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## Hemphill: A bright future diesels

By Alan Hemphill

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Most people do not follow road racing, but as a former Sports Car Club of America racing driver I certainly do.

Something is going on that will impact every driver of automobiles, and very soon: diesels.

We have grown accustomed to thinking of diesels as long-lived, generally slow vehicles. Then last year, the most important race in the world, the 24 Hours of Le Mans, was won by a diesel-powered Audi. Audi then won race after race in America – dominating the gasoline-powered engines from the rest of the world, including Porsche.

Racing does improve the breed — and it foretells all of the improvements in passenger automobiles.

Now you might think that diesels won because they are reliable in long-distance racing, and they use less fuel. All of that is true, but the Audi diesel R10 TDI won the pole as the fastest car in each race it competed in, and its dominance continues.

This year, Peugeot fielded a fast diesel to compete against diesel Audi – and the recently run 24 Hours of Le Mans pole position was won by Peugeot, but the Audi again was the class of the race and set lap times unmatched by anyone else.

Most American NASCAR automobile racing is for relative short distances of 400, 500, or 600 miles, but road racing is often much longer. Automobiles at Le Mans reach speeds of 240 mph and cover 3,200 miles in rain and sun, night and day.

Le Mans not only tests the cars and drivers, but everything. Michelin brought 8,000 tires to Le Mans for the cars it shoes, but it does not shoe nearly all of the cars.

Many times, the 8.4-mile course at Le Mans has rain on one part while sun shines brightly on other parts. This year, to “level the playing field” and force all teams to make the same number of pit stops, diesels were required to run with smaller fuel tanks to offset their better fuel mileage. In spite of this obstacle, the diesels were both faster and stronger.

Diesel technology portends great changes for passenger cars. Diesels are now a viable alternative to gasoline engines. Diesels get much better fuel mileage, the fuel requires much less refinery action, and now they can produce equal or greater horsepower than gasoline engines.

The future is getting brighter for technology, and we are about to see more

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and more options. Gasoline engines are getting better, diesels are getting better, hybrid cars are getting better, and fuel cells are coming.

Government cannot legislate technological or engineering breakthroughs, but racing offers huge financial incentives for being just slightly better than the competition. One less pit stop in a race can mean the difference between winning and losing, and you can't win if anything breaks.

I remember when I got my first set of tires that would go 10,000 miles without replacement. Now I complain if I get fewer than 60,000 miles on anything but the Z-Rated tires on my "quick car" – but they are built for sustained speeds above 164 mph.

I remember when cars needed a "lube job" and oil change every 1,000 miles. Now I would change my Mobil 1 synthetic oil at 10,000 miles if the factory did not require 7,500-mile intervals to keep my warranty in effect.

Watch racing results for the future.

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