



IMSA PHOTOS

IT'S WAR IN GT LE MANS

By JOHN JEPPESEN

The battle lines are being drawn. It looks like the Europeans are preparing for a fight in the IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship's GT Le Mans class.

The war will be waged at tracks across this continent with more vigor than ever before. Both Chevrolet and Ford know they're in for a battle royal. The dogged consistency of Chevrolet's Corvette secured the championship last season, despite not winning a single race. On the other hand, Ford won five times.

We noted combatants' opinions on IMSA's Balance of Performance in a previous story in this magazine. Chevrolet's Doug Fehan and Ford's Chip Ganassi agreed that the BOP was a "necessary evil."

A cursory look at the Balance of Performance seems to give an edge to Porsche, BMW and Ferrari. That forces the Yanks to conjure up that ingenuity for which we're famous.

While weight has remained relatively the same, both Chevrolet and Ford have suffered.

Chevy's air restrictor has been reduced and Ford's

turbo boost has been chopped on the top end of the rev range, while BMW gets a boost increase above 5,000 rpm to redline.

Is a little more boost enough to get the boys in the Munich beer halls to lift a stein of lager? Or will Porsche leapfrog the whole bunch? It's difficult to say what Ferrari will do after running a limited schedule last year.

Gary Pratt is the guy whose name is on the door of the shop that builds the Chevrolet Corvette C7R.

"We've been looking at data, section times on the track. We think Porsche and BMW are going to be real strong," Pratt said. "When you look at the Roar (Roar before the 24), we did good in qualifying; other teams don't do that. Maybe they're not looking for the pole. Maybe they don't want to show their hand. Our two guys (the No. 3 and No. 4 cars) drafted together and we were quickest, but obviously you can't always do that in the race. It's usually only good for a lap or two."

Pratt knows the team has its work cut out for the battle plan sorties and it's not what you'd see at first

glance.

"We did a lot of tire testing and we hope we did a better job in tire testing, maybe Michelin built us a better tire than the other guys," Pratt said. "That's what we're hoping. We are constantly working on our execution and software that will help us make better decisions during the race. We've done a fair amount of testing in the offseason. There are certain things we can work on and certain things we can't."

The key to Corvette's continued success has very little to do with horsepower. It will come in the team's execution.

"Execution, we always try to do better on pit stops," Fehan said. "We try to get really close to the edge on refueling time. There are a lot of rules on refueling time that we have to follow. If you're a quarter second or half a second off that's 50 to 75 feet in pit lane. We have to get that stuff right on the money. Yeah, we saw that at Petit Le Mans. Everybody was pretty damn competitive at Petit."

"Obviously, we hope that that continues on for the rest of the season," he

added. "What I mean by that is we thought we were pretty good at the beginning of the race, a couple three hours go by and we sunk to the back and a lot of that was in pit strategy. It was temporary and we got back to the front a few hours later. We just have to keep executing so we don't make any mistakes."

Ganassi's strike group wants to rack up enough victories to claim the championship. Mike Hull is the team "XO" — Executive Officer in military terms. For Hull, all this yammering about BOP isn't worth a tinker's dam.

"BOP is a give-and-take situation all the time," Hull said. "As an example, we were at the Roar test and it's funny matching up the field with a theoretical, which you have on the screen in front of you and IMSA has the same information in front of them, and the completion of the lap is fun to watch. We've never been a team that is crafty enough to work on BOP."

Here's why BOP doesn't matter much.

"We're a race team that just goes out there, lays it all out and does it," Hull said.

“People think that’s a statement not based on fact, that we’re being deceitful, but that’s not the case. The Europeans are much better at the game than we are, but the results prove out that we’re a good racing team and that’s the counterbalance for BOP. The one thing that sanctioning bodies, whomever they might be, they can’t BOP race craft.”

The final element in team success is the driver. Hull chuckled after hearing about Ganassi’s conversation with NASCAR Hall of Famer Leonard Wood, when Wood said of his driver: “If we wasn’t running good, we needed to work on our car.”

That, says Hull, “is the way it is with any front-line driver. The more you have the opportunity to continue to run that driver, it’s a good reminder that it’s not all about you. The part that it’s all about you is what the Wood brothers did during that era. They worked by themselves in that category. They had Richard Petty deal with all the time. What they did was they listened to their driver. They listened to what their driver wanted, what their driver needed and I think that teams that consistently run at the front, win races or championships.

“They go hand in hand. That’s what they do well,” he added. “They don’t come in with a pre-conceived notion of this is how the car needs to be. They want the driver to tell them what he or she needs to get the most out of a car on a given day. That’s what the Wood brothers did a long, long time ago. That’s probably the link to modern day race teams and race teams from different eras of racing.

“I think what Leonard said to Chip was really awesome. He was just a racing guy who understands how to remain on the practical side of execution to get it done.”

Mark Rushbrook is Ford’s global director of Ford Performance Motorsports. IMSA GTLM as an important part of the company’s performance image.

“The competition is why we are in the series and in this class, GTLM,” Rushbrook said. “We sure want to race against the best in the world. To be on the track and competing against Ferrari and Porsche and BMW and Corvette is exactly what we want to be doing.” ■



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