



LE MANS 24 HEURES

Le Mans, France, August 21-22

Le Mans 24 Heures Vélo



PENNY COMINS HIRES a van and crosses the Channel for a 24-hour race at the spiritual home of endurance racing, Le Mans



SPORTIVES in the UK are on the up and up. Everyone is hungry for the next challenge. We all want to be pushed to our limits and a little further, either through a huge great hill, gut-busting miles, long flat grinds or lactate-building steep rollers. Everyone wants the sting in the tail and the story to tell their mates at work come Monday. In the never-ending search for ever-harder events, I took the van and seven other riders to the Bugatti Le Mans track, four hours south of Paris, to leave my comfort zone behind. And so it was that the white-knuckled, sleep-deprived joyride began.

Set up in 2009, the Le Mans 24 Heures Velo was the brain-child of father and son duo Claude and Romain

Gasnal. Following the famed motor-racing format, the pair put forward the idea to run the race on two-wheelers under human power, which attracted over 1,000 riders in its first year. Growing every year, the event is on par with the German Nuremberg 24-hour race, held on the same weekend — which is also where the winning team from the UK Action 24-hour event held at Goodwood gets sent to compete on the European circuit. It was this team, the lovely lads from Birmingham University, with whom we shared a pit garage.

While these guys were seriously in it to win their four-man category, downloading data furiously every time out on the track, girls making them food and sleeping in the pit on blow-up armchairs, we were more in sportive mode. We had a box of 9Bars and two tubs of Maxifuel Viper Boost to keep us going, as well as a bundle of virginal willing. It was clear that none of us had any racing experience, so we put our ex-Olympian rower out first, as we knew he could perform under pressure. The rota for riding

“This event attracted over 1,000 riders in its first year”

355
teams



CW in the pits



Before the weather turned really nasty

KEY



Feed stops



Entry on the line



GPS mapping



Changing facilities



Electronic timing



Affiliated to charity

Dylan Wyn Pugh

MY
RIDE**Age: 33****Lives: London**

“NOT knowing what to expect, charging out on to the track, only to be swallowed up and then spat out by the peloton as it snaked its way round the racecar circuit was a truly exhilarating experience. As soon as you got used to the form, hanging on in the pack was great fun and left me spent each time I pulled into the pits to hand the baton to the next team-mate. It's a great event that I'd recommend to any experienced rider.”

and sleeping was drawn up and stuck to the van. Viper-boosted, we were off.

Entrants are permitted to do the 24 hours solo, in pairs, fours, sixes or eights. Teams of eight formed the Leisure Class, but most took it terribly seriously and were hovering around the monitors in the pits waiting to see their live rankings roll up. After several laps, we were clearly in second and chasing hard.

Afternoon kick-off

The Le Mans-style start at 3pm sent everyone scuttling in cleats over the tarmac to their bikes, in blazing white sunshine. With our team having started, some of us retired back to the campsite to get valuable sleep while the member

Local Knowledge

Getting there: Driving is the best option. You can bring all the bikes, turbos to warm up on and camping gear, and either hop on the Euro Tunnel or the night ferry from Southampton.

Accommodation: Le Mans is used to an influx of car enthusiasts for the racing, so accommodation is plentiful as 90 per cent camp on-site. The facilities are fantastic, complete with cafes and food options in the event village where you can buy full catering wristbands for the weekend.

Things to do: Try out the Le Mans museum to see what all the fuss is about (www.lemusee24h.com).

Carbo load: The event has full catering on-site.

Leg-loosener: The track is open on the morning of the event for an hour to test it out. Friends and family are allowed to ride around then too.

Simon Fieldhouse

MY
RIDE**Age: 34****Lives: London**

“AN incredible, unique opportunity to race on a track with over 400 other riders. In two dark, rainy hours at around 2am, I learned more about peloton riding than I'd learnt in all my other events! An awesome experience. The hosts were so friendly and helpful, and the event offered everyone a go, from professional outfits to pink ladies on mountain bikes. I'd definitely do it again, and next time I'd try and stay for some beers afterwards.”

What's so special about... Le Mans

THE fact you are racing on the famous Bugatti Le Mans racetrack brings a tingle to the spine. Leaving the pits that the cars leave while watching TV and racing past the huge grandstands is really something special for the mere mortal (petrolhead or not).

either side of the shift waited to support. On the back of a fag packet, we had worked out that an hour on the track each would give us enough time for a kip, eating and three turns on the track. Diligently, the five boys volunteered themselves for the graveyard shifts — lucky for us, as the biggest thunderstorm erupted at midnight. Floodlit, the track remained as slippery as an ice rink until the morning when the girls took over.

Waiting in the pits for teammates to come in was a test of nerves. Other teams were racing off as I waited patiently in-between the changeover lines. Swapping over the ankle-timer was perfected to get a slick transition, but without breaking the speed restriction (one minute 30 seconds) in the pits and incur a penalty.

Hitting the 4.3-kilometre route, it climbed away from the grandstands up to the iconic Dunlop tyre from the pits. Under the bridge, it was a downhill sweep to a flat hairpin corner which required skill to stay in the big snake peloton. Many a time, it spat me out the back like a rattlesnake flicking its tail. Racing back past the packed

Jonathan Grossick

Age: 34
Lives: London

"AN epic race at a very special venue. I'll be back next year to ride solo again with 368 miles done; I'd a bad time with flats, and crashed during the night on the descent from the Dunlop bridge. I hit hard, then another rider crashed over me. Apart from the crash and flats, the experience was something else."

A Le Mans style start — what else?



542 miles ridden

campsite and to the grandstand was a huge adrenaline rush passing through the crowds and lining up up the climb.

Road racing virgins

Le Mans 24 Heures Vélo is marketed as a cyclo-sportive, but it's a fantastic transition event for those moving from sportives to racing. None of the team had any

"It's a fantastic transition event for those moving from sportives to racing"



Every second counts

David Hutchins

Age: 33
Lives: London

"I THOUGHT it was a very well organised event, very professionally run. I think an optimum team size for a good challenge would be a team of four. Most fun was cycling in the dark, particularly with a bit of rain making everyone nervous into the corners on the slippery track. It got the senses going in an exhilarating way. The campsite was great with good washing facilities. I was impressed with the range of riders, from keeno pros to family fun types and lots of old boys. Can't really fault it, actually, except our team's timing chip going a bit wonky for a short while."

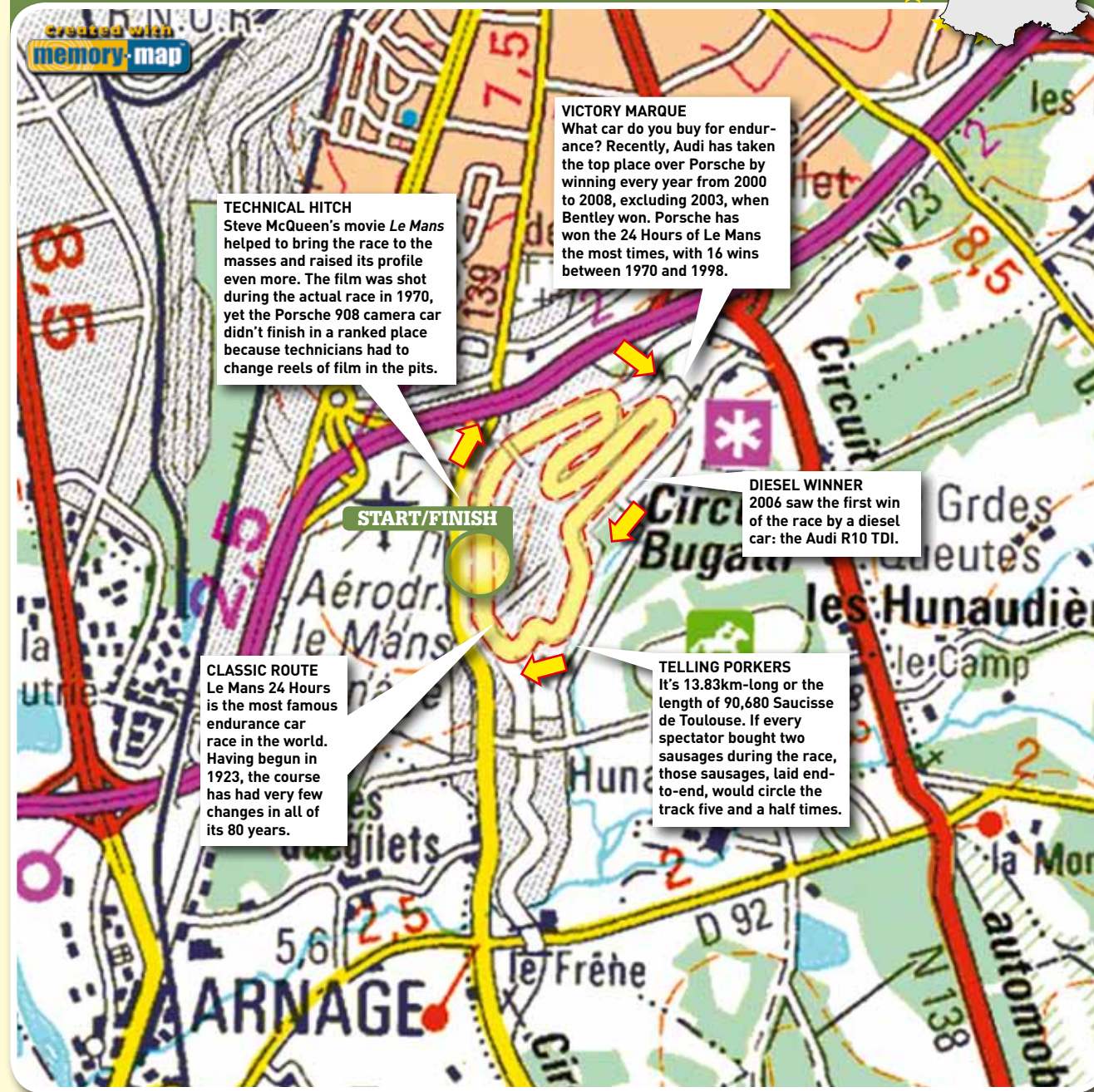
experience of road racing before the weekend, but loved every bit of it. As a team, we fought hard and put our Olympian back on for the finishing laps, but we couldn't pull back the three-lap advantage the other team had. We came an honourable second in our class and top 100 team. We'd done 210 revolutions of the track and covered 878.85km (542 miles), the same distance we'd driven to get to and from the event.

The 2012 event will be held over the bank holiday weekend in August, allowing Brits more time to travel over, and giving a day afterwards for a few celebratory drinks with the team before driving home.

Cycling WEEKLY

Le Mans 24 Heures Vélo

878KM [542 MILES]



EVENT WEBSITE www.24heuresvelo.fr/en/

