 2000, the Le Mans legacy continued. Corvettes took third and fourth in 2000; first and second in 2001 and 2002; second and third in 2003; first and second in 2004 and 2005; and, of course, first again this year. In fact, when it comes to the storied roads of Le Mans, Corvette is now the winningest manufacturer in recent GT class history.

"This is the hardest race in the world," said No. 63 co-driver O'Connell. "This is a very special time in Corvette history — five Le Mans wins in six years is an incredible record against very stiff competition."



