



# Living Truth

Le Mans makes for compelling cinema by an unlikely source

BY MATT DeLORENZO ■ PHOTO BY RICHARD DOLE

WHEN AUTO RACING FILMS ARE DISCUSSED, talk invariably turns to either Steve McQueen's *Le Mans* or John Frankenheimer's *Grand Prix*. Trouble is, both were made over 35 years ago. Since then, most motorsports-themed cinema has been execrable—from *Days of Thunder* to *Driven*. These movies are powered more by special effects than storytelling.

That's why the recently released documentary, *Truth in 24*, chronicling Audi's win last June at the 24 Hours of Le Mans, is such a welcome departure from Hollywood's idea of a motorsports movie. Commissioned by Audi, the film was produced

by Intersport, a Chicago-based sports programmer that hired NFL Films (of football filming expertise) for the project.

Scott Keogh, chief marketing officer for Audi, was seeking an alternative to the traditional marketing manufacturers use to promote their racing programs. Typically these efforts include race win ads, promotional trips to events and trackside hospitality. After experiencing a season of this approach, Keogh decided that Audi's motorsports program didn't require marketing, but rather "it was a story that needs to be told."

After entertaining several proposals

from outfits with direct motorsports involvement, Keogh said he chose Intersport because of their connection to NFL Films. "They know how to capture personality and drama," Keogh explained. He also understood the risk of the project. Audi had won seven of the eight previous 24 Hours of Le Mans, but there was no guarantee of an eighth victory, especially in 2008 with a hungry Peugeot back anxious to knock the German automaker off its pedestal.

Director Keith Cossrow immediately grasped the challenge that lay before him. "We wanted to make a movie that my wife



would watch as well as someone who has been to Le Mans 20 times,” Cossrow said, adding, “It’s hard, but you can do it. Look at *The Simpsons*; it works on five different levels, from the people who have been watching it for years and get all the inside jokes down to the youngster who just wants to see Bart acting up.”

But where to start? For Cossrow and three of his staff, it began at Sebring in March. Blending broadcast footage with film shot by his crew, Cossrow began the steep learning curve of what it would take to capture the essence of an event like Le Mans.

“When you shoot the Super Bowl, you have a fixed space you’re working in. Still, with 5000 people on the sidelines, it presents its own unique challenges,” Cossrow said.

Sebring was an eye-opener on three counts—the size of the venue, the speed of the cars and the fact that Audi lost for the first time in eight years. The risk of this project that Keogh had sold to German management became all the more apparent because there were no guarantees that Audi would win Le Mans.

And in fact, Cossrow uses that defeat as a critical storytelling element in the docu-

mentary, portraying Audi as going into Le Mans as the underdog. The R10s simply were not as fast as the Peugeots.

Cossrow’s crew began to grow in size as Le Mans approached—eventually it would include 30 members with eight cameras. The team covered American Le Mans Series (ALMS) and FIA races in both North America and Europe. They shot extensive footage at the ALMS race in Long Beach; however, a 12-minute segment on that event, which Audi won, was axed from the final cut, while an FIA race at Monza, won by Peugeot, figures prominently in the run-up

to Le Mans, further reinforcing the Audi-as-underdog story line. A critical element in that sequence is the fact that the crew literally rebuilt the heavily crashed R10 driven by Dindo Capello in just 15 minutes, underscoring one of the Audi team's inherent strengths in endurance racing.

Another thing they learned is that one of the trademarks of NFL Films—shooting high-speed film to capture dramatic slow-motion imagery—doesn't necessarily translate to racing. "When you shoot a beautiful slow-motion shot of a race car, sometimes it would just be a car going really slow," Cossrow admitted. "The challenge then is how do we capture the speed and the power of the cars?" The answer came in the use of more high-definition cameras employing a shuttered effect. "This combination allows the car to jump off the screen." The other was using the elements, like rain cascading off the ground-effects bodywork of the cars to enhance the slo-mo effect.

But beyond the eye-popping images, 7-channel surround sound with an original score performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra and a killer voiceover by action film star Jason Statham, Cossrow simply tells a great story. He said he patterned his approach after Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* in that "I wanted to capture the epic and the intimate equally. That is why we would shoot the big wide shots on one hand, and then have Howden "H" Haines (the engineer for the No. 2 car of Tom Kristensen, Allan McNish and Capello) miked for the entire 24 hours on the other hand."

»When Audi arrived at Le Mans, the crew from NFL Films was there, capturing the action. Bottom: We're sure the ACO didn't approve of this during the race, but innovative shooting angles help make *Truth in 24* have a broad appeal.



Cossrow successfully blends the pure spectacle of the event—the crowds and sheer size of the Sarthe circuit—with more intimate moments, such as Ulrich Barletzky, designer of the R10's diesel engine, standing alone atop the empty grandstands, watching the race as the sun rises.

While the film is a taut 1 hour 35 minutes, those familiar with Le Mans may find the going a little slow initially—the actual race is covered in the last half of the film. But Cossrow defends this decision, noting that much of this exposition is needed not only to provide background for viewers new to Le Mans, but also to introduce a large cast of characters—nine drivers in three cars for the Audi team alone, plus footage of the lead Peugeot car that included some interesting observations by former F1 and Indy 500 champ Jacques Villeneuve.

Cossrow likens the beginning of the movie to the long, slow climb a rollercoaster might make up to the top. "The downhill part, the twists and turns and jumps, that's the story of the actual race."

While Audi did win the race, there were two primary reasons for the victory—the first was Audi's preparation beforehand, which looked to negate the on-track speed advantage of the Peugeots via quadruple driving stints and minimized pitstops. The other was brilliant race tactics by engineer Haines, who calls for intermediate rain tires at a critical moment over the protests of Kristensen. It's good fun watching it all unfold, from the opening sequence showing part of a 12-hour pitstop practice session days before the race, to a frenetic McNish describing over a video what it's like to lap Le Mans. And then there's an exhausted H, grabbing a smoke on a pile of tires in the garage, away from the massive celebration on the main straight.

Audi has shown *Truth in 24* at several film festivals including the American Film Institute's AFI Fest in early November and is looking toward either a limited theatrical release or a cable airing early in 2009. Catch it; it's the next best thing to being at Le Mans in person.

