

# Revenge of the Turds



## The 24 Hours of LeMons: What Started as a Joke Has Become One of America's Fastest-Growing Road Race Series

story by nick pon • photos courtesy 24 hours of lemons

*We bring series creator Jay Lamm into a wide-ranging discussion of the 24 Hours of LeMons, an instant route into wheel-to-wheel road racing that began as a joke over beers.*

Despite what you'd think, the idea to race \$500 cars against one another for hours on end wasn't the product of drink and insanity. Well, it wasn't only the product of drink and insanity. In fact, the 24 Hours of LeMons owes much to the prestigious California Mille vintage rally.

Back in the mid-1990s, LeMons creator Jay Lamm and California Mille founder Martin Swig stood on the side of the road by their glycol-expelling Alfa Romeo. Inspired by the situation, Jay challenged Martin with a theory: Most \$500 cars could run more reliably than the Mille's exclusive collector machines. Swig called his bluff, and the Double 500—a 500-mile rally for \$500 cars—was born.

It turned out Jay was right. Not only were the \$500 beaters generally more reliable than the Mille's big-ticket Ferraris, but the Double 500 was, for most entrants, downright easy. Anyone with a sense of humor and an Internet connection could track down a \$500 machine whose flaws were distinctly nonfatal, and most finished the rally without spinning a wrench.

Even Jay—who is obviously more optimistic than the average bear—didn't expect the Double 500 to be so easily conquered. "Clearly, if we wanted to see more entertaining explosions and stuff, we needed to come up with a tougher venue," he recalls.

### Solution to Everything: Chinese Food

The scene: Martin and some other Mille veterans talking over beer and Chinese food. The pieces began to fall into place when Jay came up with the 24 Hours of LeMons moniker, a pun that both accurately described the vehicles and inspired an extra-long format. The \$500 cap was retained because "cars are too nice at \$1000, and at \$250 they blow up as soon as you get out of the driveway."

The first race, held in October 2006 outside San Francisco, Calif., was intended to be the only one. "But basically," Jay explains, "nothing I predicted came true. I thought it was just going to be me and 10 buddies, but 33 teams showed up. Then I figured it would turn out to be more like the Three Hours of LeMons—that every car would blow up before lunch. Instead, something like three-quarters took the checker a day later."

A successful formula had been uncovered. "And I certainly never thought anyone would want to go crapcan endurance racing twice, but after that first race got some news coverage, other people began bugging me to put on another one, and then another one," he continues. "[The event] just sort of metastasized into a national series from there." LeMons's 2009 schedule included 10 races spread out across California, Nevada, Texas, Ohio, Louisiana, South Carolina and Connecticut, plus a static show—the appropriately named Concours d'LeMons—held during Monterey weekend. The average starting field now boasts 90-plus cars, with some races pushing past 110.

Media coverage has taken off in kind, with multiple features appearing in all the big car mags plus such non-auto venues as *The Week*, *ESPN Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, various in-flight mags, "Good Morning America," and other print, Web, radio and television outlets.

And then, of course, there's *Grassroots Motorsports*, the series' official print partner. "The GRM thing was just obvious: If you've found GRM you're by definition our kind of guy, and if you've run LeMons, you're by definition their kind of guy. These days, *Grassroots* gives out a plaque to the best finishers in the crappiest car—the GRM Most From the Least Award—and we hand out free copies of the mag in the paddock."

### Success—Yikes!

By 2008, a Google search would reveal twice as many results for "24 Hours of LeMons" as for that French event with a similar name. If that kind of notoriety wasn't Jay's plan, how does he think it happened? "Let me put it this way. The fact that *Automobile* magazine called LeMons 'America's fastest-growing road race series' kind of indicates that American

road racing has some serious issues,” he replies. “I think a whole lot of car nuts had some confusion or ambivalence toward the stuff that was already out there, and we kind of fell backward into this niche where they suddenly ‘got it.’

“I wish I could say that I’d planned it that way, but I didn’t—I just thought it was a funny idea for a one-time race, and that crapcan racing was maybe the only kind of racing my own crappy skills might be good for. What LeMons played off of was racing as people perceived it: too expensive, too remote, too hard to break into, too easy to screw up, too serious, too self-satisfied, too much potential for pain and embarrassment. Even though that perception wasn’t always correct, it still kept the vast majority of everyday enthusiasts from finding their way into wheel-to-wheel racing. By de-fanging the thing, LeMons made a lot of people see what had always been true: Racing is for anyone who wants to go racing. Or, to put it another way, every racer started out as a non-racer.”

The result is a series with literally thousands of drivers, maybe half of whom had never engaged in wheel-to-wheel combat before their first LeMons event. “Two kinds of people run LeMons,” Jay explains, “with the numbers about evenly split. The first bunch always wanted to get on the race track but could never quite figure out how. From the outside, to these people, even amateur racing seemed costly, complicated, dangerous and exclusive. It seemed very, very serious—which is ironic, since racing is one of the least serious things you can do. Nobody needs to haul himself out to



The grid at a LeMons race is part junkyard and part fashion show, and a great deal of inside and practical jokes are thrown in for good measure. Endurance race cars often end up looking beat to hell after long hours on track, but many LeMons cars start off that way—and they only get worse with each passing lap.

## LeMons by Threes

In honor of LeMons's third anniversary, Chief Perpetrator Jay Lamm chooses his favorite trios from the race:

### 1) Three Best Fixes Ever

**Team TurboSchnitzel (Carolina 2009):** After learning (surprise!) that rural South Carolina parts stores don't carry 20-year-old Merkur clutch disks, the Schnitzels built their own in the paddock out of sheet metal and brake pads.



**Team LeMons of Club GP (New Orleans 2009):** During Friday testing, their V6's screwed-up head gaskets led to a holed block and head. Two tubes of JB Weld later, they finished fifth overall.

**Puff Puff Pass (Texas 2008):** How do you un-sieze a melted engine? If you're Puff Puff Pass, you give it a freezing-cold blast from a nitrogen fire extinguisher. Amazingly—at least if you're Puff Puff Pass—it works.



### 2) Three Worst Fixes Ever

**Sharing the Glove (Altamont 2006):** Faced with a Volvo whose fuel cap refused to seal, Conrad Stevenson zip-tied a Latex mechanic's glove over the fill neck. Hilarity ensued, followed by fire trucks.

**The Kudzu Konflagration (Carolina 2009):** Black flagged for a dragging exhaust, the Kudzu Kommandos wired up their pipe with coat hangers. Never mind that this put the exhaust outlet half an inch from the wall of the gas tank. Mannix-like fireballs ensued.

**The Great JV Sawzall Massacre (Detroit 2007):** Wherein Team C&D Junior Varsity discovered the one thing that Sawzalls aren't good for: radiator maintenance. The firing of drivers ensued.



### 3) Three Teams With the Right Attitude

**Los Diablos, South Texas:** Unfazed by oil spray in their faces, two zillion penalties, and \$20 tires made out of flint, the Diablos continued to focus on what really matters: beer, Border Patrol stories and barbecue.

**Chard Beef, New England:** They did three engine swaps in 16 hours. So why were these guys always laughing?

**LeMons Demolition/Pit Crew Revenge, Northern California:** Always, always, always happy to help a competitor get back on the track. Always equally happy to crush them with heavy machinery.

### 4) Three Toughest Curse Enforcers

**Ryan Acord:** Ryan likes adjusting cars' mirrors with the claw of his 64-ton excavator, right before pulling off their doors.

**Dan Cantey:** Dan's special move is The Twirl, a subtle, hair-flipping whiff of the crush bucket that can make a Fox Mustang spin like Mary Lou Retton in midair.



**A Big Angry Mob:** We tell the same 600 racers you've been ramming and chopping all weekend that now they can work on your car. Yes, torches and pitchforks are tools.



## 5) Three Best Tales of Sportsmanship

**Dueling Magazines:** At Altamont 2006, the leading *Road & Track* Corolla lunched its diff two laps shy of the checker. *Car and Driver's* Aurora, fresh from repairs after a well-deserved People's Curse, bumper-pushed their arch rivals across for the win.

**Dead Monkeys, Meet Dead Smurfs:** On the way to Thunderhill 2008, the Cheese Eating Surrender Monkeys totaled their brand-new tow rig on black ice. While the rest of us laughed that a \$500 Peugeot had just cost them six figures in damages, the Dead Smurfs offered to give them all spots in their lineup.



**Cajun Hospitality:** Shrimp Boots/Piranha Racing earned their place on the list by driving a shrimp boat till 4 a.m. on race day just so the whole New Orleans paddock could pig out on seafood for free.

## 6) Three Best Car Themes

### Bi-Polar Express (Thunderhill 2008):

These guys were shocked—shocked!—to discover that 400 pounds' worth of roof-mounted particle board could negatively impact their lap times.



**It's the Libyans (Detroit 2007):** Spectacular DeLorean replica made out of tinfoil, plywood and dryer hose. Extra credit for mid-race pit stops taken to remount their time machine vents.

**The Flakes (Reno 2009):** A mid-'80s Volvo sedan turned into a '55 Chevy through the injudicious use of Bondo, metal-flake and Toyota truck chrome.

## 7) Three Most Spectacular Team Outfits

**Eyesore Pimpin' (Altamont 2008):** What better complement for a faux-Eldorado CRX (gold grille, leopard-print roof, landau bars, personalized PIMPIN w/ EZ plate) than this Superfly-worthy garb?



**Team TurboSchnitzel (Carolina 2009):** These guys made their own matching outfits of lederhosen and hiking socks; extra credit for keeping their steins firmly in hand and recruiting a genuine Austrian bratwurst maker.

**Dungeons and Dragsters (Reno 2009):** The Middle-earth outfits were only the setup; the punch line was the 20-sided fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview mirror.



some godforsaken weed patch and drive around in circles all day. The joy of the thing, basically, is its pointlessness—the fact that it's something you do strictly because it's so fun.

“The second bunch are experienced veterans, and even professionals. These guys show up because they want to get back to that pointlessness. Unlike what they're doing in other series, with us it doesn't matter if they finish dead last, or never quite find the best line, or blow up their engine, or worry more about picking the right bratwurst than the right final-drive ratio. There's nothing riding on it except for the fun of the racing itself.”

#### Like BattleBots, but Different

Whether novice or pro, choosing the right machine can make the difference between a weekend of driving and a weekend of eating grease. What makes the best LeMons vehicle is open to interpretation: Teams have shown up with everything from tiny Fiats to hulking Cadillacs, but Jay's advice is to keep it simple: “Rear-drive, front-drive, V8, four-banger—none of that really matters. What matters is finding a reliable, durable little crapcan that up until yesterday was somebody's mom's daily commuter. That, and not buying a Tempo. Tempos really suck.”

Contact isn't uncommon in a LeMons race, but the ever-watchful judges are sure to dole out penalties to those who bully their competitors.

### 8) Three Biggest Contributors to Mayhem

**Do or Die Racing (California):** What's harder to pass than a 210-inch-wheelbase race car? The same car when team captain Denny Flynn tries to drift it.

**Fancy Junc (California):** They're fast. They're experienced. They're talented. So how come they're always in trouble?



**Stugots LeMons (New England):** So slow and out of control that we gave them two mechanical black flags before realizing their french fry-powered Mercedes wasn't the problem.

### 9) Jay's Three Favorite Penalties

**The Grille of Damocles (Issued for Bumping):** The Arc Angel welds a metal plate with inward-facing spikes to the front of your radiator.



**The Highway 17 (Issued for Holding Up Traffic):**

You're forced to follow a smoky, reggae-blaring VW Bus while everyone else gets to blow by at speed.

**Basic Training (Issued for General Idiocy):** You and your teammates are Marine-marched through the paddock while a Penalty Judge calls cadence. (My personal favorite: “I don't know but I've been told, four wheels off is getting old.”)

### 10) Three Most Forehead-Slapping Drivers

**Phil Greden:** Yes, our very own BS Judge Phil, in recognition of his two separate attempts to enter the race counter-course.

**Troy Hogan:** You've gotta respect Troy's enthusiasm, but any driver whose mouth has to be duct-taped before reaching the penalty box counts as forehead slap-worthy.



**Clay Bush:** Or as we call him, Sir Crashington Crashy von Crashalot, of Shuntmeister Castle, Stuff-in-the-Barriers, Hoonshire, U.K.

### 11) Three Tastiest BS Bribes (as Tasted by Chief Judges Phil Greden and Jonny Lieberman)

- Bacon-wrapped filet mignon with shrimp cocktail, Formula M for Mullet.
- Zaya Rum, various teams.
- A 100-pound serving of boiled shrimp, Team Shrimp Boots/Piranha Racing.

### 12) Three Cars That Totally Sucked

**1979 Peugeot 504, Safari Taxi Company:** Although, to be fair, it did make the 505s look good.



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that line to explain why their car will be cooler than everyone else's. Most guys get it—they say they're going to cover their Fiat X1/9 in fiberglass spaghetti and meatballs—but some never do. There's always some straight-thinking plodder who just writes down, 'We are five guys who are dying to race.' Our take is, 'Hey, so is everyone else, except these other five guys are dying to race and they're covering their Fiat in spaghetti and meatballs.' I mean, which one would you pick?"

The team selection process, which Jay says involves "a big table, a bunch of guys, lots of discussion, and plenty of gin," is just one of the tasks behind running the now sprawling series. "If I'd had any idea at the time what I was getting myself into, I would've just ordered another beer and shut up," he continues. "One of the biggest hurdles is just finding enough safe, workable tracks to run races on. With the cars we're running and the huge variation in skill sets, you can't just say, 'Hey, there's a track over there. Let's use it.'"

As Jay explains, everything from the length of the straights to the exit speeds, pit blends, wall placement, runoff areas, emergency staging sites, driver sightlines over hills, and chicane placement must be considered. "All of that has to be looked at quite differently when you're talking about '01 Mustangs racing against '71 Pintos, and about 30-year Daytona vets dicing with guys who've never done a track day," he explains.

"You've got to do site visits, book research, pore over facility maps—all of that jazz—and, at the end of the day, you've just got to accept that at the majority of American race tracks, you really can't craft a safe crapcan enduro," he continues. "There are a lot of fabulous, famous courses out there that are great for HPDEs and that may be perfectly safe for experienced drivers in serious race cars, but where doing a LeMons-type race would be incredibly, irresponsibly unsafe."

Then there's the staff. Each race requires about 30 to 40 local staffers in addition to the half-dozen in-house folks who travel from California to every race. "There's about 14 separate process sheets needed to cover all the various pickup jobs—in other words, if you hire some dude to eyeball credentials at the gate, he's actually got to know what's he's expected to do—and about 35 different custom-written forms and documents and handbooks and other bits of printed junk," Jay explains, "plus all the transponders, plane tickets, rental cars, decoders, crates full of props and equipment and T-shirts, freight tracking, ambulances, staff time sheets, paramedics, tow trucks, Curse stuff, insurance documentation, tech inspectors, site plans, ground medevac plans, air medevac plans, local permits—it just goes on and on. It's a whole goddamn traveling circus—all to put on a race that, if we're successful, will look like it's being run by three clowns goofing off on their lawn chairs."

If you'd rather watch the spectacle from a lawn chair yourself, all LeMons events offer full pit access to the public. One such spectator, apparently overwhelmed by the swarming horde of \$500 clunkers, uttered a phrase that has since become the unofficial series motto: "What could possibly go wrong?"

**GRM**



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**20-21 February:** Gator-O-Rama (Houston TX)  
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**6-7 March:** Sears Pointless (San Francisco CA)  
Infineon Raceway, Sonoma CA

**7 March:** Concours d'LeMons Car Show  
(San Francisco CA) Infineon Raceway, Sonoma CA

**17-18 April:** American Irony (Detroit MI)  
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**1-2 May:** Cain't Git Bayou (New Orleans LA)  
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**22-23 May:** LeMons South Spring (Charlotte NC)  
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**5-6 June:** North Dallas Hootie (Dallas TX)  
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**7-8 August:** LeMons Arse-Sweat-Apalooza (San Francisco CA)  
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**14 August:** Concours d'LeMons Car Show (Monterey CA)  
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**28-29 August:** Mutually Assured Destruction of Omaha (Omaha NE)  
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**11-12 September:** Yee-Haw, It's LeMons Texas (Houston TX)  
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**25-26 September:** LeMons South Fall (Charlotte NC)  
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**9-10 October:** Detroit Bull Oil Grand Prix (Detroit MI)  
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**23-24 October:** Rod Blagojevich Never-Say-Die 500 (Chicago IL)  
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**20-21 November:** Laissez les Crapeheads Roulez (New Orleans LA)  
The Circuit at Grand Bayou, Belle Rose LA

**4-5 December:** LeMons Arse-Freeze-Apalooza (Los Angeles CA)  
Buttonwillow Raceway Park, Buttonwillow CA

**30-31 December:** 24 Horas de Cuba del Norte (Miami FL)  
Palm Beach International Raceway, Jupiter FL

RULES and INFO and ENTRY FORMS: [www.24HoursofLeMons.com](http://www.24HoursofLeMons.com)