



This year marks the 50th birthday of the classic Spa 24-hour touring car race.

closer than in previous years. In fact, this year's event is more open in terms of overall victory than any in the recent past.

Marc Duez, victorious at his 20th attempt last year, will be hoping to take his second successive and BMW's 21st win at the wheel of a Juma prepared BMW Belgium/Fina Team 320i which he's sharing with the equally experienced Alain Cudini and '87 winner Eric Van de Poele. F3 hot shoe David Saelens shares the sister Juma car with Alain Ferté and Pierre Fermine.

Peugeot will be going all out to be first past the chequered flag this year and has assembled a strong team to drive its three Peugeot 306 cars. They will be driven by super quick Procar contenders Sébastien Ugeux and Vincent Radermecker, who are sharing with Thierry Van Dalen, Max Weisenburger, Frédéric Bouvy and Jean-Pierre Vandewauwer – all experienced racers. The third 306 will be driven by former F1 winner and French legend, Jacques Laffite, Procar promoter Pascal Witmeur and Pierre Van Vliet, F1 commentator for the French TF1 channel.

If you're into betting, a flutter on Honda could prove worthwhile. The exciting Honda Integra R is proving a tough one to beat in the Procar Championship and a first victory in the 24-hours is a definite possibility, especially when you see the depth of talent in the driver line-up. Twice Procar champion and 4-times winner of the 24-hours, Thierry Tassin, has to be taken very seriously with Swiss co-driver Philippe Favre in the ELR car.

Newcomer to the Procar series and man to watch, Grant Elliot shares his Asquith Autosport entry with Christophe Baillien and Toni Ruokonen whilst French TV presenter Alexandre Debanne co-pilots the Integra of Damien Coens and Pierre Chaudoir. And two dark horses are the entries from VZM, which ran the Procar Hondas during the past three years, and Mardi Gras Motorsport. VZM's drivers are all veterans of this race, Renaud Verreydt, José Close and former Procar Champion Pierre-Alain Thibaut. The Mardi Gras guys, better known on British circuits, are the experienced James Kaye, Simon Harrison and Stephen Day.

Nissan is another to be making its mark on touring car racing this year, showing hot form in Britain and Germany and the recently completed Group N + version already showing some of its potential in the hands of Vincent Vosse. Anthony Reid and David Leslie are taking time out from the BTCC to compete for honours with Vosse and Dirk Schoysman.

Renault drivers Pierre-Yves Corthals, Paul Simons and...Jacky Ickx himself – a "revival"! – could be good outside bets for the podium in the latest Mégane and the Mühlner run Opel Astras could be up there when the chequered flag is shown.

Enjoy all 24 hours of it. ■

Dick Suter

Think Grand Prix racing and the Monaco GP probably comes to mind. Muse on sports cars and the Le Mans 24-hours grabs the attention. Then think about endurance touring car racing and Spa-Francorchamps takes centre stage. This highly challenging circuit in the

It's certainly not a track for the faint hearted – certainly not to race on – but for those who relish the thrill of taking the exacting, high-speed Eau Rouge-Raidillon or Blanchimont sections on the limit of precision and adhesion, there's no other circuit in Europe like it. A walk around the track during the 24-hours race is not only picturesque, it's decidedly educational as you see why precious seconds are being gained or squandered at the various turns and corners.

The first 24-hour race at Spa-Francorchamps was held way back in 1924, when it was won by a Bignan, a marque which disappeared many years ago, as did the winning car in '25, a Chenard & Walcker. Peugeot took the honours in '26 while in 1928 Alfa Romeo notched up the first of its seven victories to date. But way out in front in victory row is BMW, with no less than 20 wins to its name.

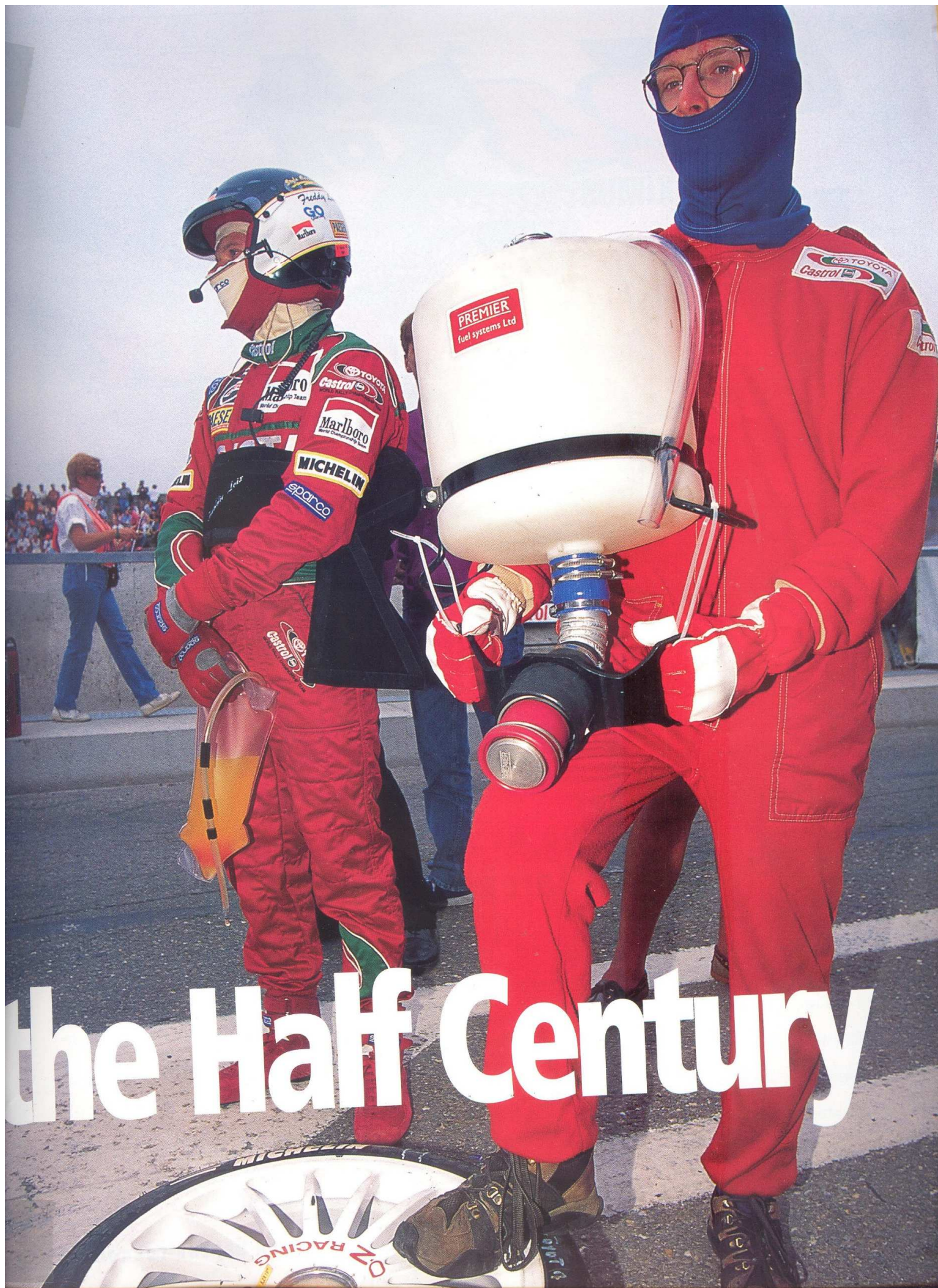
The 24-hours has been regularly re-enacted these past years and, for most of them, the winning car has come from the Super Touring class, the category which the British Touring Car Championship and the German equivalent are run to. But there have been classes for other categories at the same event and, inevitably, the speed differential between the fastest and slowest has been large.

But new for 1998, the Belgian Procar Championship – of which the 24-hours of Spa is a round – is for cars built to Group N Plus regulations. They're quick, entertaining and are closer to the cars we drive on public roads than the super-sophisticated and ultra expensive Super Touring versions. And, as they're more entrants participating in this class, the battle for supremacy should be even

Dazzlingly fast James Thompson and BTCC team mate Peter Kox have a Foss-Tech prepared car, while Stéphane De Groodt, winner of two Procar races so far this year, is sharing the first of the PSI prepared cars with Didier Defourny and Eric Bachelart. Eric, one of the mainstays of Belgian motorsport for many years, is now concentrating most of his energies on his IndyLights team in the USA but he relishes the opportunity of winning an event which, so far, has eluded him.

The second PSI car is driven by Philippe Tollenaere, Pascal Tillekaerts and Wolfgang Haug.

Hitting



the Half Century