

# GOLDEN BOYS

A host of international sports and GT racing stars trekked out to Surfer's Paradise to taste some winter sun at the V8 Supercar Gold Coast 600. *Jake Yorath* takes a look at how they got on down under.



Photo: Bundaberg Racing / © inetpics.com

**W**henever V8 Supercars are mentioned, excitement often flows through the ensuing discourse.

People automatically put on slightly rubbish over animated Australian accents and excitedly talk about 'The Mountain' and the differences between Holden and Ford, the Commodore and its deepest rival, the Falcon. The fierce rivalry between the brands is legendary, ingrained into families (and often, in the form of gaudy tattoos, skin) from birth. The drivers are household names, famed for their ability

to manhandle the cars (bereft of the excessive technology that characterises Europe's closest equivalent, DTM) in similar style to Roman charioteers.

It seems an odd move, then, to invite members of the international racing community to come and share this most specialist of worlds. But that is the entire premise of the Armor All Gold Coast 600, a two race, 600km showdown on the narrow, bumpy and scary Surfer's Paradise street circuit. The names on the bill read oddly like a round of the ILMC; Simon Pagenaud, Sebastien Bourdais, Joerg Bergmeister, Pat



Left: Darren Turner stepped in and did a 'cracking job' as replacement for Dan Wheldon according to team mate James Courtney.

Photo: Toll Holden Racing Team

Long and Andy Priaulx to name a few. They would be competing for the inaugural Dan Wheldon Trophy, a poignant award dedicated to the Briton killed just days before the event. He would have been on the grid but for his tragic accident, but fellow Brit Darren Turner bravely stepped in to race in his place.

The cars are not quite as sophisticated as the European racers might have expected. Live axles, (ostensibly) production bodysells and zero traction control are matched to 600bhp from 5.0 litres of V8 power. To avoid runaway designs, the cars are tightly controlled and there is an element of performance balancing too. It adds up to stunning racing of the kind that those non regulars stepping up from a GT racing background may well be used to.

But Patrick Long, who shared his Shannons Mars Racing Holden Commodore with V8 Supercar regular Fabian Coulthard, reckons it's not all about rustic technology. "Technically, within the rules that are allowed you can have some quite complex designs. It's at the same level as some GT cars, and some of the tech would rival a current spec LMP1 car." And he reckons the driving experience to be quite something, too. "The rear end, with the lack of a

differential, combined with 3000lbs of weight, and the power, makes it a very unique car to drive. It's like nothing else out there. Some drivers got to grips with it quite quickly, but

"As you all know, it was a pretty heavy hearted weekend for all of us, the Indycar drivers. I think it's been a great showing for Dan. I'm sure he would have loved it and I'm so sad

**It's like nothing else out there. Some drivers got to grips with it quite quickly, but others never even got close**

Patrick Long

others never even got close."

One man who got to grips with the car was Sebastien Bourdais, the Frenchman earning the Dan Wheldon trophy as best non native. On collecting the trophy, his feelings were very clear. Addressing the assembled crowd, he spoke from his heart.

he couldn't have been a part of it this weekend." Close to breaking down, the Frenchman finished, "This means a whole lot. Thank you."

Another man doing a good job was Darren Turner, and he reckoned it was a challenge as well. "I love V8 Supercars," he beamed after the first race. "There

Below: Patrick Long impressed alongside Fabian Coulthard.

Photo: Bundaberg Racing / © inetpics.com

was a lot going on at the start but I managed to find my way through and settled into the race. The main thing for me was to hand the car back to James [Courtney, reigning champion and team mate] in one piece. I loved every minute of it."

Though there was a sombre note to his words, too, "The team has really looked out for me this weekend under difficult circumstances," he explained on Sunday evening. "I think all of us still have Dan very much in our thoughts. He should have been here this weekend and although it would have been nice to get him a really good result, I think with today's sixth we did the best job we could."

Of those finding the



Bourdais shone for Team Vodafone alongside Jamie Whincup, winning one race and taking home the Dan Wheldon Trophy.

Photo: EDGE photographic/ V8 Supercar



driving more difficult, Gianni Morbidelli struck many as a man all at sea. The Italian, more used to Superstars in his native country, had one blinding moment of idiocy and ended up driving the wrong way into oncoming traffic. The incident has become a YouTube sensation and the unfortunate driver will be left red faced for a while.

Fellow Italian Vitantonio Liuzzi, on a break from driving at the back of the Formula One field for HRT, raced at the back of this field too, in his Wilson Security Racing Ford. "I really enjoyed driving the V8 Supercar. It's a great world, great atmosphere, great Grand Prix and was cool," said the Italian, who was the first current F1 driver to sign up for the event. "I really want to come back next year, for sure. I wanted to try this and it's a new world and I really wanted to discover it. I hope I will get another opportunity in the future: I think now I understand better the car. I learned a lot about it and during the race we had a really good race pace, so I'm really looking forward, in case it happens again

in the future."

Bringing the internationals over does have one major benefit for the series, in that they go out and spread the word about the series: it is not 'backward' at all.

"I think backward would be an ignorant comment; [the detractors] just haven't got down there to see how professionally it is run in Australia," muses Long, dispelling the myth that V8 Supercars is anything other than a top drawer series. "It's one of the last Mohicans of a totally sponsor funded race series where teams are paid to do their thing. It really is in the same league as Nascar is in America, or Formula One in Europe. [When I first came over] I was pleasantly surprised by how professionally the teams operated."

It certainly is a huge deal. In 2007, 2.157 million people tuned in to watch the Bathurst 1000: that's nearly 1 in 10 Australians. And though that figure is falling (down to 1.643 million in 2010), it is still one the key parts of Australian sporting society, second only to Aussie rules in terms of viewers.

**I really enjoyed driving the V8 Supercar. It's a great world, great atmosphere, great grand prix**

Vitantonio Liuzzi



"From the moment I got on the plane, it's a different world," explains Long. "The centre spread of the paper was on Bathurst, and the on demand TV on Virgin Australia was every round of V8 Supercars from the 2011 season."

Following the American (but increasingly global) trend, the events are almost all sponsored. This was the Armor All Gold Coast 600, and just like any American series, the drivers are quick to thank their sponsors in interviews and telecasts. Each car has a full set of sponsor decals and every team is named after their principal backer, and for good reason. Cars cost somewhere in the region of A\$600,000 (roughly £400,000), and teams are reputed to spend in excess of A\$ 10,000,000 (£6,600,000) a year running a two car team. Big business.

With 2012 bringing a Nascar style 'Car of Tomorrow' in an attempt to curb costs, improve safety and generally keep the series on top of its game, the future is rosy for the V8 Supercars. And if the Australian audience keeps falling, there's a fair bet the series would be pretty popular in Europe...