

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2011

The Star

Mercedes-Benz Club of America



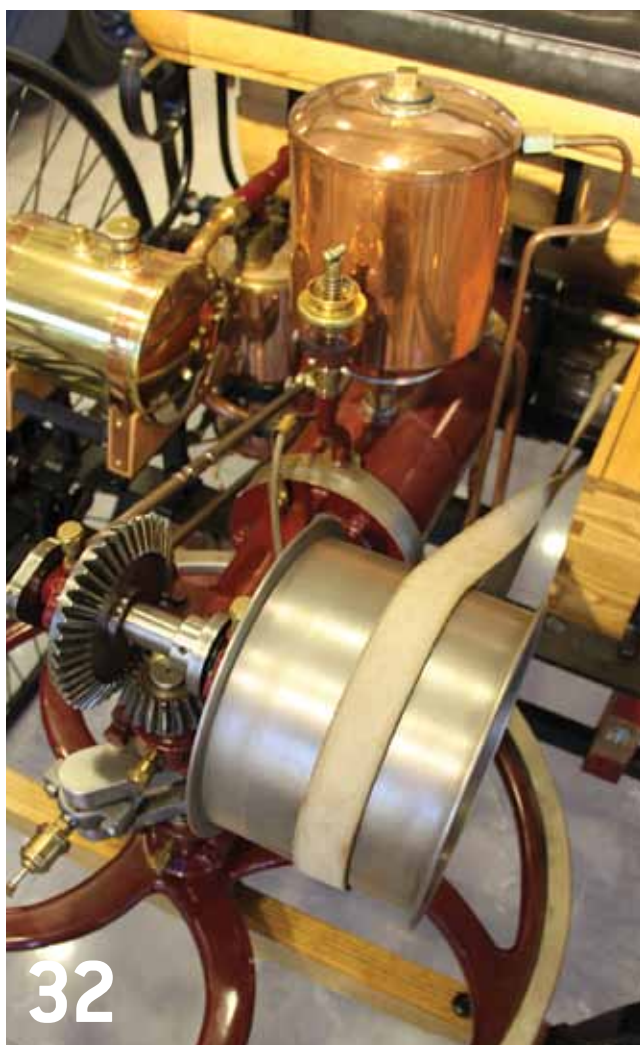
The Birth of the
Automotive Age

125! years of innovation

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That's LeMons

The 24 Hours of LeMons started, as crazy gearhead ideas so often do, in a late-night, alcohol-fueled garage bull session in early 2006. Racing had become too expensive, everyone agreed, and the entire industry – and it now was an industry – took itself far too seriously.

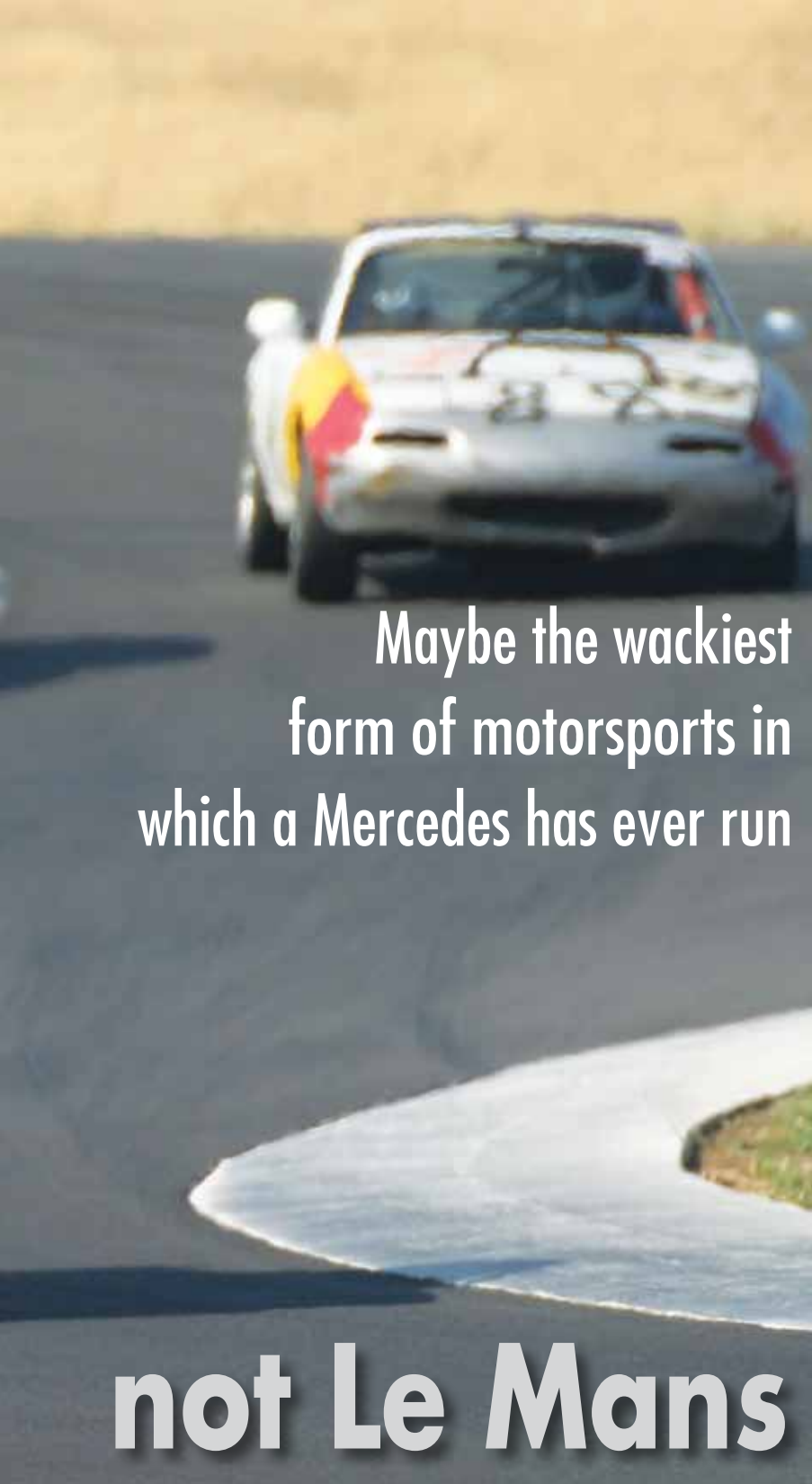
What if we were to put on a race, someone suggested, with an absolute limit of, say, \$500 on the price of the cars, and run them for 24 hours just to see how many would last?

Jay Lamm, who could claim ownership because the idea was generated in his garage apartment (which, by the way, is the apartment in which Lamm parks his cars, rather than an apartment above a garage), took it from there.

Even after the first race was organized at Altamont Speedway (yes, that Altamont Speedway), Lamm thought it would just be a fun, one-time joke that might get him a page or two of coverage in one of the car magazines to which he contributed humor pieces.

Unfortunately, as Lamm points out, the first event turned out to be way too much fun for everyone concerned, and there was a groundswell of demand to run a second one, not least from the serious mainstream auto magazines that had dismissed the first event as silly and now wanted to run teams of their own.

Now entering its fifth season, the series is such a success



Maybe the wackiest form of motorsports in which a Mercedes has ever run

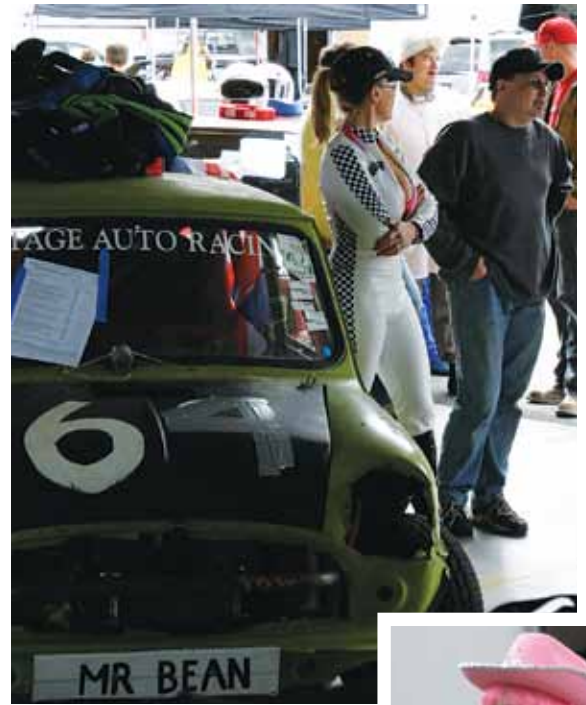
not Le Mans

that it runs all year long on tracks all over the country, has even spawned imitators, and, Lamm says, takes up way too much of his time.

A Mercedes in the Heart of the Fray

And in the heart of the fray of seven races, beginning with the second race at Altamont, has been a slightly dented 1987 190E 2.6 "Hans Am." Spray-painted black and sporting a Pontiac Trans Am eagle on the hood, it's run by Team Über Vogel, which loosely translates to "Super Bird."

In a series that chews up cars and spits out mangled axles and sheet metal, the Über Vogel Hans Am Mercedes-Benz 190E is tough and gritty, a stubborn survivor. To date,



Typical scenes in the LeMons pits

the car has competed in seven LeMons events, completing 2,488 laps and covering 4,634 miles, at Altamont, Buttonwillow, Infineon, and Thunderhill raceways. A testimony to the durability of the Mercedes-Benz brand, that's the equivalent of driving full-out from San Francisco to New York, and then back to Denver, with other drivers at random intervals trying to force the car off the road.

The car is very stoutly built. With the exception of the vulnerable placement of the radiator, which required developing a stronger front bumper using a leaf spring from a truck, the car is a war-wagon that can't be killed.

The team of close friends from Silicon Valley in California has also proven to be durable. Peter Congistre, one of the team's original members, has raced with a separated shoulder, and another original member, Rod Diridon Jr., with a broken wrist. "We're just trying to match the car for toughness," jokes Congistre.

Mercedes invested millions of dollars in R&D for this model, and it shows. The Über Vogel 190E has finished in consistently respectable form, in a field dominated by tightly wound E30s and Japanese imports, with nearly anything else that can be imagined out on the track as well. But the trick with LeMons (as with any endurance race) is as much staying on the track as it is going fast. The team has placed as high as sixth, running with approximately 85 percent of the field in speed, but with very few repair stops.

Where do you find a 190E for \$500? This one was discovered in the side yard of an aspiring rock star in Santa Cruz, reeking of rotten mildew and wet cat hair. From there, the car was gutted, a full roll cage and race seat installed. Since its first race, it's been fitted with a sway bar from a 500E, and Bilstein shocks, big brakes, and other spare parts from a donor 300E that was given to the team by a neighbor when his wife drove it through their garage door and into the two cars parked inside. Beyond the \$500 limit, the car is fitted with Raybestos race brake pads, stainless-steel brake lines, and 225/50/15 Yokohama tires on 15x7-inch wheels.

Succeeding in LeMons requires a team. Even with the \$500 limit, putting a car together will cost \$3,000 to \$5,000, not much by professional standards, but

not inconsequential until shared across a team. Even then, the main savings that keeps this racing at the amateur level comes from the team doing its own mechanical work, rather than farming it out to a race shop.

As Congistre points out, "Anyone can put together a car with a bunch of money. With cash in hand, it's just a matter of swapping in parts and tuning the thing until it goes fast. Because of the \$500 limit, we had to rebuild things we would otherwise replace, and scrounge junkyards for parts from larger E-Class cars that would function as 'performance equipment' on the 190E."

Diridon, the team captain, says doing the work oneself, to LeMons standards, is rewarding. "We're all used to doing meticulous restorations or careful mechanical and body work on serious projects. Not having to do so with a LeMons car is a liberating experience. The thing is a piece of junk and always will be, so there is no concern about aesthetics or being factory-correct as long as it's functional."

That may explain the top of the car, where the group decided simply to weld the sunroof shut rather than replacing it, using any pieces of metal laying around to fill the gaps, and not particularly worrying about metal deformation from the welding heat. Diridon says that when it cooled, the roof looked like a troop of Girl Scouts had jumped up and down on it.

Christopher Leal, a volunteer driving instructor with the Audi Club who works as a regional data center specialist at Novell, had raced a Nissan in LeMons before joining Team Über Vogel four races ago. He says choosing a Mercedes for LeMons can be summed up in one word: "Respect." "No one ever said to me, 'Cool, you're running a Stanza,'" he says. "But people genuinely like that we're racing a Mercedes."

Rick Lofgren, a two-time Norcal NASA Porsche 944 Spec champion and local contractor who recently joined the team, says, "It's nice to have the power to get a good pass and run fast on the long straights, and it handles well enough to keep the lead once you've earned it." At 6-foot, 3-inches tall, Lofgren also says he's "happy to be in a car with enough headroom not to put more marks on the top of my helmet by hitting the roof."

Like many of the LeMons teams, Über Vogel races for charity as part of the philosophy that LeMons isn't about the money. In addition to the entry, equipment, and fuel costs, the team has donated 25 cents per lap, per driver, for each of its LeMons races. So far, the team has donated \$2,972 to the American Cancer Society, the Canary Foundation, the Cort Summerfield Fund, Shriners Hospitals for Children, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars Foundation. Their most recent recipient is Speedway Children's Charities, the newly christened 24 Hours of LeMons official philanthropic partner.



Front row, from left: Peter Congistre (driver, seven races), Rick Lofgren (driver, one race), David Saliba (crew member), Rich Hudnut (official photographer and historian). On top of car: Christopher Leal (driver, four races), Rod Diridon Jr. (team captain, seven races)

Together, Peter, Rod, Chris, Rick, and Rich Hudnut have more than 60 years of experience as working professionals and dedicated gearhead hobbyists. Joined by high-tech executives and hot-shoes Tobias Yergin and Scott Hung for the upcoming Buttonwillow race, the Über Vogel 190E should be a force to reckon with.

So, why would a group of successful, respectable members of their community choose to race the 24 Hours of LeMons? Most people think they are either hallucinating from malaria or suffering a bout of mad cow, or both. That's probably true, but LeMons is also just a lot of fun. For more information, visit www.UberVogelRacing.com.



How LeMons Works

When Jay Lamm first pitched the idea of running an endurance race for \$500 expletive-deleted cars, nearly every respectable track operator hung up on him. Lamm ultimately convinced the owners of Altamont Speedway that his proposed event couldn't be worse than the figure-eight schoolbus demolition derbies that were a solid source of income at Altamont.

They did agree that the cars would be required to have safety equipment, including roll cages, fire systems, and safe brakes, tires, and wheels, and that drivers would wear standard racing safety gear. All of this would be above and beyond the cost of the basic vehicle.

To ensure that no one spent more than \$500 on a car, Lamm would borrow an idea from horse racing. At the end of every race, the organizer has the right to "claim" any car in the race and buy it for \$500 plus the cost of the safety equipment. Clearly, no one would surreptitiously spend money if he or she knew the car could wind up in someone else's driveway for a pittance.

There would be technical safety inspections, but in keeping with the notion of not becoming too serious, Lamm put his own mark on these as well. Engines at the first race were tested by placing a brick on the accelerator, and if the engine didn't blow up or leak anything in five minutes, it would be considered mechanically sound. Brakes were tested by rolling a baby carriage in front of the car. Stop without killing the doll and the car passed. The inspections have gotten a little more serious as speeds have increased on the larger tracks, but the philosophy still is to keep the driver safe, without getting bureaucratic about it, and don't worry about competitiveness.

During the race, drivers could be penalized for unsafe or unsportsmanlike conduct, but the penalties would be different from the standard drive-through, loss of place, or disqualification. Cut off another driver, and a woman dressed in angel wings and wielding a welding torch would weld a metal pig to the roof. Become a little too aggressive in one's driving, and she might weld the Spike of Damocles to the front grille, aimed so that if the driver then hit another car, the spike would pierce his or her own radiator and put the car out of the race, at least until another radiator could be found and fitted.

And the ultimate penalty would be determined by popular vote. Three-quarters of the way through each race, the most pernicious car would be selected by vote of all teams and smashed to pieces, often by being lifted and dropped from a crane until declared dead.



Organizer Jay Lamm hands out the expensive and coveted trophies.

Lest the racing still get too serious, the organizers also give prizes to the car developed with the best theme (pope-mobiles, death cabs, Ali Baba's thieves, and Mr. Bean have been popular) and best-costumed pit crew, leading to a carnival atmosphere in the pits counterpointing the potential carnage on the track.

Actually, since the second race, which put 80 cars on a 1.1-mile track and led to a bumper-cars scene and a lot of car damage, the organizers have opted for longer tracks, and the penalties for intentional car contact have become a bit more stringent.

Nevertheless, when budgets are strictly limited, just getting a car to run for long periods of time can be a challenge. Few of the events have ever actually run round-the-clock. Altamont wasn't permitted to run after 11 p.m., so the first event was staged in two eight-hour segments on successive days.

The two-day system with an overnight break, turned out to be a good setup, because many of the teams needed all night after the first day on the track to repair the damage and rebuild broken engines and components. In fact, like all endurance races, much of the drama and character-building takes place in the pits rather than on the track.

If you've got nothing better to do, check out the numerous YouTube clips of past races, and then visit the LeMons website (www.24hoursoflemons.com) to see if an event is coming to a track near you. Who knows? You might decide that this budget-minded racing for the sheer fun of it is something you want to do as well.

