

## Le Mans 2009 – Johnny O’Connell’s race comment

It’s been a few days home now, and if you’re wondering what I’m doing you’d laugh. It’s back to doing laundry, getting groceries, cooking dinners, and cleaning. But for some reason or another it all is a bit easier to do now. Le Mans was awesome. A great battle between the two cars, and a win that will always mean a lot to me.

It was from the start a great battle. Jan did a good job getting us on the pole even though neither car really made an honest qualifying run to the conditions and focusing more on set up. For the first stint, Jan was able to keep Oliver behind him, but as close as OG could stay to Jan I was concerned that maybe our car was not working quite as well as the 64 car. Just before I got in for my first double, there was a caution that separated the two cars and allowed us a gap of around two minutes. Luck is always a part of the game in long races and we caught a good break.

When I got into the car, it was pretty good the first stint but suffering from too much mid corner understeer so that you could not carry the speed you wanted through the middle part of the corner. We had a huge lead so I was not all that concerned, but on the second stint, the tires really fell off and it was all you could do to run a decent lap time. Beretta in the 64 car was also pushing really hard, and with their car working a bit better in the middle of the corners was able to make up some time on me.

Us trying to sort the car and make it better was a big part of the race. We made several changes, but could never get the car completely in the sweet spot. We again got another break with a safety car later, building up a gap again to the 64 car, but soon would have problems of our own that would really cost us.

The first was a fueling rig problem that would add about 20 seconds to each time that we stopped. That cost us a ton. Then around 2 in the morning, Jan was unreal sick, and had to take some medicine to get over it. The problem was the medicine totally knocked him out and it was iffy whether or not he would be able to get back in the car, so Antonio and I just put our heads down, and pushed as hard as we could. Personally I only got about 45 minutes of sleep during the race, and would spend my time not in the car either getting massaged or icing my feet which I had bruised in my first stint. I also at one point did an IV and took two bags of whatever it is they pump into you. But all that was enough.

Anyway, we were still having a great battle, situations arose that allowed the 4 car with another safety car to get back up to us, and I found myself having to hold off Marcel in the 64 car. It was a fun battle... he’s a very good talented driver, and I knew that with them having the better car it would be hard work holding him back a long time. But I’m kinda sure I could have. Anyway, I did get the call to let him go, and once by me he was able to open up a good gap as he was on his first stint with tires and I was on my second stint.

As I pulled in to change drivers with Antonio, I was a bit down as I thought that the race for us was most likely over. But then talking with our engineer was given hope as with the way tire strategy was working, we might be in a better tire and fuel window than the 64 car, and that it would come down to the last stint. So I went to get worked on and prepare for the last stint, and it wasn’t 20 minutes later than Jans wife let me know the 64 car had had a problem, and we provided we didn’t make any mistakes, we could get this last win in the GT 1 category.

**There was only one thing on my mind when I got into the car for the last stint, and that was be perfect. Perfect lines, perfect shifting, watching mirrors, total focus. Not just for me wanting to win for Jan and Antonio and myself, but really a much bigger picture. To be perfect for all our Corvette Fans. To be perfect for all the Americans back home pulling for us. To be perfect for everyone that loves and cares about the future of GM. For everyone that believes in Corvette Racing and it's value to Chevrolet. For Doug Fehan, Gary Pratt, Jim Miller, everyone at Katech, for Compuware and all our sponsors. And especially for all the mechanics and engineers with Corvette Racing that spend hours upon hours building the race cars.**

**The guys on both cars did an amazing job. It was bad luck for the 64 guys, as they work every bit as hard as the guys on the 63 car. And Oliver and Olivier and Marcel drove really well. So hats off to them. And for Dan Binks.... Well it was nice to finally get him a win at the one track he'd never won at. Now rumor has it he was all emotional and crying at the end. Personally I'll have to see it before I believe it as the Dan I know is a hard ass who even if I scissor kicked him in the head wouldn't cry !!! Of course I'm just kidding, as that place is the most emotional place in the world.**

**My last several laps, I did not talk on the radio unless absolutely necessary, and then really short. I know that if I had done anything but focus on the job of driving, as tired and beat up as I was, I would have done the same, and lost it. So when I got close to the finish, I asked permission to do a burnout. Seemed like the right thing. And when I lit them up.... Smoked them big time.... Over the radio.... Dan said " Now that's showing them how we do it in America. "**

**Finally, about this being my fourth win. I'm sure it will sink in over the next few days how special it is to be the only American to get that many wins at Le Mans. And like at Sebring, I hope I can still get a few more. But those results are really not the result of just me. It's having teammates like Jan, Ron, Antonio, Oliver, Scott Pruett, Steve Millen and John Morton. Guys preparing the cars like everyone at Pratt and Miller and Corvette Racing. The support of GM and Chevrolet. And early in my career, an amazing effort put forth by Nissan when they were involved in sportscars.**

**When I drove for Nissan, the racing Manager at the time Frank Honsowitz once told me that at the start of every race, he gives me 100% of a car. Bring me back just 1%, just make sure you win.**

**When I first joined Corvette Racing in 2001, my first race was the 24 hours of Daytona. A huge event for the team as both Earnhardts were racing with us. Prior to the race, Program manager Doug Fehan told me that he only has three rules. Follow them, and good things will happen. Needless to say those directions were followed... we won, and since then have with the GT 1 car had the most amazing ride writing history. As we move forward, know everyone at Corvette Racing is committed to winning, and always will be.**

**Johnny**