

# AUDI DOMINATES THE NÜRBURGRING 24 HOURS - THE HARD WAY



story and photos by Kevin Ehrlich and Mary Fischer

**W**e almost made it.

After years of racing in fog, rain, and hail, we almost made it.

The weather challenge for the 2017 Nürburgring 24-hour race was heat. The sunshine turned up temperatures in the Eifel to unusually high levels. Drivers struggled with exhaustion. Tire manufacturers could only guess at optimal compounds with limited data in their logbooks at such temperatures.

The 200,000 plus fans adjusted as well, but fans at the Nürburgring are always prepared to work around the weather. Sunbathing Germans unfolded beach chairs, added pools to their encampments in the forest, and stocked up on beer (need to keep hydrated).

On the track, the #29 Land Motorsport Audi seized the lead and dominated from about 4 hours into the race. It easily led the most laps, stayed out of trouble, and consistently logged lap after lap after lap of fast lap times. Porsche failed to challenge for the lead

and seven cars in the AMG stable each encountered challenges along the way. Several BMW entries kept things close, but the race was owned by the green and white #29 Audi.

Until it wasn't.

In the 22<sup>nd</sup> hour, after leading for 125 laps, an ECU fault struck the Audi. It exited the pits and tried to circulate, but the electronics issue limited the car to limp mode speed rather than its usual spritely race pace. The #29 team saw its hopes for a win evaporating in front of them. The car returned to the pits where engineers reset the system – the rough equivalent of a control-alt-delete reboot.



The reset cured the electrical gremlin and the Audi returned to the fray, but having surrendered the lead. The team was devastated. To run well at the Nürburgring 24, let alone dominate, and then lose a shot at a win due to some

mysterious sensor glitch resulted in heads buried in hands with disbelief. Bosses consoled drivers. Crew members quietly carried on without the extra boost of energy that leading brings.

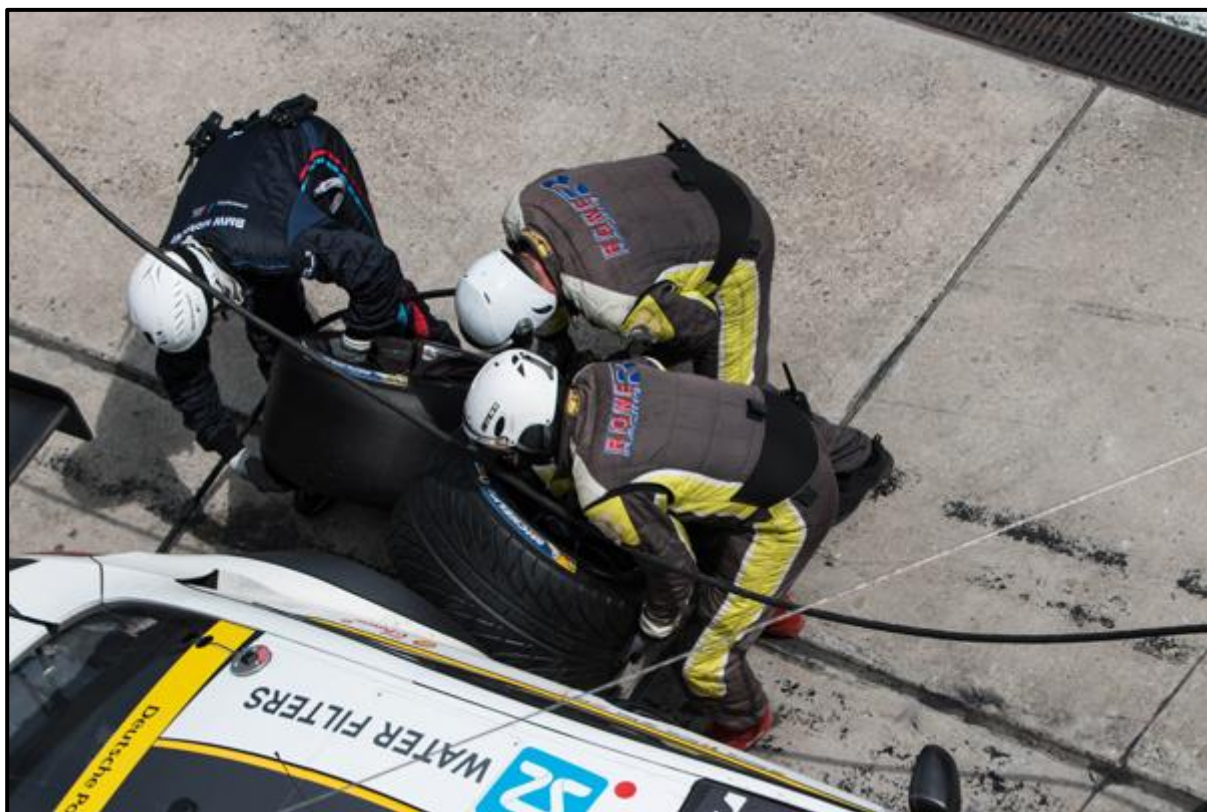
Then it happened. The rains came. The torrential rains came. The torrential rains came selectively, completely drenching some parts of the track while leaving other parts absolutely dry.

With only 25 minutes to the finish, pit lane exploded into a frenzy of activity. Crew members scrambled with new tires and cars suddenly appeared for service, competing for scarce space on pit lane with shared pit stalls.

The full Nürburgring 24-hour circuit spans a length of 15.7 miles. It encompasses three towns within its perimeter. Perched in the Eifel mountains of western Germany, weather is notoriously unpredictable. Weather can rise very quickly and violently, but also very locally. Which brings us to the key point of the race.

Out in the forest, a downpour soaked the area of the track around Pflanzgarten. The track became soaked and rivers quickly formed to stream across the track. An asphalt surface already littered with dirt, gravel, rolled up bits of tire and other debris became treacherous with the added water. Drivers on slick tires encountered the maelstrom with little warning. Some navigated through slowly but successfully while others made contact with other cars or the barriers. Teams struggled with the choice of whether to switch to rain tires.

At that point, the leading #9 WRT Audi and the second place #98 ROWE BMW M6 were trying to stay on slick tires.



The #29 Audi pitted with the intent of mirroring the tire strategy of the two leading cars, but the race turned in an instant when a stuck fuel filler cap cost the team valuable seconds to remedy. However, the additional few seconds also gave the #29 Audi team a lifeline.

Rather than stick with the plan to mount slicks, the team quickly changed course, put on wet tires and released driver Kelvin Van Der Linde back onto the track. Van Der Linde passed the BMW on the next to last lap as it struggled on its slick tires. He then passed the WRT Audi to reclaim the lead as the WRT Audi pitted for rain tires on the very last lap of the race in an effort to salvage a podium finish. As the checkered flag waved, the two Audis finished first and third and the BMW finished second.



Even more incredible than the last lap heroics for the #29 Audi to rescue the win, it was the second year in succession that the race turned on a last-lap pass for the victory. In 2016, it was an exchange between two Mercedes AMG drivers that decided the outcome.

It was Audi's fourth Nürburgring 24-hour win, but the first for Land Motorsport. It was also the first for American Connor de Phillippi, making him only the second American in history to win the event after Boris Said did it in 2005. Van Der Linde was the first South African to win the event as well. Fellow drivers Marcus Winkelhock and Christopher Mies claimed their third and second Nürburgring 24 wins, respectively. They completed 158 laps in the win, one short of the distance record claimed in 2014 by another Audi.

And what of the Mercedes AMG squad of customer cars? Seven cars were entered, all with livery touches that gave a nod to the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday of AMG. Just before the race, all of the Mercedes AMG drivers gathered together in front of

the Mercedes grandstand in turn 1 with a banner to recognize the occasion and thank the fans for their support. As it turned out, however, seven bullets in the gun wasn't enough. With the dominance of the AMG GT3 in its maiden Nürburgring 24-hour race in 2016, perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that the balance of performance regulations ratcheted back the AMG might a bit.



In qualifying, the highest placed AMG started seventh in the hands of ace Maro Engel just under two seconds off the pole time. Two other Mercedes AMG entries started 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>. Two more rounded out the top 20 in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> positions.

At the sharp end of the field, American Jeff Westphal took a popular pole position in his yellow Scuderia Cameron Glickenhaus SCG003, the project spearheaded by another American, Jim Glickenhaus. The #29 Land Motorsport Audi and the #9 WRT Audi started second and third, foreshadowing their strong run.

While the Mercedes AMG did not boast outright pace this year, two cars finished in the top 10 overall. Maro Engel in the white and blue Black Falcon skidded off the road and incurred right side damage in the late-race rainstorm but finished fifth overall, on the tail end of the lead lap. The black Haribo AMG finished 8<sup>th</sup> overall, a lap down, after suffering a time penalty in the night hours.

The silver and black #50 AMG was a victim of the late race rainstorm. While running in 6<sup>th</sup> place overall, Maximilian Buhk slid off the track at Metzgesfeld damaging the car. Sadly,



despite running 155 laps over 23 hours and 36 minutes, the car did not finish. The #47 yellow and black HTP car retired in the evening with damage suffered in a collision. The blue #3 Black Falcon AMG car had early contact which put it out of contention for the win, but the team kept it running for a recovery drive to 23<sup>rd</sup> place overall. Two other HTP customer AMG entries finished 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> overall as well.

The two yellow Scuderia Cameron Glickenhaus cars were fast but ran into their own misfortunes. The pole sitting #704 car slowed for a yellow zone and was hit from behind by the #3 blue and yellow Black Falcon Mercedes AMG. The 15 minute repair was ultimately done in vain, however, when the #704 retired after 19+ hours of running due to a single-car crash near Flugplatz. Its sister car (#702) had a fuel tank issue that prevented it from taking a full load of fuel, inevitably requiring more stops along the way. It soldiered on and was credited with a 19<sup>th</sup> place overall finish.

Porsche had a difficult race with a single customer car finishing in the top 10 and others retiring early. Bentley teams encountered issues as well. Among the top 10 finishers, four BMW cars in the top 10 were the most of any manufacturer. (In addition to the four BMWs, pairs of Audis and Mercedes AMG cars, a single customer Porsche, and a single customer Ferrari comprised the marques in the top 10.)



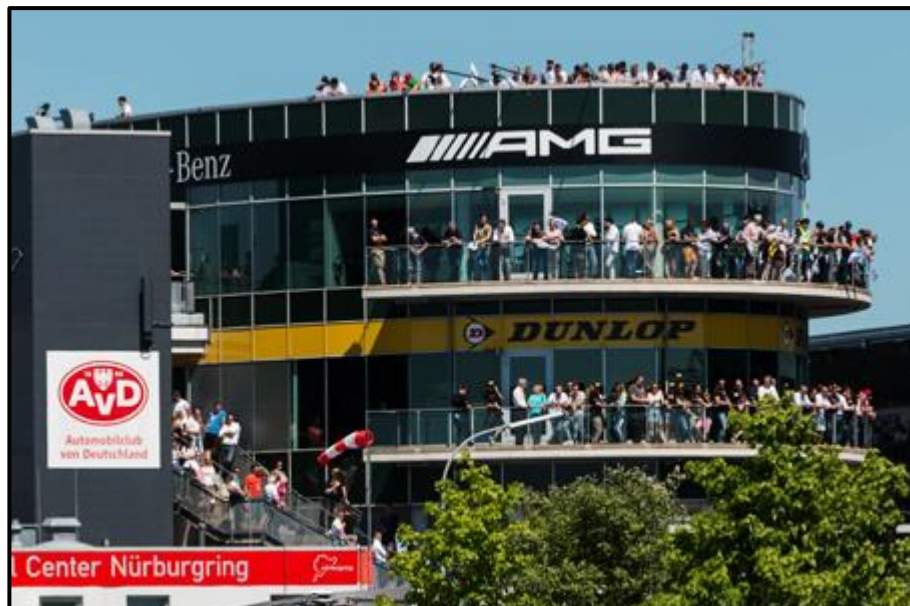
BMW and Mercedes AMG both had a significant presence at the track for fans. BMW occupied its traditional hillside location just outside the paddock with a huge pavilion overlooking the track for BMW guests. Mercedes AMG took up its now traditional location at the edge of the paddock very close to the entry to pit lane. BMW thoughtfully acknowledged AMG's 50<sup>th</sup>



Anniversary with signage on the side of their guest pavilion reading: "You ordered cake. We made donuts. ///M congratulates AMG on its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary."



The Mercedes AMG compound included an outdoor balcony area with long picnic tables that allowed any fan to find some shade and watch the race cars exit the grand prix section of track and climb out onto the twisty and narrow Nordschleife. There was also a display area for several modern AMG road cars and a show race car for fans to try their hand at pit stops. A private indoor area for special guests (i.e., potential customers) contained a rolling chassis of the new Project One supercar.





The highlight, though, was a selection of six AMG race cars arrayed side by side to show off many different variations of Mercedes AMG racing history. The AMG "Red Sow" 300 SEL tribute car to the famous AMG Spa 1971 win anchored the line-up. A pair each of German touring cars and sportscars (the benchmark CLK-GTR and an SLS GT3 Spa 24 hour winner

complete with original race grime and bugs) came next, followed by a modern day Silver Arrow Formula One car. It was quite a popular attraction for fans and certainly highlighted the strong AMG racing pedigree.

Inside the Ring Boulevard spectator area, manufacturers and vendors set up displays for show cars, t-shirt and die-cast car sales, and simulator rides. Mercedes AMG paired two important cars together in their area – the white and blue overall race winning AMG GT3 from the 2016 Nürburgring 24-hour race and a new pre-production Mercedes AMG GT R. The link between racing heritage and road car development was not subtle. Turns out, we had seen decals being applied to the exact Green Hell Mango GT R car earlier in the week at Affalterbach during our tour of the AMG Performance Studio.





As always, each Nürburgring 24 hour race is unique. With 160 competitors across 21 classes, there were compelling stories everywhere. Some stories were told by teams or drivers who were making their debut and considered merely getting the chance to race to be a victory. Other stories were told by teams or drivers who are fan favorites year after year.

Regardless, finishing this race is very difficult. Attrition due to contact with other competitors or the barriers or due to weather competes with the challenges of mechanical reliability. The spirit of fighting back, of fixing with tape and zip ties just to get the car back on track, and of soldiering on out of pride even when hope of podium hardware is likely gone – those are the races within the race.

The 2017 edition waited until over 98% of the race distance had been run to play a weather wild card. In the end, the rainstorm ended or hampered the race for some but also provided the twist that rewarded a bold pit stop call and thrust the #29 Land Motorsport Audi to the top of the podium on the last lap of the race. Each year is unpredictable and unique. No wonder over 200,000 Germans flock to the Nürburgring every year for this event, and a growing international audience joins them, both in person or online.

