

2023. A Year in Pictures

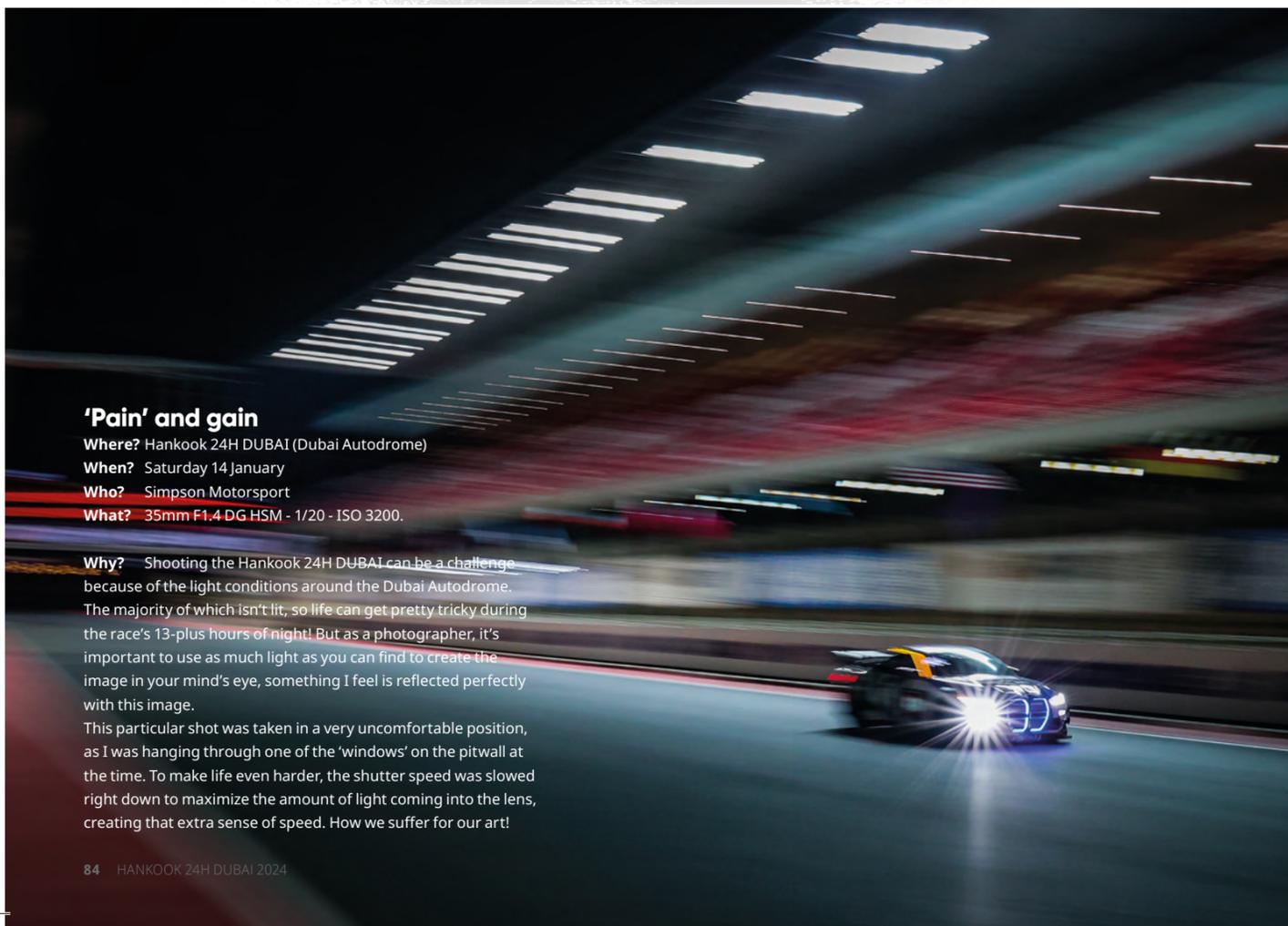
As another year of endurance racing action drew to a close in December, the 24H SERIES was left celebrating new champions, brand-new race winners, and breathtaking on-track action at some of the most charismatic venues across Europe and the Middle East. It also brought the curtain down on the first full season for new 24H SERIES photographer Nico Mombaerts, so we asked the man himself to walk us through some of his favourite shots of 2023.



Magic hour

Where? Hankook 24H DUBAI (Dubai Autodrome)
When? Thursday 12 January
Who? RABDAN Motorsport / Team GP-Elite / Grove Racing
What? RF100-500mm F4.5-7.1 LIS USM - 1/800 - 500mm - ISO 2000

Why? Before heading to Dubai, I'd been told that sunsets in the Middle East are on another level. This clearly wasn't a lie! This shot was taken during one of the week's evening practice sessions, and there are a few corners at the Dubai Autodrome where you can really take advantage of that amazing 'golden' glow (this particular shot was taken from turn six). The challenge is the ability to combine everything into one shot: speed; action; atmosphere; and, yes, sometimes sunsets. Photography, for me, is more than 'just' taking a shot. It's about creating stories and memories. Something this image represents so well for me.

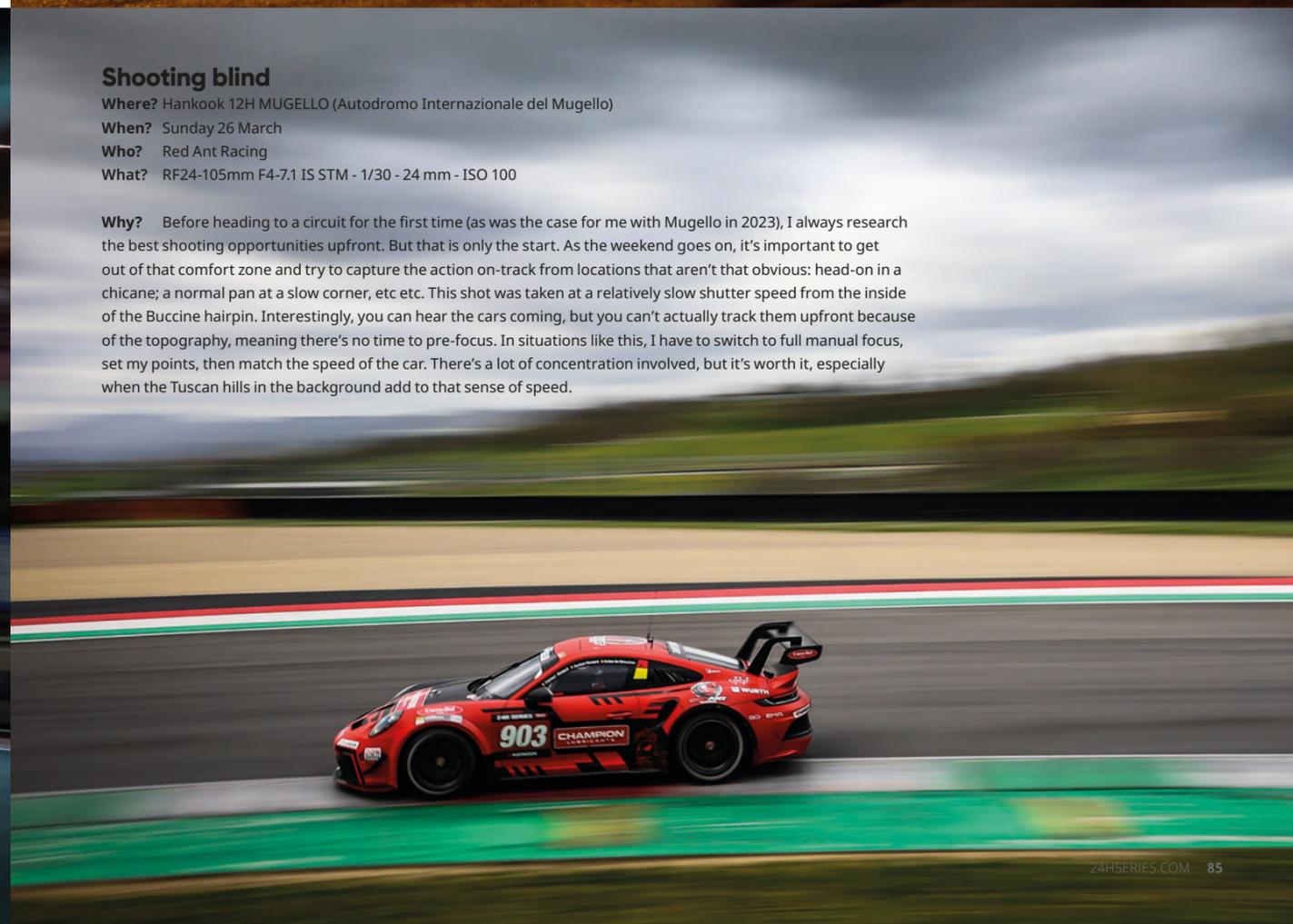


'Pain' and gain

Where? Hankook 24H DUBAI (Dubai Autodrome)
When? Saturday 14 January
Who? Simpson Motorsport
What? 35mm F1.4 DG HSM - 1/20 - ISO 3200.

Why? Shooting the Hankook 24H DUBAI can be a challenge because of the light conditions around the Dubai Autodrome. The majority of which isn't lit, so life can get pretty tricky during the race's 13-plus hours of night! But as a photographer, it's important to use as much light as you can find to create the image in your mind's eye, something I feel is reflected perfectly with this image.

This particular shot was taken in a very uncomfortable position, as I was hanging through one of the 'windows' on the pitwall at the time. To make life even harder, the shutter speed was slowed right down to maximize the amount of light coming into the lens, creating that extra sense of speed. How we suffer for our art!



Shooting blind

Where? Hankook 12H MUGELLO (Autodromo Internazionale del Mugello)
When? Sunday 26 March
Who? Red Ant Racing
What? RF24-105mm F4-7.1 IS STM - 1/30 - 24 mm - ISO 100

Why? Before heading to a circuit for the first time (as was the case for me with Mugello in 2023), I always research the best shooting opportunities upfront. But that is only the start. As the weekend goes on, it's important to get out of that comfort zone and try to capture the action on-track from locations that aren't that obvious: head-on in a chicane; a normal pan at a slow corner, etc etc. This shot was taken at a relatively slow shutter speed from the inside of the Buccine hairpin. Interestingly, you can hear the cars coming, but you can't actually track them upfront because of the topography, meaning there's no time to pre-focus. In situations like this, I have to switch to full manual focus, set my points, then match the speed of the car. There's a lot of concentration involved, but it's worth it, especially when the Tuscan hills in the background add to that sense of speed.



That first win!

Where? Hankook 12H MUGELLO (Autodromo Internazionale del Mugello)

When? Sunday 26 March

Who? Mathieu Detry / Sandrine Haas / Haas RT

What? RF24-105mm F4-7.1 IS STM - 1/30 - 24 mm - ISO 100

Why? Motorsport is all about emotions. It's not just about the racing itself; it's about the people behind it and their passion. Few pictures I took in 2023 captured that better than this one of Mathieu Detry and Haas RT team owner Sandrine Haas hugging after their team had just won the 2023 Hankook 12H MUGELLO. The team's first race win ever! The shot speaks for itself, as the happiness, and relief, comes pouring out. For Mathieu and Sandrine - in fact everyone at Haas RT - this is a moment that will stay with them forever.



Old dog, new tricks

Where? Hankook 12H SPA-FRANCORCHAMPS (Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps)

When? Friday 5 May

Who? Herberth Motorsport

What? RF100-500mm F4.5-7.1 L IS USM - 1/1.000 - 500mm - ISO 100

Why? What is more iconic at Spa-Francorchamps than Eau Rouge and Radillon? Exactly! Over the past few years though, this incredible racetrack and the surroundings at this complex have been through many changes, which, ironically, has made it harder for photographers to capture this unique location. The flip side is that driver and marshal safety has also been improved, so we won't dwell on that too much! The new grandstand at the top of the hill however provides a brand-new location for photographers. One that's amazing to shoot from: I can almost get my lens to the same level as the track itself. This also allows us to include the yellow and red run-off areas in the shot in a different way. It's an interesting additional touch that also helps frame the image. Turns out, even after 100-plus years, photographers can still learn new lessons at Spa.

A game changer

Where? Hankook 12H SPA-FRANCORCHAMPS (Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps)

When? Friday 5 May

Who? Heart of Racing by SPS

What? 35mm F1.4 DG HSM - 1/1.250 - 35 mm - ISO 100

Why? The 'downside' of coming to Spa-Francorchamps so many times is that it's always a challenge to find new angles and corners to shoot from, and thus create images that genuinely speak to us. This shot was taken during qualifying, just moments before the rain started to pour, as it can only do in the Ardennes. It was taken at pit entry, and in order to get that glorious combination of lines and the ominous clouds in the background, the camera had to be held very low down (it was almost touching the track surface). You can feel, in this one shot, that everyone's carefully thought-out strategy is about to change completely...



Focus!

Where? Hankook 12H MONZA (Autodromo Nazionale Monza)

When? Friday 9 June

Who? Robert Renauer / Herberth Motorsport

What? 35mm F1.4 DG HSM - 1/2.000 - ISO 100

Why? I had this shot in mind very early on during the Monza weekend. The opportunity finally arose, during qualifying, when the clouds really popped out. As luck would have it, I was covering the pitlane at the time, and managed to catch Herberth Motorsport's Robert Renauer while he was waiting to take over the #91 Porsche for his qualifying run. I'm also quite pleased with the metal rig on the left too, as this balances Robert out in the frame nicely. As you can tell, his attention, quite rightly, was elsewhere when I took the shot!





Beautiful ballet

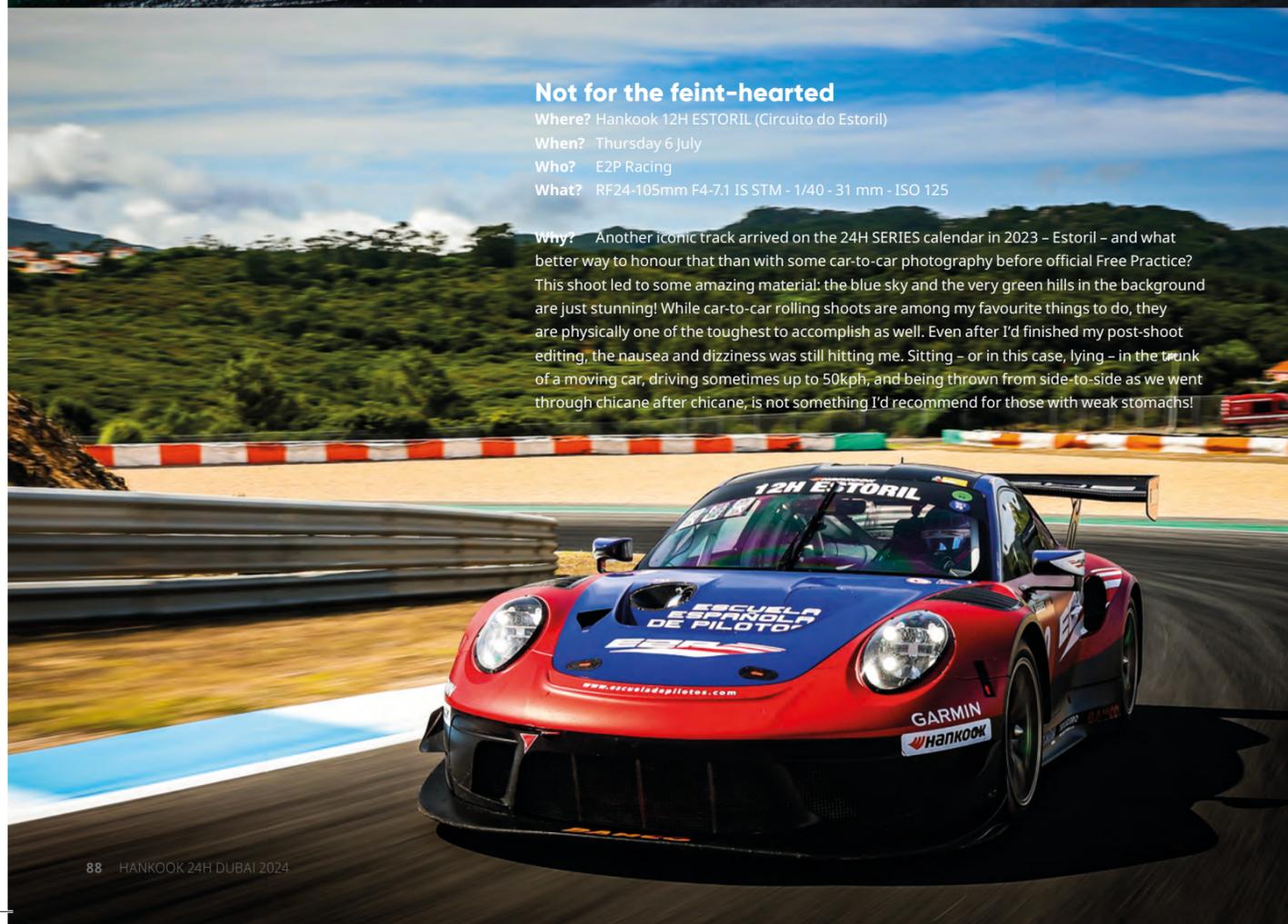
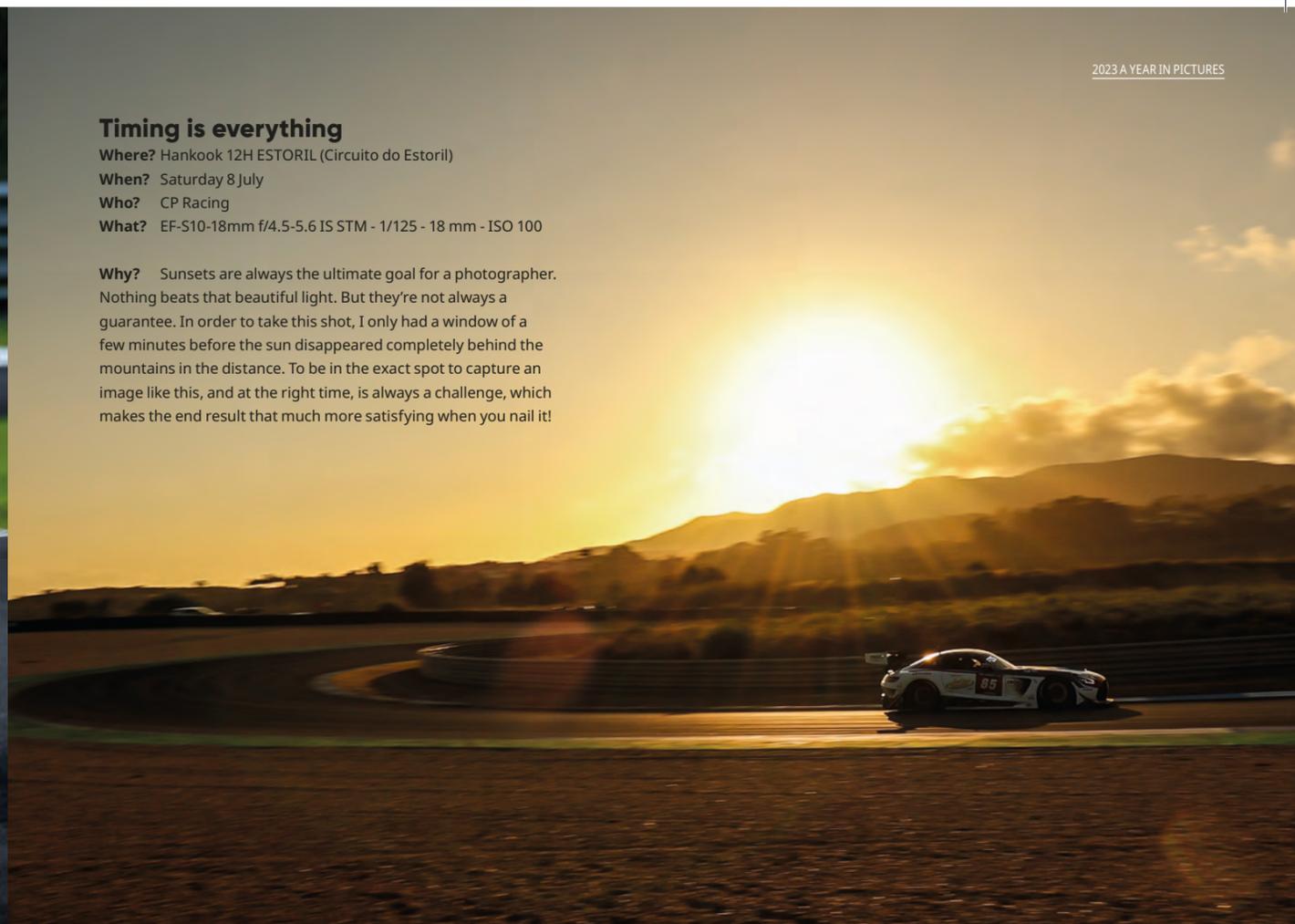
Where? Hankook 12H MONZA (Autodromo Nazionale Monza)
When? Friday 9 June
Who? Rabdan Motorsport by HRT Performance (again!)
What? RF100-500mm F4.5-7.1 L IS USM - 1/1,000 - 300mm - ISO 800

Why? Monza. One of those legendary race tracks that still features on the Formula 1 calendar today. But, iconic as it is, Monza is a really tough track for photographers, as the number of shooting locations to work with is limited to around six places. This shot was taken at Variante della Roggia during Free Practice, and shows a beautiful ballet of two Porsches hitting the kerbs simultaneously, creating a nice balance to the shot. Much to both team managers' annoyance, I imagine! I'm guessing there was a conversation after Free Practice, reminding each driver to save their tyres, and their cars, by staying OFF the kerbs.

Timing is everything

Where? Hankook 12H ESTORIL (Circuito do Estoril)
When? Saturday 8 July
Who? CP Racing
What? EF-S10-18mm f/4.5-5.6 IS STM - 1/125 - 18 mm - ISO 100

Why? Sunsets are always the ultimate goal for a photographer. Nothing beats that beautiful light. But they're not always a guarantee. In order to take this shot, I only had a window of a few minutes before the sun disappeared completely behind the mountains in the distance. To be in the exact spot to capture an image like this, and at the right time, is always a challenge, which makes the end result that much more satisfying when you nail it!



Not for the feint-hearted

Where? Hankook 12H ESTORIL (Circuito do Estoril)
When? Thursday 6 July
Who? E2P Racing
What? RF24-105mm F4-7.1 IS STM - 1/40 - 31 mm - ISO 125

Why? Another iconic track arrived on the 24H SERIES calendar in 2023 – Estoril – and what better way to honour that than with some car-to-car photography before official Free Practice? This shoot led to some amazing material: the blue sky and the very green hills in the background are just stunning! While car-to-car rolling shoots are among my favourite things to do, they are physically one of the toughest to accomplish as well. Even after I'd finished my post-shoot editing, the nausea and dizziness was still hitting me. Sitting – or in this case, lying – in the trunk of a moving car, driving sometimes up to 50kph, and being thrown from side-to-side as we went through chicane after chicane, is not something I'd recommend for those with weak stomachs!



Sharp focus

Where? Hankook 24H BARCELONA (Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya)
When? Thursday 14 September
Who? Max Partl / Hofor-Racing by Bonk Motorsport
What? 85mm F1.4 DG HSM - 1/125 - ISO 100

Why? When I am working in the pitlane, I usually carry my f1.4 lenses in the hope of capturing a detail that's so crisp, it feels unreal. Looking at this image in high resolution, you can see that there is only one element in the shot that is sharp: the pupil. And that's the point I wanted to make here. All the focus is on the eye, representing a driver's focus before heading out on-track to set that crucial lap time (it helps that the roll cage and the protective nets draw your attention to Max's eyes too). It's a simple idea, but it can create a very powerful image.



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Get up and go!

Where? Hankook 24H BARCELONA (Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya)
When? Friday 15 September
Who? NM Racing Team
What? RF70-200mm F4 L IS USM - 1/640 - 70 mm - ISO 4000

Why? Just before qualifying in Barcelona, a session I usually cover from the pitlane, it started raining. And I mean, really pouring down! In moments like that, you just have to grab your gear, collect yourself and start shooting. You can't hang about, because you've no idea when the rain will stop. The fact that you need to spend the next 12 hours drying your camera is a small inconvenience you need to accept, especially because it's the perfect opportunity to capture the spray and the almost sinister atmosphere created by the headlights. There's a lot more dedication that goes into an image like this than people might realize at first glance...



How low can you go?

Where? Hankook 12H KUWAIT (Kuwait Motor Town)
When? Friday 8th December
Who? KKrämer Racing
What? 35mm - F8 - 1/5 - ISO 100

Why? For any motorsport photographer, it's vital to capture the speed of the cars. We can always crank up the shutter speed to make sure the car is sharp, but in return, we risk losing the essence of our subject. And with complex shots like this, finding the right balance between the location, the composition and the light makes things difficult enough as it is. In the end, capturing the speed of the KKrämer Porsche while testing the extremes of my shutter speed by dropping this as low as possible was always going to be a gamble. One that definitely paid off.

Those last rays of light

Where? Hankook 12H KUWAIT (Kuwait Motor Town)
When? Wednesday 6 December
Who? Toro Verde
What? 85mm - F 1.4 - 1/1600 - ISO 100

Why? Photography is, in essence playing, with light. When the last sunrays of the day hit the pitlane, you get that warm, gloomy atmosphere that I absolutely wanted to capture. The combination of a warm and slightly cloudy sky in combination with the striking pose of the Ginetta team members, make this composition complete. A nicely balanced, playful game of light and shadows appears.



12H KUWAIT

The Star Wars outro

Where? Hankook 12H KUWAIT (Kuwait Motor Town)
When? Saturday 9 December
Who? Manamauri Energy by Ebimotors
What? 500mm - F 6 - 1/1600 - ISO 2000

Why? You have those moments as a photographer when one image sums up the entire race weekend. For me, it's this one. For this shot, I had a timeframe of exactly 15 seconds. 15 seconds, during which the sun would be in the exact position for me to capture one of the cars driving into it (seriously, the speed of the sunsets in Kuwait is incredible!). With the help of Sebastian our pitlane camera man, I was able to find the exact spot for this composition. And it worked perfectly. Beer is on me at the next event, Seb!

