

# A Ferrari I Am Not

by John Farrow

Imagine a little drive in the country. Then imagine that the country is France. And that this little drive is at 200 miles per hour. All day and all of the night. It can only be *Les 24 Heures du Mans*, or simply, *Le Mans*.

Porsche, Maserati, Ferrari, Jaguar, Bugatti, Aston-Martin, Lola, Cobra, Corvette -- since 1923, each has made a name for itself in this rolling, bucolic country-side. And with my 10k due to start in less than an hour, we were doing our best to imitate one of those cars in our little Citroën on the Autoroute from Paris.

They go for 24-hour events here. During the year, there are also 24-hour motorcycle and truck races, and for the erudite speed freak, a 24-hour book sale. The Night 'N Day races are run the week-end after the famous automobile race and include a 10k, a marathon (which is mercifully run at night) and a 24-hour relay, all of which are fundraisers for a local blood bank.

Unfortunately, there was no night involved in the 10k that I was about to run, as this race was in the afternoon under cloudless skies and a searing sun. In the garage area behind the main grandstand, a thermometer said the temperature was 32EC. That's 90EF. In the shade. What the temperature was out on the asphalt of the track in front of the grandstands as I took in the scene before the race I can only imagine, but the finish line looked as if it would include a *crêperie* with the griddle set directly on the track.

There are actually several racing circuits at Le Mans, although only a portion of the track for the 24-hour race is closed to regular traffic. Most of that race is run on roads that for the majority of the year are full of farmers delivering their cheeses to market or pensioners on holiday in rickety little Renaults that sound like sewing machines and look as if they should come with carrying cases.

In fact, the long main straight is actually the N138, which typically is full of traffic heading south to the Loire Valley. In June, however, it is

full of sleek racing cars hurtling down it at speeds sufficient to become airborne, not entirely unlike local traffic.

At the end of this straight, drivers come to a roundabout known as the Mulsanne Corner in the village of the same name. Make a mistake here and you wind up in the local *boulangerie*.

From Mulsanne, the race heads up the D140 to Arnage, where its chicane whips you first right then left and then right again, directly in front of Pierre Dauphin's vineyard. In the early days of the race, drivers out of the running had an unusually high break-down rate at this point on the course as M. Dauphin was noted for his *vin rouge* and *paté de canard*.

The 10k is run on the Bugatti Circuit, a completely enclosed track that incorporates the grandstand straight and the section of track through the Dunlop Tire Bridge from the permanent Le Mans circuit. It then veers off into a series of switchbacks and another long straight before re-entering the grandstand straight at the Ford Chicane after another, tighter series of switchbacks. Each turn is lined with expansive skid-out areas of pea gravel, and walls are lined with stacks of tires strapped together. Reassuring, perhaps, but I didn't expect to bring those into play.

Registration was comfortingly familiar. Pre-registered runners were picking up race packets in manila envelopes and others were filling out fairly ordinary-looking entry forms, but with one notable exception -- there was no place for a signature after the standard legalese about forfeiting your dog and your next born in case of an accident. Here, they figure that if you are dumb enough to hurt yourself running around in the heat of the day when any self-respecting Frenchman would be ensconced at lunch with some bread and cheese and a bottle of wine, then it's your own damn fault.

There is, however, one major difference.

*Votre license, s'il vous plait*, as I handed in my entry form.

To this, I probably responded in my best traveler's French with something like, *Of course, I'll have another glass of wine, if you please*.

Yes, in France, runners are required to be licensed. Licensed by who or what I never did

figure out, but several runners in front of me at the registration table produced a *License au Courir* much like a driver's license and which certified them to be members of the *Club Française du Marathon*.

I suppose if you're used to being invaded left and right as France has been, or under the heel of this self-appointed monarch or that, then you take such things in stride. Otherwise, it just seemed like another way for the Socialists to keep tabs on the rabble.

The licensing requirement is technically just for residents of France, however. Non-residents can get by with a doctor's certificate that you are capable of safely completing the race, and fortunately I had been warned by one of the organizers. My doctor just laughed and told me to write whatever I wanted and he would sign it.

The start was not in front of the grandstand, but on the back straight, about a kilometer away. A good warm-up jog, I thought. But in the heat, by the time I reached the starting line I was drenched in sweat and regretting the *rôti du porc* and all the wine from last night on Montmartre.

Glancing around, the results of licensing runners were readily apparent. Not only was the field small, less than 100 with only seven women, but there were almost no average-looking runners. Everyone looked capable of a 35-minute 10k -- everyone except me, that is. And as the only American, I tried not to think that national pride was at stake. Otherwise, I would have brought David Morris and Shelly Steely with me.

Soon after the start, as much of the field steadily pulled away in front of me, I came to the realization that my preparation for this race had perhaps not been the best, either. Aside from the huge meal last night, climbing the Eiffel Tower the day before a race does not improve leg speed or strength. Quite the contrary.

Also, roaming all over the Louvre or Père Lachaise Cemetery or the better part of several *arrondissements* in the City of Light the past few days does not necessarily improve stamina. Nor does 10 hours of sleep in the past 50 prove toughness -- only stupidity.

But such are the rigors of racing while on vacation, and one would be a fool to forgo the

pleasures of this beautiful and savory land for one race. It did, however, make this one race somewhat more arduous than usual.

We all received a big round of applause as we completed the first kilometer in front of the grandstands, with most runners taking two bottles of water to pour over their heads. How in the world do you keep a high-powered racing engine cool in weather like this? I can't even keep this low-powered one cool.

Soon, the Dunlop Tire Bridge loomed up ahead, with a squiggly section of track directly in front. Each curve was preceded by signs at 200 and 100 meter intervals for drivers to gauge their approach and down-shift accordingly. I, on the other hand, was shortening my stride going up the only incline on the course and trying to keep the sweat out of my eyes.

The bridge, designed to afford spectators a way to get from outside parking areas to the inside of the track, is perhaps the most recognizable feature on the circuit and is made to look like a semi-circular black automobile tire with the Dunlop logo painted on it. And to someone who had raced slot cars as a boy and laid out track sections in the shape of the Le Mans course, it was a thrill to run under it.

As there were no distance markers along the course, I thought to measure my pace by seeing how long it took to run the 100 meters between the markers before each curve, but soon gave up as the math was too taxing in the mid-day sun. Plus, the steadily-increasing numbers were discouraging.

Entering the grandstand area after the first full lap, we all doused ourselves with more water and headed down the straight once again with renewed determination. However, the second lap soon became one of perseverance in the heat, and thoughts of a chilled glass of Viognier kept me going. Although this would be a mid-pack effort, there was no small measure of satisfaction in seeing the checkered flag ceremoniously waved as I crossed the finish line.□

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