

Run for Fun

Column

By Walter Kirchheim

As a Continental European exploring the world of racing in North America for the first time, you feel almost naked without a cap, T-shirt, or badge identifying you as a member of the racing-fan species. As a conscientious researcher you have, of course, diligently devoured all available information about the American Le Mans Series. You could give a lecture on how to behave during a yellow-flag period. But first you'll find yourself overwhelmed with the realization that you have landed among an enclave of people who are there purely to have fun and whose happiness isn't derived from adding up sector and lap times. You almost feel like an alien, although the book you just read on the plane—Wolfgang Koeppen's *Amerikafahrt*—contained the memorable phrase “Every day, America shows you a new face.”

Certainly, if you're into a sport, you should take it seriously, even if you are just a spectator. But you still need to have fun. The American Le Mans Series is an ideal venue for putting this upbeat principle into practice. Straight ahead, you'll find the competitors' park. On your right, the beer garden. Or turn left, and you'll get to the go-cart track. The European in you learns

swiftly in this fast-track cultural exchange: Fun, fun, fun is the fuel that drives these spectators to the race.

Since Europeans tend to lean toward the serious side and understand that a certain detachment is the operating principle in Formula One, you're still not quite convinced: Is it really doing this sport justice to treat it as just plain fun? Why not? The very highest authority, Earl Warren, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, seemed to confirm this view: “The sports page reports what people have achieved. The front page only records how people keep screwing up.” So, run for fun!

That's an approach you can easily live with, or drive with. Experience it at the ALMS, at the race, the show, and the party. There's always a reason to celebrate. The motorsport in which the emotions of the principal actors are often concealed behind facemasks becomes more alive in the faces of its fans. Most of them are proud to wear their convictions on their sleeve. And when their pennants, jackets, or T-shirts aren't expressive enough, they resort to tattoos. There aren't many limits (of good taste) that define how far to go. If you want to rank high in the bleachers, you have to prepare for the event, just like the technicians in the pit lane.

Fans in the sports-car scene have an advantage: in addition to being fixated on the stars, they can be passionate about the brand—and marketing people love that! Moreover, 51 percent of all ALMS spectators belong to the preferred age group of 25 to 49—preferred because they're influential. On top of that, these race fans have above-average incomes. And 39 percent own three or more cars. But in the grandstand and in the bleachers, the ALMS community acts as one society. Everyone is here to celebrate acceleration.

And when the *European* fan returns home, the RS Spyder badge finds a special place of honor. ◀

