

# 24-hour ride

**John Murray** looks ahead to the 2015 edition of one of the world's most gruelling 24-hour races, Le Mans, to see what's in store for fans this year

It speaks volumes about the prestige of the 24 Hours of Le Mans that Anthony Davidson is more interested in winning the race than defending his world title. Together with France's Sébastien Buemi, the British driver won the 2014 World Endurance Championship for Toyota but, in 2015, he has his eyes firmly set on one goal – on the outskirts of a city in north-west France.

"I would love to win as much as I can, but that one race [Le Mans] keeps slipping away," Davidson says. "I want to try everything I can – at least in my

power – to make sure it is going to come my way this year."

Davidson is by no means alone in his obsession with Le Mans. Such is the allure of the historic race that 263,000 spectators flocked to the Circuit de la Sarthe to watch Audi record their 12th victory in 14 years in 2014. And don't be surprised if those attendance numbers are even higher on 13-14 June for the 83rd edition of the hugely popular race.

Since it was first held in 1923, the event has grown to become the world's most famous endurance race. With three



**Above:** Formula One drivers Max Chilton and Alex Buncombe will be testing their skills at the legendary Circuit de la Sarthe racetrack this June (main)

drivers per car, teams compete for 24 hours at the Circuit de la Sarthe, which blends elements of a specialist racing track with closed public roads. It is as much a test of stamina as speed, with the car that travels the greatest distance being crowned the champion – in 2014 the victorious Audi team completed an eye-watering 379 laps of the 8.47-mile course. Teams from France, Italy and

Great Britain dominated the early years of the race, before Ferrari and Mercedes-Benz among others developed a keen interest after World War Two. Following a tragic accident in 1955 when Pierre Levegh's car crashed into the crowd, new safety measures led to drivers sitting in closed cockpits. This in turn resulted in increased speeds, with the likes of Ford – a four-time consecutive winner in the 1960s – travelling at over 200mph. Further technology advances over the years have added to the drama of the event, which enjoyed a



resurgence in popularity with production-based cars that continues today. The race even inspired a film, the 1971 classic *Le Mans*, starring Steve McQueen. Packed full of racing it retains a cult following with motor sport fans today.

In 2015, there are 56 team entries in all, competing in four separate categories. Four manufacturers – Audi, Nissan, Porsche and Toyota – will contest the overall title in the LMP1 category, while the likes of Jota Sport and that famous French

racing name – Ligier – will fight for glory in the LMP2, LM GTE-Pros and GTE-Am classes. With drivers from all over the globe desperate to test their skills at Le Mans, it is no surprise that this year's event will have a star-studded line-up. That includes several drivers who can boast Formula One experience, such as Davidson, Alexander Wurz, Nico Hulkenberg and Max Chilton. "Le Mans has always had an amazing following and to be racing there as a works driver is a dream come true," says

Chilton, who will compete for the Nissan team. Another notable thing to look out for in 2015 will be the safety upgrades to the Circuit de la Sarthe. Automobile Club de l'Ouest sporting manager, Vincent Beaumesnil, explains: "We will still have white lines and kerbs, but there will be asphalt rather than grass on the other side. This will make it much safer if one car has to go off the circuit to avoid another." While the amendments to the track will enhance safety, they will take nothing away from

the drama. With world-class drivers, top teams and 24 hours of action, it promises to be another memorable chapter in one of the most gruelling motor races. For updates and more information, visit [www.lemans.org](http://www.lemans.org). ■

**Above:** Nissan's ZEOD RC is not only speedy, but is environmentally friendly too  
**Below:** The race inspired the 1971 film *Le Mans*, starring American actor Steve McQueen  
**Below left:** The ferris wheel is an iconic landmark of the racetrack

