



N24

Named after the classic 24-hour event, the Aston Martin V8 Vantage N24 proves its mettle in the gruelling Nürburgring, taking the top three positions in class. Driver **Matthew Marsh** gives the low-down on the team cars and paints a nail-bitingly tense picture of their progress from the pits to the chequered flag

There are less than three hours to go in the 36th ADAC Zurich Nürburgring 24-Hour race and Andy Hindhaugh is worried. He's just been jolted back to reality from dream-like thoughts. It's true that Andy and his team of 12 mechanics from the Prototype Department at Aston Martin's factory have been awake since seven o'clock on Saturday morning – that's 29 hours. A fact also that Friday night had been a late one: in the garage until 2am preparing the two V8 Vantage N24 cars for the race, nicknamed Kermit and Rose.

Yet lack of sleep is not the problem, they are used to that: the problem is the bent steering arm on Kermit – the green N24, the seventh one to be built at Gaydon and the first with Sportshift automated gearchange. For this race it also has the new 4.7-litre V8 engine developed for the 2009 Vantage road car. The problem is – was – the driver in the BMW who, despite indicating the other way, seemingly aware of Kermit's rapid approach, then turned in and caused a collision. To make matters worse the crash happened early on the 25km lap. It's a long way back to the pits despite the urging from over 200,000 fans (this is probably Germany's largest single spectator event).

Things had been going well: the two factory-run N24s had suffered not one mechanical problem and were running first and second in the SP8 class, swapping positions as they stopped for fuel every 75 minutes or so. They were also both inside the top 20 overall – of the 220 cars that started the race 21 hours ago. Perhaps even more pleasing is the similarly strong performance of the third N24, nicknamed 'Barry' because of its white colour, privately entered by Swiss Gentle Racing.

That's pretty impressive for what Future Technologies Manager and Kermit driver, Chris Porritt calls 'real Aston Martin people racing a real Aston Martin'. Unlike other cars in the SP8 class, including racing specials like the Dodge Viper and Lamborghini Gallardo, the N24 is essentially a road car. The interior trim has been stripped and is fitted with safety equipment such as a roll cage, racing seat and fire extinguisher, of course. It also has adjustable dampers and different springs to those used for the road. The brakes are slightly different. These are hardly major modifications.

It's Kermit that stars on the television now – for the wrong reasons. Porritt, at the wheel when the disaster struck, drives as quickly as he dares with smoke billowing from the deranged front wheel. No one speaks. Andy's team stare at the screen in the garage trying to work out how bad the damage is. Then they launch into action fetching the parts that might be needed for the repair and clearing the pit in readiness for Kermit's arrival. On the pit-wall Richard Meaden is close to tears. The multi-talented writer and racer is one of Kermit's four drivers and a regular member of Aston Martin's Nürburgring driver squad. He can see the dream result slipping away.

Andy's boys will repair Kermit quickly enough for it to finish third in the class. For now, though, the focus has moved back to his older sister, Rose. Born with the name CP 025 (Confirmation Prototype number 25) this car began life as a mule for testing engines on a rolling road. After Aston Martin's Chief Executive Officer, Dr Ulrich Bez, gave the Nürburgring 24-Hours project the green light in early 2006, Porritt needed to find a car to use. CP 025 was perfect. Originally painted Tungsten Silver, Rose (from English Rose) was resprayed yellow with green highlights (a reversal of the now classic paint scheme of the DB3S in the 1950s) before her first Nürburgring 24-Hours in June of that year.



THE ROAD AND RACE CROSSOVER

Matthew Marsh explains the unique dialogue that exists between Aston Martin's racing teams and the Gaydon factory floor

Since the dawn of the industry, motor manufacturers have raced each other. There's no doubt that competition has improved the breed or that racing prowess has created strong followings for particular brands. As the sport has become more technologically specialised it has sometimes been difficult to maintain a link between the cars on track and those on the road. Not so for Aston Martin's victorious 24-hour racers. Most surprising is the close relationship between the DB9 road car and the DBR9 GT1 class racer which won its debut race – the Sebring 12-hours in 2005 – and now has two Le Mans GT1 trophies. The family resemblance is more than skin deep. The DB9's advanced bonded-aluminium technology meant that – unusually – the road car's lightweight yet rigid chassis was ideal for racing. DB9 owners will not be surprised to learn that the 600bhp race engine uses the same aluminium cylinder block and head as the road-going 6-litre V12. The DB9's double wishbone suspension configuration is retained. As Aston Martin Racing's Team Principal George Howard-Chappell described it: 'The DB9 was an excellent starting point.'

It's easier to understand the connection between the N24 which swept the SP8 class at the Nürburgring and the V8 Vantage road car. The N24 starts as a V8 Vantage shell and running gear. Interior comforts such as carpet, air-conditioning and entertainment are omitted. A racing roll cage is added and – to compensate for the added weight – the side windows are changed from glass to plastic. Stiffer springs and adjustable dampers are the only modification to the suspension system and the only change to the brakes is the fitment of racing brake pads.

Most tellingly the N24 remains entirely capable of being licensed for road use with a conversion by Aston Martin Works Service. After its first 24-hour race the prototype N24 was driven back to Gaydon by the architect of the project, Chris Porritt. He famously described the car as 'a real Aston Martin driven by real Aston Martin people'.



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She's still perfect – and still running. There are only two hours to go but that's longer than a Formula 1 Grand Prix. More than long enough for trouble to strike. 'You've got a good lead, haven't you?' questions Dr Bez rhetorically as I prepare to take over Rose for the final stint. I know what he's trying to say, but then he says it anyway: 'You can take it easy.' I can see the worry written all over his face. He's being the solid leader here, making sure I understand what is required – but he can't help also being the passionate racer and engineer he has always been. We wouldn't be here if he was any other way.

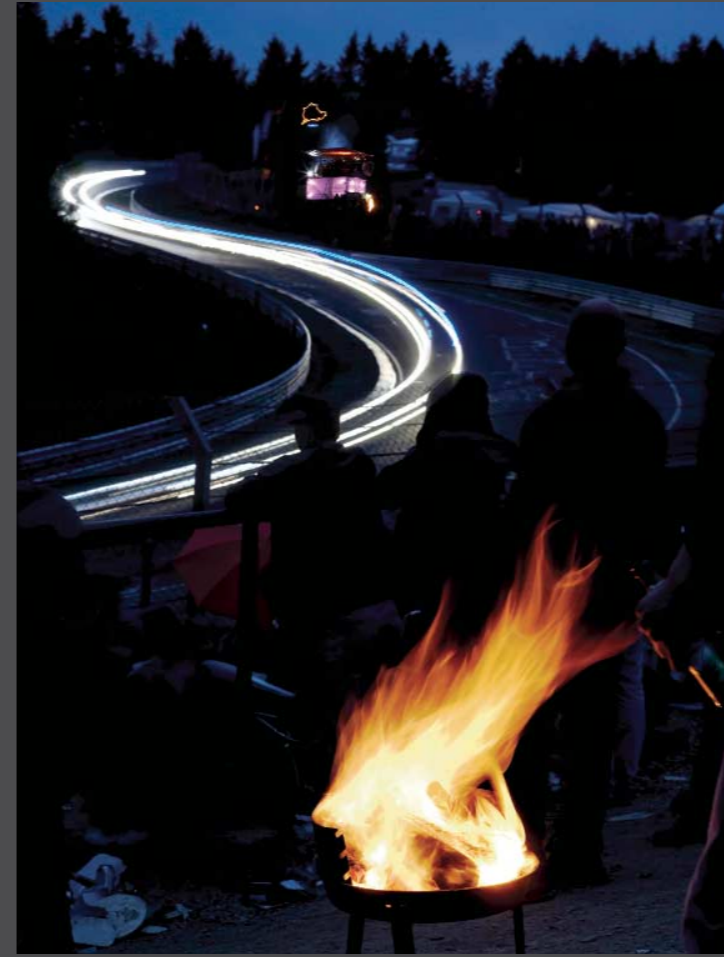
Shortly before Kermit's disaster there had been thoughts of a formation finish. I had wondered what I might do if the two cars were close together, on the same lap, as the end of the race approached. 'You will be advised on the radio,' had been Chief Engineer Graham Humphrys' response. Now it's all different. The crash was a reminder that it's not over until the chequered flag.

The cliché about final laps is true: you really can feel every vibration in the car; you really do fear it's about to break. In reality, it's clear that Rose is quite capable of pounding on around this 25km of driver's Nirvana for another day and night. I keep the car out of harm's way, assuming every other car has a lunatic at the wheel. This is more *Driving Miss Daisy* than *Days of Thunder*.

I report in by radio once a lap to Graham Humphrys on the pit-wall, giving him the reading of the dashboard's fuel meter. In return he estimates how many more circuits will be completed before the finish. We're both taken a little by

surprise in the end by the chequered flag and perhaps by the domination of the SP8 class by the V8 Vantage N24. Rose finishes first (and 18th overall) on 135 laps with the Swiss Gentle privateer car second, two laps behind. Kermit has recovered to complete the sweep of the podium spot – a lap ahead of the nearest challenger.

'She will be valuable one day,' Porritt had suggested of Rose before the race. That day has come, this 25 May, 2008. Now, with the pit-lane suddenly full of people enthusiastically waving Aston Martin flags, all Andy has to worry about is finding a gap in the pit-wall scrum so he can greet his car home.



Heaven in Green Hell

Even the casual race fan knows what to expect at Le Mans, but nothing could really prepare Patrick Paternie for the spectacle of the 24-hours of the Nürburgring, where the passion and stamina of fans and racers alike are keenly tested

Dubbed 'Green Hell' by Jackie Stewart, the Nürburgring's intimidating collection of steep climbs, deep drops and blind corners cuts a narrow, twisting – more than 70 turns – path through the Eifel woods, testing the mettle of fans as well as racers. The circuit combines the modern Formula 1 track and the epic Nordschleife (North Loop) for a lap nearly 16 miles long or almost double that of Le Mans. Throw in unpredictable weather conditions – heavy fog and biblical amounts of rain interrupted the 2007 race – and it is understandable how, over the 36 years that the 24-Hours has been in existence, the drivers and spectators have developed a special relationship unlike that at any other race event.

The drivers' parade, for example, takes place on Wednesday night, not race day, and can take five hours or more, due to frequent stops along the circuit so drivers can mingle with fans and hand out souvenirs. The spectators pay back their heroes by covering huge sections of the racing surface with scrawled good luck wishes – a sort of benign, technicolour graffiti worn away by rubber and rain all too soon.

Numbering 200,000 or more, the spectators begin setting up elaborate campsites throughout the forest at the most desirable viewing locations as early as the Tuesday before the race, which begins at 3pm on Saturday. The more architecturally adept erect elaborate multi-story viewing towers, some of which double as neon-lit nightclubs with booming hi-fi speakers and sky-seeking light shows. Of course, this being Germany, beer is an integral part of the experience and the storage of chilled Bitburger, the local favourite, ranges from ice-filled buckets and washtubs to antique retail-style Coca-Cola coolers. And just when you think you've seen everything, the bright orange Disco Truck – complete with DJ and go-go girls, rolls out at midnight Friday to serenade fans around the circuit until 3am.

Those of us lucky enough to be hosted by Aston Martin had more comfortable accommodation in the four-story Dorint Hotel that hugs the main straight of the modern Formula 1 track. In-room television dedicates no less than five channels to live coverage of the 24-Hours with four of those required to list current standings and lap times on the maximum of 230 cars that can enter. This year's race saw 220 cars with 840 drivers take the green flag.

Besides the sheer number, the variety of cars is also what makes this race so unique. It is an automotive free-for-all with openly factory-supported teams like Aston Martin and Toyota plus more surreptitiously factory-backed Porsches and BMWs sharing the course with local garages in Opel Astras and VWs. This year's race even included an exotic hybrid, an ancient Mini Cooper and a new Fiat Cinquecento. So besides intently waiting for Kermit – the bright-green N24 Vantage co-driven by Dr Ulrich Bez – or Rose to make an appearance every nine minutes or so, you occupy the rest of the time checking to see if that Mini or Fiat or any car whose paint job, driver or, in the case of the crowd-pleasing Viper, engine note you fancy are still in the fray.

A midnight excursion out to the spectator field finds most people still awake and, more surprisingly, intently watching for their cars – at that stage only visible as headlight beams, plunging downhill in the darkness. After 12 hours, it's back to the Dorint where sleep comes easily, despite the lullaby of high-revving engines outside the window.

Sunday morning is spent catching up on who made it through the night and who did not. Still roaming the paddock are fans proudly bearing used racing tyres on their arms, the weekend's ultimate souvenir. Time switches into low gear a few minutes before 3pm as the final lap lingers on until your favourite cars pass the line. Green Aston Martin flags fill the air as the Vantages parade past, still running strong and sweeping their class. Many laps further down come my Fiat and Mini, but they are among the finishers. For the spectators and racers who have spent the past 24 hours in 'Green Hell', the wait until next year is the real endurance test.