

ASTON MARTIN RACING TRIUMPHS OVER ADVERSITY FOR SPA PODIUM

Spa, 10 May, 2009. The 007 Aston Martin Racing LMP1 car of Jan Charouz (CZ), Tomas Enge (CZ) and Stefan Mücke (GER) has finished on the podium of the Spa 1000 kilometres in Belgium following a magnificent fightback after the team started from the back of the grid.

The 007 crew failed to set a qualifying time on Saturday as the result of a mechanical problem, which saw the Aston Martin Racing mechanics work late into the night to replace the car's engine in readiness for today's six-hour race.

Nonetheless a superlative performance from all three drivers throughout an incident-packed race, plus a well-deserved fifth place for the sister 009 car, has resulted in Aston Martin Racing adding to its Le Mans Series team points total following victory at the opening round in Barcelona last month. This was despite strong opposition from diesel-powered rivals that turned out to have a significant performance advantage on the seven-kilometre Spa circuit, located in the heart of the Ardennes Mountains. Although this region of Belgium is noted for its changeable weather, conditions remained warm and dry for the 143-lap race.

Mücke started the race at 12:50 in the 007 car from the back of the grid, and soon demonstrated an impressive pace coupled with the incisive ability to cut through traffic. Within an hour he had already moved into the top five behind the 009 car. However, the German did not have an entirely trouble-free stint: a collision with another competitor who had outbraked himself damaged the nose of the 007 Aston Martin, affecting the car's handling.

"The damage meant that the underside of the nose was actually moving, which made the handling totally nervous and unpredictable," reported Mücke. "But to come back from the problem of not being able to qualify yesterday and surviving some interesting moments during the race only makes this podium result all the more satisfying. What is clear is that our car is very competitive when we have a clean run, as our ability to move through the traffic showed."

Jan Charouz – who formed part of the victorious 007 crew at Barcelona – then took over for the second stint, which was characterised by several incidents, accidents

and safety car periods. Charouz then handed the car over to his Czech compatriot Tomas Enge after a tricky double stint on the notoriously complex Spa-Francorchamps circuit. During Charouz's stint the 007 car's nose was changed in order to rectify a problem with the lights, and it was then that the crack in the underside that had affected Mücke was discovered.

"Conditions were really difficult," reported Charouz, who did not put a foot wrong throughout his long stint. "This is one of the most challenging circuits in the world, and the number of people going off proved the point. I struggled a little bit with the set-up, but in the end this result here has certainly gone beyond our expectations at the start of the weekend so we are very happy."

Enge got into the car with two hours to go when it was running in fourth, but he was able to close up to the leaders under yet another lengthy safety car period. He emerged in third place with around 20 minutes of racing left, meaning that he had to strike a delicate compromise between guaranteeing a strong finish for the team and attempting to secure a podium place against strong opposition that was right behind him.

"There was some pressure on me in those final laps, for sure," reflected Enge at the finish. "Our instructions were very clear: with Le Mans so close we did not want to take any risks with the cars. However, I also really wanted to be on the podium. So I pushed as hard as I could while keeping a certain safety margin, and thankfully it had the right result. I said from the start that I believed we could put the difficulties we experienced during qualifying behind us with some good teamwork and this was proved to be the case today. It just goes to show the strength of our team."

Darren Turner started the race from third on the grid in the 009 car but the Englishman had a puncture at the first corner after he was hit by another competitor. He said: "It was just one of those things: a racing incident. Nobody was at fault, but it was unfortunate that we had to complete the first lap with a puncture. What helped us was the fact that a safety car came out, so we lost track position but didn't go a lap down."

After the problem was rectified Turner was able to make impressive progress through the field, climbing as high as third place throughout a double stint that lasted for

nearly two hours. He subsequently handed over to Portugal's Miguel Ramos, who had to battle a serious vibration throughout his own double stint.

"I'm not sure what the problem was but the effect was dramatic," said Ramos. "The vibration was so bad that it was hard to concentrate on the braking zones sometimes as I could not see them properly. Under those circumstances it was just a question of bringing the car home safely, and I'm pleased that we managed to do that."

Swiss driver Harold Primat drove the car for the final and longest stint totalling over two hours. He dropped a bit of time with a spin in the closing stages after being tagged by another competitor. Thankfully this had no lasting consequences and the team was able to seal its first double points finish in the Le Mans Series.

Primat said: "This was the longest stint I have ever done in the car and I was feeling a bit tired by the end of it. Above all I was aiming for consistency, and I think I managed to do this. It was just a pity that somebody hit me at the end and I had a spin; there was nothing I could do. It took me a little while to get going again, and maybe without that we could have taken fourth place. But fifth is still a good result and I think we all worked well together today. "

The next competitive outing for the Aston Martin Racing team will be its biggest challenge of the year: the daunting Le Mans 24 Hours itself, on June 13-14. Aston Martin Racing Team Principal George Howard-Chappell concluded: "I'm extremely pleased to get both cars home in one piece this close to Le Mans. It was an excellent result for the 007 crew, full credit to the team for working so hard to deal with what was a tough weekend."

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