
Spydermen

American Le Mans Series Special





Even a model maker couldn't have imagined a more beautiful race course than the one in Long Beach's harbor district. This California classic certainly leaves nothing to be desired in comparison to its European role model of Monte Carlo

The close-up perspectives, speed, and ear-pounding excitement of city races drive the fascination with the American Le Mans Series to a fever pitch.

Successful episodes from a tour in the Porsche RS Spyder with starting number 6.

Six and the City

You've got to be ready for it. So you better get down into a deep crouch behind the massive concrete barrier in order to face whatever comes at you. To get this type of "cockpit" perspective of the racing drivers of the American Le Mans Series, you have to do it along the city courses of North America. We've experienced one such circuit made for only one weekend a year, and it's as precarious and exciting as an Olympic bobsled run. Whether we're in St. Petersburg, Long Beach, Houston, or Detroit—we're alive in the heat of the action. It's this close-up perspective that makes all the difference: sound, speed, and drama are all amplified. If

motorsports can be really "sexy" anywhere, it's here. And, since starting no. 6 is one of the most successful Porsche RS Spyders ever, "Six and the City" becomes an appropriate motto.

Navigating city streets in a race car is challenging: "You have no time to catch your breath. You're constantly steering, or shifting, or braking. There are no long straights where your pulse rate can come down." Timo Bernhard knows what he's talking about. City races are an extreme experience even for seasoned race-car

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drivers. Bernhard made ALMS history with his teammate Romain Dumas with two overall victories in a single week, hard won on the streets of Long Beach and Houston. A perpetual adrenaline surge: "You have virtually no leeway for error. If you relax your focus even for an instant, you'll get spattered against a wall." You might imagine a race-car driver's brain at such instants resembling a city map, replete with one-way streets, cul-de-sacs, or passing lanes. The unforgiving law of the street mandates perfection: there is no second chance.

No city race is like any other, and no one can talk about this with greater authority than Porsche motorsports chief Hartmut Kristen and his colleagues. "The driver's character and the individual race conditions make every tuning cycle of the RS Spyder a new

challenge. Anyone who imagines that one concrete surface is like any other is mistaken," he stresses. "Sometimes the levels of adjacent sections of pavement differ abruptly by three or four centimeters." It dawns on us that technicians need to have extraordinarily good judgment when they tune race cars for city circuits. But how can they divine the best compromise? They have to tune the chassis to compensate for the worst bumps in the road, and optimize the aerodynamics to maximize the vertical force on the pavement so that the driver can accelerate when emerging from a slow curve—but never to bottom out. That's a complex equation, and only the extensive experience of the drivers and technicians protects them against becoming neurotic about city circuits. Yet Kristen has no doubt about it: "These races are among the most thrilling." The greater the challenge, the greater the commitment to win.

City races create a vibrant market. From a single circuit in the preceding year, the number of venues in the current ALMS calendar has grown to four. "These events are win-win situations for all participants," explains a pleased Scott Atherton, president and CEO of the American Le Mans Series in Houston. He is thrilled with a great marketing platform "that gives companies direct access to an extremely interesting target group." City races simply attract the most spectators.

Some cities are revitalized by creating pedestrian zones. Others achieve it with efficient traffic patterns. And in our examples, the action-filled days of the American Le Mans Series and ChampCar do the same

Road and chassis don't interact well at first. In fact, they seem to be destined for conflict. Though race cars like the RS Spyder ▶





Six Is a Winner

Good luck, Spydermen: This is how fans at the races in Long Beach and Houston expressed their admiration for the RS Spyder with the starting number 6



Action, please! There is no lack of interesting views in these urban settings. Here, it's not just the race cars that are photogenic

are built to be durable, they also have a sensitive side. Nowhere is the cumulative stress on the RS Spyder so extreme as on city circuits. On the straights, the engine is pushed to deliver maximum power in an extremely short distance. The toughest test comes in the curves and on especially uneven street sections: pavement irregularities cause enormous vibrations and abrupt changes that shake the vehicle like a snow globe.

Driving a good lap and a consistent race doesn't just depend on the interaction between tires, suspension, and chassis. Just as essential in an urban setting is the driver-technology synergy. No matter whether the race car is suddenly airborne or makes a delicate landing, both man and machine are subjected to enormous stresses, right down to the smallest cog and gear. This is where you learn what precision really is. There is nothing that can be simulated in preparing for such a race. Winning under such un-

Long Beach is the equivalent of four aces in poker. The event is as rich in tradition as most any race in the world. In Southern California both the backdrop and the market share are just perfect. The 180,000 spectators that stream into this city on the Pacific Ocean during the weekend drop some 30 million dollars during their stay. The idea of using a car race to revitalize the blighted harbor district with its cheap bars between Ocean Boulevard and Pine Avenue first occurred to Chris Pook. That was on Memorial Day 1973, while he was listening to the radio in his travel agency on Linden Avenue when Gordon Johncock was winning the Indianapolis 500 race. His enthusiasm helped persuade the mayor and civic leaders at the time to adopt the idea. On September 28, 1975, the first Grand Prix of Long Beach was run, and North America had found its counterpart to the great Formula One race in Monte Carlo.





From zilch to 100: With the temporary circuit through the Pioneer Park by the picturesque waterfront, St. Petersburg is setting new standards. The 50 additional berths for mega-yachts at Turn 10 were swiftly taken up

predictable conditions, and doing it in one of the somewhat less powerful LMP2 class cars is an accomplishment of a champion. Welcome to the realm of the Spydermen.

The elevated command post behind the pit wall is bustling with activity during the rush hour. Decisions made here have greater consequences than elsewhere and require a faster response time. “Any decisions have greater impact here,” confides Hartmut Kristen. Shorter laps, increased risks of an accident, fewer opportunities to pass on the course. How to deal with all these issues? “Everything has to come together. Strategy is extremely important. Circuits like this allow no mistakes,” says Kristen. Thanks to clever refueling tactics, Penske-Porsche triumphed in the prestigious race at Long Beach. In city racing you’ve got to immediately seize even the smallest opportunity that the competition might open for you.

The recipe for success in the cockpit is no secret. Timo Bernhard tells it from experience: “You must avoid even the smallest mis-

take.” He adds, “There are no stretches where you can really open up, and there isn’t very much training time. You’ve got to figure out very quickly what your limits are and register every curve in your head: Where is the bumpy pavement? What would be the best line through the apex of the curve? At what point to accelerate again?” His French teammate Romain Dumas, on the other hand, likes city races for more mundane reasons: “The hotels are located right by the race course, and if we want to eat a bite in the evening there are other places besides fast-food restaurants.”

The fact that city circuits usually include many bends and turns isn’t always due to the constraints of the street plan, but may actually be the result of other, concurrent events—even beauty contests. Such occasions have become standard fare at these races, as have charitable events. In Long Beach, the throng of celebrities from nearby Hollywood can lead to traffic problems. One of the more spectacular occasions happened in a supporting race, when Emily Procter, the beauty who plays Agent Calleigh in *CSI: Miami*, forced movie director George Lucas into the wall

with a passing maneuver that was as risky as it was hopeless. Star wars in the harbor district! Fortunately, the impact angle was relatively shallow, and the famed filmmaker emerged from his totaled car just a little green around the gills. But he had learned his lesson: “I probably should have just let her pass.”

The beaches of St. Petersburg, Florida, are among the best in the United States, but this city on the Gulf of Mexico also lures visitors with its Dali Museum. And now St. Petersburg has added the art of navigating a race car through its city streets. “This race is a success story,” rejoices Mayor Rick Baker. “It moves us even more into the limelight.” His enthusiasm is entirely understandable. After all, he’ll tell you proudly that he grew up in Indianapolis. With the temporary route through Pioneer Park by the picturesque waterfront, St. Petersburg is setting new standards. The organizers even took care of people who insist on something superior to hard plastic seats on steel-tubed bleachers: directly at the attractive Turn 10, they created 50 additional berths for mega-yachts. The biggest boat that docked there for the race weekend was the *Detroit Eagle*, owned by Roger Penske.

Houston is a city circuit of extremes, staked out on the huge parking areas around the football stadium. Right by it, a large billboard invites you to the Texas Rodeo. But first comes the stretch across the enormous concrete and asphalt expanse. Sascha Maassen was at the wheel of the Spyder that bears the number six. But on this surface it’s not always fun: “With so many changes in the pavement, you sometimes lose traction all of a sudden. It’s almost like when you suddenly hit an icy patch in your car.” His team colleague Ryan Briscoe grins and adds, “You spend quite a bit of time airborne. And when you land again, you get shook up right down to your bones.”

A universal problem in the labyrinthine city races is the tight time frame. Because the public streets can be blocked to normal traffic only so long, a whole training day is usually lost. This makes it harder to get the vehicles tuned properly. “If you don’t come up with a good compromise fast, you haven’t got a chance at winning a good starting position,” Maassen says about the time constraints. “And if you’re too far back in the starting lineup, you’ve already lost the race.” Action like that also means ▶





“City lights,” so to speak. But these are the high-speed variety. The drama of auto racing is actually heightened as the daylight fades.

places. Visitors can listen to the experts’ tech talk as they use vivid examples to explain what everyone should know about auto racing. Drivers enjoy posing next to their vehicles. There are many fun activities, especially for people who like to look at the ALMS event as a day to enjoy the outdoors.

In the evening hours the atmosphere grows even more intense. As the laps get faster and faster, their increasingly frenetic rhythm becomes infectious. It’s like watching a nonstop action film. The swift passage of the cars’ headlights becomes nonstop, too, and competes with the lights of the metropolis. By the time some of the competitors begin to lap others, if not sooner, the race also becomes a contact sport. The constraints of the narrow, curvy circuit add to the drama. Fences and barriers are intended to keep spectators safe, but the excitement of the race with all its hazards keeps the spectators mesmerized. Their pulse rates accelerate along with the lap times. If you come to the city to enjoy life, you can expect an adrenaline rush. So much action inevitably begets a reaction.

As the RS Spyder in Houston crosses the finish line, in the lead by a heartbeat, a steel band plays “Good Vibrations.” There couldn’t be a more fitting postscript to Six and the City. ◀

total concentration. “Your limits are clearly defined: there’s no spare space along the circuit—just walls! That means you pay the penalty immediately for even the smallest mistake.”

Today, Dwight Tanaka is “the Man” in Long Beach. More to the point, he’s responsible for getting the big construction job done. In a mere 60 days the harbor district is being turned into a temporary race course. Then his 40-man crew will have just 30 days to dismantle everything. In total, 1,400 concrete sections, each weighing four metric tons, must be installed to create a safety barrier five kilometers in length (over 3 miles). Some 16,000 old tires must be strategically placed to make really hairy turns safer. Once the course has been laid out, it’s time to install the spectator facilities: 19 grandstands and bleachers, 7 pedestrian and about 200 hospitality tents, not to mention 550 advertising billboards and 250 portapotties, strategically distributed along the route. In Long Beach as in Houston, some 400 volunteers will help ensure that the event does the city proud.

Every need will be attended to. A race in the city is a day-long event. NASA supplies astronauts for the “autograph hour.” Professional beach volleyball players (one assumes bikini-clad) vie for the crowd’s attention. Monster trucks invite spectators to a bumpy sightseeing tour. There is a lot going on, especially when the cars get a break. The competitors’ parks turn into meeting

The Next City Circuit: Detroit The ALMS Is Ready for the Island

Detroit, September 1

Detroiters are looking forward to the three fastest days of this summer. Over the Labor Day weekend (August 31 to September 2), Belle Isle in the Detroit River will be the site of an auto race for the first time since 2001: the Detroit Grand Prix is back. From 1992 to 2001, the circuit through the park was a regular venue of the CART championship. The course has been shortened to two miles, but it still contains thirteen curves.

For more information go to: www.detroitgp.com

