

PETER BROCK
follows ALMS from
Sebring through an
expensive rat's
maze of temporary
street circuits

GAYLE BROCK
captured the color

MEAN STREETS

2007 SEASON OPENING RACES

ALMS's opening 12-hour enduro at Sebring was certainly one of the best in the series' brief history, with new teams, new faces and some of the best competition seen in years, but the action wasn't evenly divided. Audi, as expected, again dominated the overall results with its technically innovative LMP1 R10 diesels. However, it was both exciting and obvious the challenge of the new Acura-powered specials and Porsche's latest RS Spyders—in spite of their P2 classification—will be a season threat for overall laurels. The best racing, as ALMS insiders already know, wasn't in the series' more glamorous, marquee-featured prototype classes, but in the populous GT2 category. It's here where Ferrari's unexpected, but very welcome return to serious competition has completely upset years of almost boring domination by Porsche. Last year Risi Competizione, out of Houston, appeared with a single 430GT to test the waters in Florida and dazzled everyone with the new mid-engined V-8's

speed. Only a couple of unexpected delays in the pits—caused by the crew's unfamiliarity with changing wheels on the new Italian challenger—prevented victory; but other teams took notice. By mid season it was evident Risi and Ferrari were in the ALMS to stay and very intent on recovering Maranello's long-lost reputation as a serious GT racing entity.

Several incidents at Sebring made the race interesting—to say the least. Audi's R10s overpowered the field with blinding speed, especially on the long straights where the big V-12s demonstrated their swiftness, but it was also apparent Roger Penske's DHL-sponsored Porsche RS P2 racers weren't going to be the only contenders for overall honors. American Rob Dyson's veteran crew had forsaken last year's Lola AER V8s in favor of two of Porsche's new RSs, these to be run under the team's familiar Thetford/Norcold colors. In combination with Penske's

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effort, these four new German prototypes had the paddock abuzz with a possible serious threat to Audi's overall domination of the race and the series. When Dyson's Andy Wallace set some early times that matched the Audi's best laps, it was evident the P2 Porsches could really be a match for the P1 Audi's contention for overall victory. In qualifying, though, Frank Biela's pole-sitting R10, at 1:44.9, was still a full second faster than Timo Bernhard in Penske's fastest Porsche—almost everything seemed to return to normal, at least for a few minutes.

Then David Brabham put the brand new Highcroft Acura fourth on the grid ahead of the three other RS Porsches! His time was still a full second slower than Bernhard's best for Penske, but few had expected much speed from any of the three new Acura-powered racers in their debut event. Robert Clark, of Acura, had humbly described Honda's three-car effort from Acura as an "exploratory effort" with long-range plans to eventually compete with the two established German marques. He'd verbally sandbagged the opposition. At the end of the 12 hours, two of the Acura teams were second and third overall behind the winning Audi and ahead of the defeated Porsches! To say this is an unexpected coup for the Japanese-backed newcomers is no exaggeration. In truth, however, the Porsches were faster but just not as reliable. The Andretti-Green, XM-liveried P2 Acura, with open-wheel stars Bryan Herta, Tony Kanan and Dario Franchitti, was six laps down on overall winners Frank Biela,

Clockwise from far left: The Audi R10s remain the power of the field, but this time they dived with Penske Porsche RS for the first hundred laps, shown here with a Dyson Porsche. Then the Andretti Green Acura ARX (26) was in and out of the lead until the last hour. Corvettes were unchallenged by the lone Aston, but one suffered a costly failure, in time for a fix before Le Mans. All that being said, the race of the day was in GT2, between the Risi Ferrari F430 (62) and Flying Lizard Porsche 911 GT3 RSR (45). These two staged a fabulous show to the finish with the Ferrari leading to the line. [We made this composite image with the two best photos of these cars].