

NEW CLASSIC

On its 10th anniversary Petit Le Mans
finally breaks into the big time

BY PETER BROCK PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR



Few road-racing events in the world command the over-worked title of “classic.” The promotional hype that precedes so many of the best and consistently exciting races around the world always tries to force its entry into this exclusive enclave, with each contender usually claiming it provides more than just a good weekend of competition. Experience proves otherwise; there must always be more than just “good racing.”

Each of the world’s most-prominent road circuits can certainly lay title to at least one classic. In France, it’s the 24 Hours of Le Mans, the Automobile Club de l’Ouest’s 75-year-old template on which almost every other major international endurance race has been modeled. While Germany and Belgium each have their own classic 24s at Nürburgring and Spa, respectively, the list begins to get pretty slim after those three. In America, the grueling 12 Hours of Sebring reached cult status among racing aficionados several decades ago, so it easily qualifies. Monza, Daytona and Silverstone have each had selective decades of international prominence, but nothing like the consistency of the big four, so at present these three don’t quite fit the definition.

This year’s 10th anniversary of the American Le Mans Series’ penultimate race at Road Atlanta, a 10-hour sprint through the Georgia pines—aptly named the Petit Le Mans—reached the boiling point several weeks in advance of the actual race date. With sold-out attendance of more than 100,000, Petit Le Mans finally gave America its second possible entry into solid, classic status. All it needed was that elusive factor of rivalry, which became evident as the two top teams, Audi and Penske, posted their final qualifying times on the circuit’s newly repaved surface.

This late in the season, with half of the possible championships in the ALMS’s four classes already decided, the public’s main focus was upon the ongoing, overall struggle between Audi and Porsche for alpha dominance. It mattered not that Audi’s impressive, Le Mans-winning silver ghosts—the almost-silent, diesel-powered R10s—were in the marquee LMP1 class, while Roger Penske’s smaller, V-8-engined screamers—the Porsche RS Spyders—were in the theoretically slower LMP2 class. The embarrassing fact



of the matter was Penske’s Porsches dominated most of the season and Audi’s image was suffering as a result.

Now, on this weekend, both teams’ fastest cars had almost identical speeds on the challenging Road Atlanta circuit and the impending race was perceived as a *mano a mano* duel on level turf between two top-line manufacturers; one great and one small. Each team had already won their class manufacturer’s title for the season, so the churlish marketing goals within each organization’s home office was already met.

The factory suits should have been able to close their briefcases and go home, secure in their successes with the season’s class laurels—but that’s not the way it is among racers. Racers are an entirely different breed; they’re vastly different from the corporate board-sitters who sign the checks. Racers come to win overall...regardless of class.

The Audi R10 roadsters were designed specifically to win on Le Mans’ unique 8.5-mile circuit with its unusually long straights. They had done so in June, defeating the twin French Peugeot coupes in miserable conditions, thus satisfying the main goal for those who planned Audi’s main advertising and marketing objectives for the year. The Audis, however, were not really comfortable in the ALMS—a sec-



Far left: An audience of 100,000 is a scene from the glorious days of the unlimited Can-Am. This page from the top: The Audi R10 diesels seemed unlimited in everything but racing miles. Porsche and Penske are hot on their heels with gas and preparation. Corvettes race themselves, for the fans.