

# EMBASSY RACING

## **How tough is the Le Mans 24 Hours?**

### **Very, very tough**

First you need a reliable car, next you need it to be quick enough to be reasonably competitive, then you need the resources, including the right people of course, to work through the almost inevitable issues that a tough track, unpredictable weather, and the good, the bad and the ugly of the other 54 competitors can throw at you oh and last, but absolutely not least, you need luck, lots of it – all good!

Throw into that mix a team with a still very new car and the chances of any kind of standout performance looked unlikely.

Someone really should have told Jonathan France and co!

After a massive accident for Joey Foster in the closing minutes of track action at the Test day, just a fortnight before the race proper, and more challenging still just a week before the car had to be presented for scrutineering, there was an enormous task in prospect for the Embassy crew.

Joey Foster "I'd done almost a whole stint and was on my in lap on intermediates. I short-shifted and the car went off under full compression, it was my mistake through inexperience here really but it was a very big impact. I'm pretty heavily bruised but that's healing very quickly. The main thing is that I'm gutted for the extra effort it's meant for the team and the lads. They've turned things around amazingly fast.

The whole car needed a total rebuild, luckily the team had taken good account of the need to be well prepared, the race transporter containing not only the team's second WF01 but also with a huge spares package.

It was a massive task without the facilities offered back at Embassy Racing's workshop but it's at times like this that the difference between a group of people and a team comes into play.

By Tuesday morning, at the appointed time, the #45 Embassy Racing WF01 was unloaded from the transporter with the famous Le Mans Place des Jacobins heaving with thousands of race fans getting an early fix of the unique Le Mans atmosphere.



But the boys from Yorkshire had a surprise in store – not only was the car ready for the scrutineering process – it would do so with a brand new livery – a blend of the team’s pride in their Britishness and their endorsement of the Le Mans spirit, Union Jack and Tricolour combined.

For the driving crew there was time to reflect in the sunshine on the test day, the efforts of the previous week and the race action to come later in the week:



Jonny Kane: “It’s all looking OK but of course the wet/ dry weather at the test didn’t really give anyone a real chance to show where they really are. I think we, and everyone else, will only really find out where we are on Wednesday.

“The good news though is that there is a lot more to come from our car – Of course there will be plenty of others in the same position but we’ll see. We’re all pretty pleased with where we are.”

Joey Foster: “Well the conditions were quite testing! But as a venue, and as a track, I absolutely love it. The enthusiasm and the knowledge of the public is just fantastic. The following sportscar racing has is just fantastic, it’s been a real eye opener for someone like me who is a relative newcomer to it.

Jonny Kane: “That’s right, you get out of an anonymous hire car and loads of people here know exactly who you are immediately. The scrutineering event is something which really shouldn’t work but it really is a special part of this.”

Moving on to talk about the accident that left the #45 car requiring an almost total rebuild following the test day a still bruised Joey Foster said:

“I’d done almost a whole stint and was on my in lap on intermediates. I short-shifted and the car went off under full compression, it was my mistake through inexperience here really but it was a very big impact. I’m pretty heavily bruised but that’s healing very quickly. The main thing is that I’m gutted for the extra effort it’s meant for the team and the lads. They’ve turned things around amazingly fast.

Warren Hughes: “Joey’s shunt happened in almost exactly the same place as Burgueno’s a couple of years ago in the Test which oddly led to my getting the drive in the ASM car that year as he hadn’t completed his 10 laps.



“We went for a walk around the circuit this morning and it does seem that the barriers are very close to the track at that point – I’m sure there’s a good reason for that but we might ask after two such similar high speed accidents.”

“I’m, looking forward to the week, to see what we’ve really got here. There are some really encouraging signs for us and for the whole team but as Jonny said this hasn’t been our real pace or anyone else’s.

“One very good thing is that what we’ve seen already is beginning to make real sense of the data we’ve seen from wind tunnel simulations. That’s naturally the case when you have had to do so much of your early testing at race meetings but things are slotting together well now.”

The scrutineering process was completed without any major dramas and then it was back to the track to prepare for the first track action of the week.

Qualifying at Le Mans takes place over four 2 hour sessions on Wednesday and Thursday evenings up to midnight.

That's eight hours of potential track time but with plenty of work to get through.

A qualifying time has to be set, and all three drivers need to post a competitive time AND complete 3 laps at night.

And that's without taking into consideration both the need to bed in what was effectively a brand new car and concentrate on the most important task of all, finding a comfortable and effective race set-up.





After the rush to complete the 'new' #45 car you might have thought that the Embassy Racing effort would start slowly – not a bit of it, the car was almost immediately up into the top 5 in class in the first session in the hands of Warren Hughes.

Before the session Jonny Kane had said: "It's been a while since I drove here in the dry. I did most of the running on the test day in the wet and our times reflected that; finding braking points etc. We've got a new nose on the car and various other changes on the package; and we're hoping for a good run tonight."



He got his wish, upping the ante and posting a time good enough for 4th in the hugely competitive LMP2 class – just outside the top 20 overall, by the end of the first 2 hour session.  
Warren Hughes: "We've got a mega team; the preparation is fantastic and we've got a chance to make it to the end if we get the rub of the green."

The second session though saw the emphasis shift to consolidation after Jonny Kane hit traffic on a new set of qualifying tyres.



"I went out on qualifiers at the start of the second session (for an improved time of 3:39.326) and thought that I'd go quicker on the second set; but I hit traffic and lost the best of them. P5 is pretty respectable first time out and the car has run faultlessly up till now."

Warren Hughes: "Considering our end to the test day and the effort that has had to go in since then that was a very good day."

"We had a well thought out plan and worked our way through it. Tomorrow is all about our race programme and the race engine and gearbox are going in now. We'll do a low mileage run."

"All in all the car was where we thought it should be. The only thing about the pace out there that surprised me was that the Porsches were about a second quicker than I thought they would be but this isn't the kind of race that gets won on that sort of pace anyway."

So that was the really good news, Embassy had caught up and were ahead of their gameplan.

And so to raceday

The #45 car would take the start, 24th place overall, in front of a simply enormous crowd, some 258,500 over the weekend of the race alone.

For those familiar with the Steve McQueen movie Le Mans the general setting will be familiar – but even that film's dramatic lead up to the start of the 24 Hours pales into insignificance with the reality of being the man in the hot seat.

For Embassy Racing that duty fell to lead driver Warren Hughes and the brief was a simple one – Fast, safe and steady. Stay in touch but out of trouble.



And Warren didn't disappoint. He retained his position through the early laps, a time in the race when all too many drivers let the red mist descend, sometimes forgetting that taking a tenth or two out of the car ahead is less important than ensuring that the car is in good shape to hand over to their team-mates.



No such worries with the Embassy Racing squad, Warren has played this game before and he knows what it takes to race, and win, at the Le Mans 24 Hours.

A double stint from Warren took the car through into the second hour, making progress up through both the overall and class order as others either overdid things a little or fell behind the WF01's impressive pace. By the end of the first hour the #45 car was running fault-free, into the overall top 20 and, with other cars pitting earlier, up to third in class.

Jonny Kane then climbing aboard, a double stint for him, including a best lap thus far in the race for the car in 3:43.046 was followed in turn by a similar effort from Joey Foster.



Throughout this period the WF01 was making progress, a combination of speed and reliability bringing it gradually up the overall order, up in 17th place overall and fourth in the class during Foster's first double stint.

What next? – well why change a winning formula? The double stinting pattern was repeated and that 17th slot, 4th in class was being easily maintained.

That was until 10pm, just after dark, the car pitting for Joey Foster to start his second double stint. Jonny Kane had reported on the radio that the clutch was slipping and the team took the

opportunity to bleed the clutch – but the car failed to fire up and a rapid bit of work in the pit garage saw the ECU re- cycled, the car firing up immediately and with less than 20 minutes lost for a problem that has seen other cars retire in previous races.



That though cost the car time and track position, into the mid 20s but running strongly.

Joey Foster rejoined the race but at the end of his second stint the team had work to do again,

the car's gear selector playing up a little. 15 minutes were lost there, but still the #45 car was holding its own, the race now 8 hours old and other competitors were suffering too, some rather more than the Le Mans newcomers Embassy Racing. Luck though had turned against the team in this middle section of the Le Mans marathon, a further unscheduled stop to remedy damage caused by picking up debris from someone else's incident left the car to emerge back in 36th position – time for a fightback.



The team's confidence in Joey Foster showed as the Cornish youngster was sent out once again, a triple stint in the dark – a test of anyone's mettle but Joey was well up to the task, proof if it were needed that the test day shunt hadn't removed any of his edge and drive.

He would continue aboard the car through the first Safety Car period of the race after an accident for the #6 Courage Oreca until handing the car over to Warren a little after 1am, 10 hours gone and the halfway mark almost in sight.

The #45 car was now up into 33rd position, but 6th in class as others hit trouble, a rash of accidents had accounted for other class competitors.

The team were now on a recovery drive, one which would lift the car back up into the top 30 overall midway through the 13th hour and now back up to fifth in class.



Jonny Kane took the car through and into dawn, and through some treacherously rainy weather, the car was still making progress up the order. The only interruption to their steady move up the overall order were the recovery drives being mounted by a gaggle of the LMP1 runners, still though 5am passed with the WF01 still in the top 30, still fifth in class and now with Joey Foster back at the wheel.

Jonny Kane emerged from the #45 car after a very tricky stint: "It's pretty difficult to figure out how much water is on the track. The visibility is fine, but the rain is so fine that you can't see how heavily it's falling. Being on slicks in the wet and dark wasn't a good combination, but once we changed to wets it was fine."

The car stopped just a little early after for Foster's first stint, Jonathan France "We're experiencing low battery voltage. We were only two laps from a scheduled stop when Joey reported that he'd taken a knock to the nose; so we decided to sort it all out in one go."



An hour later though, just before 6am, Foster was crawling back to the pits, an accident at the exit of the second chicane on the Mulsanne, the scene this year of a large number of incidents, had left the car looking somewhat secondhand, heavy damage to the front left hand side of the car together with a deranged rear wing. Foster apparently distracted by a car rejoining the race track in front of him at the exit of the chicane and losing control, the car impacting the rather unforgiving Armco with a sickening crunch. Joey thankfully unscathed but the WF01 rather less so.

Joey though brought the bent #45 WF01 home and the crew immediately got to work assessing the damage. Soon though it became apparent that the damage was beyond immediate repair, the left rear corner very bent and considerable body damage too. The decision, when it came, was not surprising but still had shock value, the #45 Embassy Racing WF01 was retired after a gripping 16 hours and 35 minutes.

Emotions form a massive part of endurance racing and amidst an atmosphere of quiet contemplation of the end of an epic effort it was left to Jonny Kane to sum it all up.

“The end was disappointing but doesn’t detract from Embassy’s achievements. We were running in the top four for the majority of the time. It’s a great credit for the boys’ efforts. I hope Jonathan France sees the fruits of his project. It’s such a difficult event. Anything can happen at any time – that’s the nature of Le Mans and it can bite you at any time. We’ve had all conditions here including the one I didn’t want which was rain in the dark but at least I’ve done that now. I’m disappointed for the boys after the effort they’ve put in over the months. I just desperately wanted to get to the end. I think a car must have gone straight at the chicane and took Joey’s attention away. It’s unfortunate. Joey’s done a great job all year and it could have happened to any of us. It’s a disappointing end to a great first showing for Embassy.”

In answer to the question posed at the start of this story – This is a very, very tough race indeed. The fatigue and disappointment etched on the faces of the crew bore testimony to that.

The negatives are obvious – The #45 car’s primary objective was to finish and, ultimately, it didn’t.

The positives though are legion – The car ran harder and longer, much, much longer than it has before, up to three Le Mans Series races back to back.

That means that all of the systems, and all of the teams existing data, have been tested and bolstered. The team have learnt a great deal then about what the car is capable of, where progress needs to be made, and more to the point what needs to be done to ensure that problems don’t recur and to unlock yet more of the readily apparent

potential locked into their already impressive package.

That's good news for Embassy Racing and their growing band of fans, and very bad news for the competition.