

Le Mans Man

Seven-time Le Mans winner **TOM KRISTENSEN** likes Aussie slang and cornering at 180km/h. *Alpha* catches up with the Dane for a few laps in his favourite runabout, the new Audi R8



Tom, are you sure we're going to make this corner?

(Braking hard and expertly drifting around the apex) Of course.

I learned the Australian slang for brakes today, "Stoppers". I like that. This car has very good stoppers. I drive the same one at home in Monaco, and because the engine's in the middle, it's perfectly balanced.

Rumour has it you have petrol in the blood. Premium unleaded, we assume?

I was born above a Shell petrol garage and my dad was a racing driver and a mechanic; yes, you could say I have fuel in my blood. I spent my childhood around the track. I used to collect the stickers off the cars – it all started there.

What was your first car?

A small go-kart; my dad bought it for me when I was nine. I terrorised the neighbourhood, practising in the streets around the garage.

In 24-hour racing, you're sometimes on the track for eight hours without a driver



Expert info: If Tom Kristensen says the Audi R8 drives well, we'll take his word for it.

change. What do you think about in that time?

You block out everything but the driving. All motorsport demands focus and concentration, but endurance takes that to another level, because you're driving for much longer periods. Mentally, you get into a special zone.

What's it like night driving at Le Mans?

It can be frightening. One time, it was raining hard and I was doing 300km/h through the forest. I couldn't see a thing. Suddenly, everything went quiet; there was

no tyre noise. The car was aquaplaning. All you can do is wait and hope the car comes back to you before the next corner. It did, luckily.

What made you leave a successful BMW team in 2000 to the then underdogs, Audi?

BMW had won Le Mans convincingly the year before, so when Audi approached me they didn't take it seriously, but I saw the drawings for the R8 Le Mans car and knew Audi were onto something. I signed up with them and that year we blew the BMWs away. I said hello to my old boss in the pit lane afterwards but, to be honest, he wasn't too pleased to see me.

The new R8 is named after the legendary Audi Le Mans car. Is there much similarity between the two?

Audi's technical experience with motorsport filters through to all its production cars and the new R8 definitely has a racing pedigree, but they are very different machines. You can't really compare them.

Which of your wins is most important to you?

In '05, there were new regulations, and the judges handicapped us with 50kg of ballast and a 22kw power reduction. The French Pescarolo cars were very strong, so we had to drive aggressively and not make any mistakes. The R8s proved to be more reliable than the Pescarolos and we won against the odds. That was the first year I took the car over the finish line myself. It was great.

KNOW YOUR R8s

Version	AUDI R8 (production coupe)	AUDI R8 LE MANS
Engine	4.2-litre V8	3.6-litre twin-turbo V8
Power	309kw	491kw
Weight	1560kg	911kg
Top Speed	301km/h	350km/h (with minimum downforce set-up)
0-100km/h	4.6secs	3.3secs
Price	\$250,000	Priceless