

➔ It happens within a week of the Le Mans 24 Hours and gets only a fraction of the international attention accorded to the French classic. Yet in 2007 the Nürburgring 24 hours boasted 220 cars on track and 210,000 spectators over the weekend. Moreover, it's an event held in considerable esteem by auto industry insiders. This year's driver roster included Dr Ulrich Hackenberg, Volkswagen's vehicle development chief; Ulrich Bez, CEO of Aston Martin; and a handful of senior engineers and executives from Toyota Japan. Elsewhere, Honda shipped an experimental Civic Hybrid race car to Germany especially to race at the Nordschleife; the machine ran a 30kW electric motor in place of the standard car's 15kW unit.

So what makes the race so attractive? Michael Kramp speaks on behalf of the organizers, Germany's ADAC: "It all starts with the track," he says, "it's the longest and hardest in the world, and there's a feeling that everybody who finishes is a winner. In addition, it's just such a friendly atmosphere. From a strong foundation the event has grown in the last few years, and it's been organic growth, unlike something that is pushed by the manufacturers, like the DTM."

Kramp adds that as marketing strategies change, the works teams tend to come and go. "We are pleased to have them, but most of the works teams have to learn that the Nordschleife is something special," he says. "More than any other track in the world, you can't buy the result here."

As a result, it's the smaller, and in many cases amateur, racing teams that continue to form the bedrock of the 24 hours. For an entrance fee of around US\$3,600, kept low to support the non-professional drivers and teams, a small operation with, say, a Suzuki Swift can compete in the same event as a cutting-edge Porsche 911 GT3 RSR, the Manthey-run car with Porsche works drivers that won this year's event. "We have a long tradition with amateur drivers and this is part of their sport," Kramp affirms.

For others, the 24 hours is just another day at the office. Chris Porritt, Aston Martin's vehicle dynamics manager, co-drove Bez's V8 Vantage N24 along with Wolfgang Schuhbauer, who runs Jaguar's Nürburgring test center. "It's like doing normal testing, but with a load of people watching," he says. "It's a bit faster than a standard durability test but you're basically looking to run at a consistent 95% pace

Drive for respectability



Ten thousand branded orange T-shirts meant that no one at this year's Nürburgring 24 hours could fail to have noticed Live-Strip.com Racing. Aside from a strong performance in the race – its Rudi Seher Motorsport-run E46 M3 (above) ran ninth overall before late damage dropped it to 59th by the finish – it was the team's promotional activities that really made an impact.

After a toe-in-the-water first appearance at the race in 2006, the squad stepped up its activities this time around, adding a second car and trackside advertising in a bid to not just secure a higher-placed finish, but also to generate more awareness of the Live-Strip brand among the fans, press, and TV. Marketing is the bigger picture for the adult entertainment website, as Markus Lindenthal, a former endurance karting team manager who is managing director of Live-

Strip.com, explains: "There's a very good fit between our product and motorsport," he says. "The fans are exactly the target group that we want to reach. We've given away five times as many T-shirts as last year; we did the track parade on the Wednesday evening; and we have been sending our girls out to do promotional events around the track. The fans have been coming to us and saying, it's great that someone's doing something for us."

"We're spending more than twice as much as in 2006," he continues, "approaching US\$1.3 million for the season. Of course you hope to recoup your outlay through extra business, but that's not the only reason we're doing it. What we really want to do is establish the brand, make it respectable, and get it to the point where it stops being seen as something out of the red light district. It's a business like any other."



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Chris Porritt, Aston Martin

the whole time – you want to maintain a consistent fuel consumption to keep the car on track as much as possible.

"The test driving experience can also help you preserve the car, especially towards the end of the race. As well as taking more care with the driver inputs, if I hear a noise or feel anything unusual I can be going over in my mind what it might be, because I know the car so well. That's pretty useful."

Unfortunately for Porritt, persistent problems with an electrical connector twice kept the N24 in the garage for long periods at the 2007 event, restricting it to a ninth-in-class finish, 126th overall. ❖