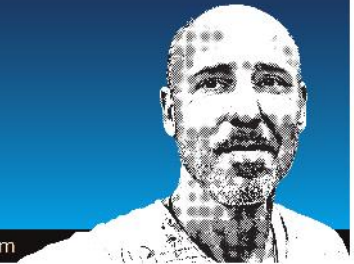


Shop Walls: LeMans Perspective

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In our Mustang hobby, as we all know, we have all types of people who are involved in restoring, collecting, and enjoying our cars—from accountants to home builders to software developers. And within those groups there are different age categories as well—retired, semi-retired, middle age, and those of us born after what I would say is the golden age of racing for Ford in the 1960s.

As is typical, in my shop you will find on the walls pictures, paintings, and memorabilia from the 1960s and 1970s. I love that kind of stuff. You see the names from that time period that have today become brands and symbols, like Cobra, Shelby, GT40, and LeMans. None of those names should sound strange, but what is missing for many of us is to really, really understand the history behind all of this.

Myself, being born in 1969, I was too late to the stage to see and hear all about these pieces of Ford history first-hand, so I learned much later. To look at racing today and understand what's going on, you really need to understand what happened 50 years ago. And by that I am talking about what happened with Ford at LeMans in 1966, 1967, 1968, and 1969. It really shaped Ford's image. There is a direct relationship there with the cars of the 1960s and the powerful Ford GT we see being made again by Ford today.

Last month, I had the opportunity to visit France and stop by the race track in LeMans, which is about a two-hour drive west of Paris. It's a beautiful rolling hills area of France and the perfect spring weather with blue skies made it a good time for a visit.



The actual 24-hour race at LeMans, which is held in June each year, starts mid-afternoon and finishes the following day at mid-afternoon. It is the oldest automobile endurance race in the world, and for most people the most prestigious race each year. If you think about it, the incredible part is that the cars run about 3,100 miles in that 24-hour period, which is well in excess of the driving distance across the entire United States! It's a closed course now, although in the very beginning it was run on open rounds around that area. The event started as a manufacturer race in 1923 with the point being not just speed but, most importantly, reliability. If a manufac-



turer could build a reliable car that could go that distance and win, it would instantly build credibility for the cars sold at the dealerships, thus furthering the concept of "race on the weekend and sell in the dealership on Monday."

There are plenty of books, magazines, and documentaries about LeMans and its history, but to really understand how that race affected Ford, there is a new documentary out called *The 24 Hour War* that really digs into the late 1960s. An excellent documentary as documentaries go, it follows the path to the wins that Ford had in 1966, 1967, 1968, and 1969 and the rivalry that was created between Ford and Ferrari.

Ferrari was actually the dominant race car and manufacturer at LeMans for many years. Starting in 1949, they built engines and cars that were excellent on the track. They were unstoppable and won each year from 1960 to 1965. They clearly were the car and manufacturer to beat on the track. However, selling cars to consumers was never really their interest. It was the complete opposite of Ford during that same time period. For Ford, looking to enter this market in the early 1960s, it seemed to be a perfect fit to acquire Ferrari. This resulted in some serious talks and negotiations that eventually broke down when Enzo Ferrari decided he did not want to sell the company. And that's where it all started for the Ford vs. Ferrari rivalry over the next few years. Ford decided to become involved in racing but did it without Ferrari, swearing to beat them at LeMans. Not an easy task against a company that was undefeated in the 1960s. Ford teamed up with Shelby American, not only to make it happen but to finally do it in a decisive victory in 1966 by finishing First, Second, and Third. Quite the feat. And after that Ford win, plus wins over the next three years, Ferrari has never again won at LeMans. Impressive statement.

For those who want to see a good documentary, I suggest watching *The 24 Hour War*. You will not be disappointed. Produced in part by Adam Corolla (a big automobile enthusiast), it's a great watch.

So yes, it all comes full circle in the images I see in my shop every day. I'm glad to better understand this piece of history. Vroom, vroom...