



GT WORLD CHALLENGE EUROPE : First Podium of the season for Team AKKA-ASP!!

26-07-2020

#News

For the 46 cars entered, this first round of the season came as a release for all the energy bottled up over the past months. The three-hour race at Imola also marked the start of the 10th season of the Endurance Cup. Even with quite particular sanitary conditions, the celebration and the passion were there. It was a successful return to the track for Team AKKA-ASP, who claimed their first podium of the season, third place overall, with the #88 Mercedes-AMG of Raffaele Marciello, Timur Boguslavskiy and Felipe Fraga. Despite a clash, caught in a vice at the restart following a safety-car, then long minutes in the pit-lane to repair the damage, the #89 of Alex Fontana, Lucas Légeret and Benjamin Hites crossed the finish line of this opening race. Lastly, suffering from bad luck after contact during the first quarter of the race, the #87 of Jim Pla, Jean-Luc Beaubelique and Fabien Barthez, propelled off course, ended the race in the gravel trap. The next event will be in two weeks' time, still in Italy, for three Sprint races at the Misano circuit, on the Adriatic coast.

And it's green lights for the start of the 2020 season...finally! After months of waiting, the pack took over the 4.9km of the legendary Imola circuit to compete in the first round of the GT World Challenge Europe. A first round of endurance racing, with a three-hour race on a layout that has strong downforce and medium speed, and on a track whose numerous gravel traps penalize instantly any deviation from the route. Despite the fact that the first day of running (Friday) was disrupted by strong and sudden storms, the qualifying sessions and the race benefitted from very good weather.

Close qualifying!

In the AKKA-ASP clan, after regular and long test sessions in Europe since the end of the lockdown, resuming competing was a relief.

Already in the free practice sessions, Rabastens' team set the tone with the best time credited to Felipe Fraga (#88), closely followed by Jim Pla (#87).

When it comes to the qualifying session, the format has not changed: three 15-minute sessions, one per driver. The best lap of each driver is used to calculate an average that sets the reference time for the starting grid. This session took place with clear and sunny skies. The track conditions were optimal, but with 46 cars, setting a quick lap remained a complex exercise. The pace was high from the start. Raffaele Marciello (#88), Alex Fontana (#89) and Jim Pla (#87) were the first to head out. The times were set, P2, P8 (P2 Silver) and P10 (P1 Pro-AM). In the second session, the competition was fierce for Timur Bguslavskiy (#88), Lucas Légeret (#89) and Jean-Luc Beaubelique (#87). In the final round, Felipe Fraga set a time for the #88 that placed it in pole for a time, before finishing with 3rd, whereas Benjamin Hites (#89) and Fabien Barthez (#87) didn't hold back. After calculating the averages, the #88 Mercedes-AMG GT3 was placed in the 2nd row (P3), the #89 claimed 5th place in Silver, and #87 was 3rd in Pro-AM.

Crazy pace for a crazy race!

No fewer than 46 cars were on the starting grid of the first round of the season. It was good weather and only a few high-up clouds decorated the skies with a few white traces.

The start was boiling but remained "clean", no clashes or crashes came to disrupt the set-up of a first hierarchy. It did not take long for the rhythm to pick up at the front and the drivers took their first opportunities to climb a few places.

In the AKKA-ASP clan, Lello Marciello had the first relay for the #88 and wasted no time in making his ambitions clear from 3rd place. On the #89, Alex Fontana slid confidently from 26th to 22nd place, whereas Jean-Luc Beaubelique managed the trajectory of the #87 from 35th place.

After only 8 minutes of racing, the first Full Course Yellow (aka yellow flag over the whole circuit) was quickly followed by the appearance of the safety-car on track, the first of a long series. At the restart, Lello did not let up and increased the pace. Multiplying the attacks, he took over second place after a nice manoeuvre at Rivazza, at the exit of the chicane, and started to put pressure on the race leader.

But after about 30 minutes of racing, the #87's ideal trajectory was disrupted. After contact with another competitor, Jean-Luc Beaubelique, victim of a puncture in his rear right tyre, left the track and ended up in the gravel bed.

Another safety car and at the restart, Alex Fontana in the #89 was cut off in the pack and could not avoid getting hit. The Swiss managed to make it back to the pits and the Mercedes-AMG spent long minutes there to repair what they could. The goal was to rejoin the track as soon as was possible.

For the second relay, Timur Boguslavskiy got behind the wheel of the #88 and rejoined in P3. The Russian driver managed to masterfully stave off the attacks from experienced drivers. All the while keeping a steady pace, he kept up with the leaders and never let up. When he handed the wheel over to Felipe Fraga for the final hour, the #88 was in fourth. In the meantime, the #89 had rejoined the track, driven by the young Chilean driver Benjamin Hites. Although their hopes of a good finish in the Silver category were gone, reaching the end of this first race and crossing the finish line was now the goal they were aiming for. Benjamin Hites, and then Lucas Légeret, spent lap after lap focusing on making it happen.

There were so many fights for the leading places in the final hour that it could have been termed "caliente". Following the safety-cars, the gaps were wiped out and the work had to start afresh. Meanwhile, Felipe Fraga demonstrated great mastery in the offensive as he tried to take second place, and in the defensive as he staved off assaults while holding onto third place. Five minutes from the end, three cars were fighting in close quarters for second place. The Brazilian was not going to give up and the last lap was tense right up to the chequered flag. The #88 crossed the finishing line in P3, giving Team AKKA-ASP their first podium of 2020. It was also mission accomplished for the crew of the #89 (and namely the two rookies) who crossed the finishing line after a good show of fighting spirit.

The next round of the GT World Challenge Europe, in two weeks (7-9 August), will take the competitors to the Adriatic coast, at the circuit of Misano, also in Italy. It will be championship's first Sprint round with three one-hour races on the programme.