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Motorsport

A lap of Le Mans with the Audi R10 TDI

- **The Audi drivers discuss the 13.629-kilometre long circuit**
- **Average speed of almost 240 kph**
- **Fast corners are particularly impressive**

When Mattias Ekström climbed out of the Audi R10 TDI cockpit after his first laps around the “Circuit des 24 Heures” at Le Mans, his eyes lit up. “The circuit is very impressive – and incredibly fast,” explained the Swede, who reeled off his first laps in a LM P1 sportscar as did his DTM team-mates Lucas Luhr, Alexandre Prémat and Mike Rockenfeller at Le Mans on the official test day.

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The Audi DTM drivers already knew that the 13.629-kilometre circuit was a law unto itself from stories told by their experienced team-mates. Le Mans is a high-speed circuit with an average speed of almost 240 kph. More than anything else, it is the many fast corners that have to be taken just as quickly during the night as they are in daylight that make Le Mans the special challenge that it has become.

In addition, the majority of the circuit runs along public roads, which are only closed off for the 24 Hour race and which are full of ‘tram lines’ caused by heavy trucks throughout the year.

We asked the Audi drivers to explain the most important track sections which they will have to complete almost 400 times in their Audi R10 TDI during the race on the 16/17 June.

Frank Biela on the Dunlop corner/chicane: “This corner is much safer but not any easier to handle since it has been modified. You have to brake hard for the Dunlop chicane on the exit of the fast right hand kink. This is extremely tricky. The exit of the chicane isn’t exactly easy either because the track drops away on the exit and you want to avoid using the kerb. The

lap starts in a challenging way – just about everything at Le Mans is a challenge even though it often does not look like this from outside.”

Dindo Capello on Tertre Rouge: “This section has been modified since last year. We compared the telemetry data from 2006 and 2007: Tertre Rouge is almost two seconds faster as a result of the new layout. The new tarmac also has more grip. However, the decisive factor is that the corner is now much more fluid and really fast as a result. The modifications, however, have also made it easier.”

Mattias Ekström on the Hunaudières straight: “When I drive down the straight and select fifth gear, I’m travelling at a very high-speed. You really notice that you are driving at over 300 kph when the braking points for the chicanes come up so quickly. It’s very impressive. On the straight itself, you only have to make sure that you follow the right line, because there are ‘tram lines’ formed by the trucks. There’s enormous turbulence when you follow another car, your helmet waggles from side to side and you feel vibrations in the cockpit.”

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Emanuele Pirro on the chicanes on the Hunaudières straight: “I actually don’t like chicanes because they destroy the rhythm and aren’t very challenging. But the two chicanes on the Hunaudières are actually excellent to drive and very important. While you can relax a little on the straights, you have to be fully concentrated at this point. It’s important to find the right braking point to be able to carry exactly the right amount of speed into the chicanes. The slower you get, the more you have to reduce the brake pressure, because otherwise the front wheels lock. Obviously, it is also important to accelerate again as early as possible.”

Allan McNish on Mulsanne: “The Mulsanne hairpin isn’t quite what it used to be. Earlier, when the cars had less downforce, the suspension was worse and the tyres didn’t have much grip, approaching Mulsanne was really frightening. Our R10 TDI is so stable under braking that it is very easy today. You get Mulsanne in your sights as soon as you come over the crest on the Hunaudières. It’s tricky having to brake at the same time as turning-in and crossing the ‘tram lines’ made by the trucks. The car gets a little unstable as a result. You brake really hard in the last part – from more

than 320 kph to about 70 kph. As soon as you reach the apex you accelerate hard. During the race you can even get on the throttle before the apex because the circuit picks up grip.”

Lucas Luhr on the approach to Indianapolis: “This segment is something very special. It goes up and down. You drive through a break in the forest where the trees crowd each side of the circuit. You approach at well over 300 kph, dab the brakes, shift down and get immediately back on the power. This is one of the parts where you need, as you say in English, ‘big balls’! You let out a sigh of relief every time you’ve gone through. Afterwards, you brake hard for the slow left-hand corner, which is slightly banked. That’s the reason for the name Indianapolis.”

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Alexandre Prémat on Arnage: “Most of the corners at Le Mans are extremely fast and the car is designed for these. That’s why it is the slow corners that cause the problems, because the aerodynamics hardly have any affect and you have very little downforce. Arnage is very slow and anything but easy. Even braking is tricky. We take the corner in second gear. You feel the enormous torque produced by the R0 TDI in your back under acceleration.”

Tom Kristensen on the Porsche curves: “The Porsche curves are incredibly fast and an absolute highlight – especially with our Audi R10 TDI. The car handles fantastically there, also because of the long wheelbase. It’s quite curious that you can hardly hear the diesel engine in this fast combination of curves. I had to get accustomed to this last year, especially in the night.”

Mike Rockenfeller on the Ford chicane: “When you exit the Porsche curves and all the fast sections you experience the exact opposite: two slow chicanes. You shift down to third gear for the first chicane, which is still pretty quick. But the final chicane before the start and finish is very slow. You have to slow both the car and yourself down to prevent entering the chicane too quickly, because you are more used to the speeds from corners before the chicane.”

Marco Werner on the start-finish straight and the pit entry: “You’re always happy to have completed another lap when you come onto the start-finish straight. It’s also fantastic to see the vast ranks of spectators. It’s no problem to read the pit-board: it is illuminated and the engineering standard – as is usually the case at Audi – very high. The pit-lane entry is very tricky: It’s relatively narrow and shaped like a chicane. However, the grip level is not as high as it is on the circuit, and you can easily make a mistake here and throw the car into the gravel bed at the pit entry.”

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The Le Mans track (based on the data recording of the Audi R10 TDI in 2006)

