



## BAR THE RAIN—the near production standard V8 Vantage N24 proves its reliability and durability in less than ideal conditions, consolidating its Nürburgring success, reports **Alistair Weaver**

‘We were told that it never rains in Bahrain,’ said Graham Humphrys, the Chief Engineer of the Aston Martin team. The endurance racing veteran couldn’t help but smile as he peered out on to a circuit that was teeming with water. No one had expected such torrid conditions for the inaugural 24-Hour Race of Bahrain, but the wily engineer had sensibly packed some wet weather tyres. ‘You have to be prepared for anything.’

Bahrain is a tiny archipelago in the Persian Gulf that was a British protectorate until 1971. Today, it’s connected by a bridge to Saudi Arabia but it remains fiercely independent. It used to be most famous as the destination of Concorde’s first flight, but that was before the Crown Prince decided to build a motor racing circuit. When the first Formula One race was held at the Bahrain International Circuit in 2004, the country’s 700,000 inhabitants suddenly found themselves the focus of world attention. The circuit cost USD\$150 million to develop and is one of the most sophisticated in the world. Designed by the German architect, Hermann Tilke, it extends to 6.14km and provides a stern test of man and machine. ‘We were thrilled to be invited to take part in Bahrain’s first 24-Hour race with the Vantage N24,’ explained Team Manager David King.

‘AFTER OUR SUCCESS AT THE NÜRBURGRING (WHERE THE VANTAGE N24 FINISHED 24TH OVERALL FROM 220 STARTERS) WE WERE LOOKING FOR A NEW CHALLENGE. WE KNEW THAT A MODERN CIRCUIT SET IN A DESERT ENVIRONMENT WOULD PROVIDE A VERY DIFFERENT TEST FOR THE CAR.’ The Bahrain circuit’s abrasive surface, long straights and tight corners would provide an intriguing contrast to the fast, flowing, aged Nürburgring. In dry conditions, the team had qualified 14th in a modest 22 car field. This was an impressive achievement for a near-standard car on a grid packed with racing specials. ‘The team has worked hard all week and now we just can’t wait to get started,’ said Chris Porritt, Aston Martin Vehicle Dynamics Manager. Porritt would once again share driving duties with development driver Wolfgang Schuhbauer and Horst von Saurma, the editor-in-chief of the German car magazine, ‘Sport Auto’. Sadly, the only absentee from the Nürburgring team was Aston Martin’s Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Dr Ulrich Bez, who was in regular phone contact.



Once again, the race team would be the so-called 'Band of Brothers': racing enthusiasts plucked from the company's engineering and prototype development departments. All were settling in for a long night. 'I'll grab sleep when I can,' explained Richard Crosby. 'We're a close knit team; we all love it to bits.'

For the mechanics, this was a subtly different challenge to the one they'd experienced at the 'Ring. The Nürburgring race had been held in midsummer, when there was little more than four hours of darkness. In Bahrain, it was dark between 5.30pm and about 6am, which made the race feel longer. The laps, by contrast, were much shorter. 'A lap of the Nürburgring took 10-12 minutes, so you had a chance to relax,' said Chief Mechanic, Martin Jackson. 'Here, each lap takes little more than 3 minutes. Problems could emerge at any time, so you can't really leave the garage or switch off.'

David King and the team had anticipated there could be problems, but the torrential rain, which began at about 5am, would test the team's resilience and flexibility. Before long, the circuit was littered with pools of standing water. Thankfully, the Aston Martin team was better equipped than most to deal with the problem.

THE VANTAGE N24'S SUSPENSION SETTINGS ARE SOFTER THAN THOSE OF A BESPOKE RACING CAR, WHICH MAKES THE CAR EASIER TO DRIVE AND MORE PREDICTABLE IN CHANGEABLE CONDITIONS. Couple this with excellent Yokohama wet weather tyres and a team of consistent, well-matched drivers and you have a recipe for success.

'The tricky conditions actually suit us,' said Porritt at dawn. 'The car feels great and we're all making use of the Electronic Stability Programme. It makes a big difference, especially when you're tired. My lap times are almost identical whether the system is turned on or off, which shows that it's working well.' His enthusiasm for the conditions was shared by his team mate. 'Driving in the wet has been so much fun,' said Schuhbauer.

Their confidence was not misplaced. When the chequered flag fell the team was in eighth place overall and eight laps ahead of the ninth-placed runner. For 425 laps and over 2,600km the Vantage N24 had run faultlessly, stopping only for fuel and tyres. On the pit wall, there were hugs, handshakes and even the odd tear. It wasn't long before a delighted Dr Bez was on the phone. 'Once again we have proven the durability of a production standard V8 Vantage and the dedication and professionalism of the whole Aston Martin team,' he said. It was a fitting tribute to a fine effort. Come rain or shine, the team had shown themselves to be up to the challenge. It was a result to be proud of.

ABOVE LEFT: The V8 Vantage N24 proved its salt at Bahrain, despite the adverse weather conditions – fortunately, engineer Graham Humphrys had remembered the wet weather tyres. ABOVE: The car gets a final check before the start of the race. RIGHT: The N24's iconic yellow body panelling laid out in the workshop.

