



Lord of the ring

WELL THEY might not have managed to take the chequered flag, but the Abt boys in their DTM TT-Rs turned in a top performance by coming second at the recent

Nürburgring 24 hours. It was my first trip to the hallowed track and also my first 24 hour race. Many told me that it's a unique experience and, although I have nothing with which to compare it, I am inclined to agree.

Scorching weather, beautiful landscape, the intimidating challenge of the mighty Nordschleife and good-humoured tented cities as far as the eye can see. The atmosphere is one big party and spectators wander freely around the pit areas, chatting to drivers and mechanics alike, peering into engine compartments and making mostly unhelpful observations.

I went for a cruise around the pits shortly before the start of the race looking for my favourite Audi driver – yes the lovely Frank Biela. He'd taken some time out from his Le Mans preparations to slip elegantly behind the wheel of one of two DTM TT-Rs entered by Team Abt-Sportsline. Chatting to him (as you do), he was relatively reticent about their chances of success. "If you enter a race like this you go for a win," he said, gazing deep into my eyes. Well, he was actually wearing very dark sunglasses at the time, but I used my imagination. "But there are so many very strong competitors, and so many circumstances you cannot influence, that it's going to be very difficult. But the car is well prepared and the performance is there, so the main key point is to run through 24 hours without any problem, and that's what we are going for."

Ahh, famous last words. Getting through the full 24 hours proved to be more of a challenge than even he expected. While team-mates Karl Wendlinger, Christian Abt, Kris Nissen and Marco Werner led for much of the race in car number 8 and finished in second place, poor old Frank and his chums had plenty of troubles with number 7.

After only 45 minutes on the track, Frank was in the pits complaining of vibrations coming from the underbody. Three and a half minutes and a few tightened screws later, he was back

in the race, and by driver changeover at 5.15pm, they were lying in seventh place. So far so good. But, oh dear, oh dear, shortly after 6.30, number seven limped back into the pits with Mattias Ekstrom at the wheel. I went for a wee look. No quick changeover this, the car was deep in the garage and a great deal of activity was going on under the bonnet. "Power steering" grunted a disconsolate mechanic when asked what the problem was. It took a whole 70 minutes to get the car back on the road, this time with Christian Abt at the helm.

Meanwhile number 8 was running well, swapping the lead with the Opel Astra V8 that eventually won the race and, by midnight, it was in second place, with number 7 at 39.

Despite number 7's impressive capacity for catching up, things just kept going wrong. Shortly before 1.00 am it took over one and a half hours to repair the brakes. A couple of hours later second gear stopped working; then, at 5.30 am, the entire gearbox had to be replaced – a further hour lost. By 8.00 in the morning, with a heat haze shrouding the track, number 8 was in the lead and poor old Frank and the boys were playing catch-up again from 90th place.

For hardened race-followers who did the matchstick trick during the night, the fight for first place was pretty gripping stuff. For the most part there was just a matter of minutes separating the Opel and TT number 8. Last year's winner, the Zakspeed Dodge Viper, was putting in a very powerful performance, but was heavily penalised on two separate occasions for overfilling the tank. Although by far the biggest hitter on the track, the penalties awarded against it pushed the US muscle car back into fifth place overall.

In the end the race was won on pit stops. While TT number 8 had been putting up a very strong and reliable performance, by 8.00 in the morning the cracks were beginning to show and the pit stops got longer: ten minutes for an electrical problem and, shortly after 11.00 am, they lost 45 minutes and 5 laps due to a gearbox change. All we could hope for now was for something to go similarly wrong in the Opel... It didn't.

It's a pity that number 8 lost its bottle so close to the end, as it could have made for one of the most exciting finishes in the race's recent history. Nevertheless, second place is indeed a fine achievement. And full respect to Frank and boys for persevering with number 7. They made it through the full 24 hours in 29th place. While this may be no testament to the vehicle's staying power, it certainly bears witness to its speed and the skill of its drivers.

At the end Frank had this to say, "My weekend trip with a touring car at the Nordschleife has been great fun. All the minor things that have cost us time are annoying, but they are just part of the game in an endurance race. After all, that is what makes a 24-hour race so special."

I made the offer of intensive consolation which, oddly enough, he declined.

ELAINE CATTON

Frank Biela and his co-drivers spent too much time in the pits

