

ASTON MARTIN FACES NEW CHALLENGES AT LE MANS

Gaydon, 3 June 2009. Aston Martin's debut in the LMP1 class at Le Mans this year coincides with a number of rule changes – posing another challenge to the British team as it gears up for its campaign at the La Sarthe circuit on the 13-14 June.

Aston Martin Racing will enter three Gulf-liveried LMP1 prototypes, powered by the same production-derived V12 engine that has given the Aston Martin DBR9 victory in the GT1 class at the 24 Hours for the last two years.

However, diesel-powered cars have recently dominated the LMP1 category – winning the endurance classic convincingly for the past three years. A number of changes have been introduced to try to bring the performance of the petrol cars closer to their diesel equivalents but Aston Martin will still have a mountain to climb. Diesel race engine technology is relatively new compared to petrol technology, so bigger steps in performance can be achieved making it easier to compensate for the changes imposed by the Automobile Club de l'Ouest.

With speeds at the circuit getting quicker year on year, the Automobile Club de l'Ouest – which organises the race – is also aiming to slow all the cars down, with a target lap time on the eight-mile track of around three and a half minutes.

The pit stop procedure has also been significantly altered in order to reduce tyre consumption and ensure that fewer mechanics are working in the busy pit lane. From this year, only two mechanics at any one time will be permitted to change tyres on the car using just one wheel gun – which can only take place once refuelling is complete. When the tyre changes are over, the wheel mechanics have to return inside the garage and only then can four more mechanics carry out any further maintenance that is required, such as topping up fluids. The car will not be allowed to leave its pit stand until all the mechanics are back inside the garage.

The result of these new rules is to make pit stops considerably longer, which puts greater emphasis on a strategic approach to the race and encourages teams to limit the use of tyres. A pit stop this year will take around 15 seconds more than it did last year, adding up to several minutes over the course of the race.

There will be a maximum noise limit of 112 decibels and post-race scrutineering will also become stricter, with harsh penalties for competitors missing any parts of bodywork or car structure at the finish.

Some even more far-reaching changes are set to be introduced for the Le Mans 24 Hours in 2010, allowing homologation of hybrid technology cars, encouraging further use of hybrid technology such as KERS and reducing carbon emissions.

Aston Martin Racing Team Principal George Howard-Chappell commented: “The changes to the pit stop rules mean that the emphasis has switched to getting more out of a set of tyres, making it a good idea to do an extra stint on each set if you can. That obviously impacts on the whole tyre wear aspect of the car. In the end these new rules just provide another set of numbers to compute: they don’t make a fundamental difference to the unique challenge of the race.”

The Aston Martin Racing team is currently completing its final preparations for the epic contest before heading to France for the 24 hour race.