Porsche teams face huge challenges at the WEC season opener

17/03/2023 The Porsche Penske Motorsport works team has wrapped up the season-opening round of the FIA World Endurance Championship WEC with positions five and six. Dane Cameron, Michael Christensen and Frédéric Makowiecki started the 1,000-mile race at the Sebring International Raceway from P7 in their Porsche 963 hybrid prototype and made up two positions in the race.

The race

Behind them, Kévin Estre, André Lotterer and Laurens Vanthoor crossed the finish line in sixth place. In the GTE Am category, the Porsche customer squad Dempsey-Proton Racing brought home a podium result, with drivers Christian Ried, Mikkel Pedersen and the former Porsche-Junior Julien Andlauer claiming second in the Porsche 911 RSR. Supported by Porsche Motorsport Asia-Pacific, Yifei Ye from China won the LMP2 class with the prototype fielded by Hertz Team Jota. The team will campaign one of the first customer-run Porsche 963 during the 2023 WEC season.

Stuttgart. The No. 6 Porsche 963 helmed by Estre, Lotterer and Vanthoor managed to gain a position at

the start of the race on the 6.02-kilometre circuit. Early pit stops by some of the rivals at the end of an extended caution phase, caused by an accident involving a GTE car, propelled the hybrid prototype shared by the French-German-Belgian crew up to third place. For the best-placed Porsche 963, strategy was the main focus for the rest of the race. However, after seven hours of racing, a fleeting electrical issue cropped up during a pit stop, which cost time and threw the racing vehicle back one position behind their teammates' Porsche 963.

After the start, Dane Cameron (USA), Michael Christensen from Denmark and Frenchman Frédéric Makowiecki managed to keep their No. 5 Porsche right behind their teammates. However, a drive-through penalty at the beginning of the fourth hour due to a regulation infraction during a full course yellow shuffled the trio down the field. The rest of the race ran without incident for the three and concluded with fifth place.

"The entire team and our drivers did their absolute best and fought to the very end. Our brand new FIA WEC squad deserves huge respect," concludes Thomas Laudenbach. The Vice President of Porsche Motorsport adds: "We did the best we could with what we currently have today and made significant progress compared to the IMSA series season opener at Daytona. The reliability of our two Porsche 963 was not an issue this weekend. However, it became very obvious that we still have some catching up to do in many areas. Compared to the competition, we lack performance. We have to work on this systematically and intensively over the coming weeks."

"Congratulations to the team! They had an extremely tough week with the prologue and preparation week behind them, but remained calm during the race and made no mistakes during pit stops – a big thank you for that. It makes me proud to be a part of it," emphasises Urs Kuratle, Director Factory Motorsport LMDh. "With fifth and sixth place, the result is definitely not yet what we want. Nevertheless, it's been a good start into a new era for us in the WEC. Congratulations to Toyota, Ferrari and Cadillac. With the crew here we'll definitely catch up, the team has enormous potential. We trust our very strong driver squad and have the required infrastructure."

The race in the GTE Am category

In the GTE Am category, the all-female line-up in the 911 RSR fielded by the Porsche customer team Iron Dames tackled the WEC season opener from pole position. Belgian Sarah Bovy, Michelle Gatting from Denmark and Rahel Frey from Switzerland initially defended their lead in the 13-car class and maintained their position in the top group. However, a short trip off the track required an unscheduled pit stop for repairs. Ultimately, the pink No. 85 Porsche fought its way through the field to cross the finish line eighth in the GTE class.

As the best of the five nine-elevens that competed, the Dempsey-Proton racer reached the finish line after 219 laps. Teaming up with former Porsche-Junior Julien Andlauer (France) and Mikkel Pederson from Denmark, team boss Christian Ried (Germany) delivered a flawless race, which saw the trio catapult from eleventh on the GTE Am grid to clinch a podium finish in second place. The Iron Lynx

squad with drivers Alessio Picariello, Claudio Schiavoni and Matteo Cressoni (all Italian) battled their way to sixth place, while the two UK racers Michael Wainwright and Benjamin Barker as well as Italian Riccardo Pera finished seventh in GR Racing's 911 RSR. Alongside former Porsche Junior Matteo Cairoli from Italy, the two Americans Gunnar Jeannette and PJ Hyett finished the incident-filled home race in twelfth place at the wheel of Project 1 AO's Porsche.

The "Super Sebring" weekend on the storied racetrack in the heart of the "Sunshine State" of Florida continues on Saturday. At 10.10 am local time (3.10 pm CET), round two of this year's IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship starts with the 12-hour race.

Drivers' comments after the race

Michael Christensen (Porsche 963 #5):"The race was hot and challenging. We're taking a lot of important insights home with us. Tyre management played a really important role today to keep us in the game. We'll come back stronger at the next race in Portimao."

Laurens Vanthoor (Porsche 963 #6): "That was not an easy race for us. Initially, we tried to fight against the Cadillac. That worked at times, but ultimately, they were too strong for us. At the moment it's the best we can do. Now we need to figure out where we're lacking speed and work hard to improve."

Christian Ried (Porsche 911 RSR #77): "I'm really happy with our strong start to the season. After getting caught up in a rival's accident with our number 88 Porsche, it's been a tough week for the entire Proton team. Now all of the cars we were responsible for reached the finish line and we've achieved second place. That's so sad for the Iron Dames team, who were hampered by damage and relegated far down the field."

Results

Hypercar class:
1. Conway/Kobayashi/Lopez (UK/J/ARG), Toyota #7, 239 laps
2. Buemi/Hartley/Hirakawa (CH/NZ/J), Toyota #8, 239 laps
3. Fuoco/Molina/Nielsen (I/E/DK), Ferrari #50, 237 laps
5. Cameron/Christensen/Makowiecki (USA/DK/F), Porsche 963 #5, 235 laps
6. Estre/Lotterer/Vanthoor (F/D/B), Porsche 963 #6, 235 laps

GTE-Am class:
1. Keating/Varrone/Catsburg (USA/ARG/NL), Corvette #33, 221 laps
2. Ried/Pedersen/Andlauer (D/DK/F), Porsche 911 RSR #77, 219 laps
3. Kimura/ Huffaker/Serra (J/USA/BR), Ferrari 488 GTE Evo, 219 laps
6. Schiavoni/Cressoni/Picariello (I/I/B), Porsche 911 RSR #60, 219 laps

7. Wainwright/Pera/Barker (UK/I/UK), Porsche 911 RSR #86, 218 laps
8. Bovy/Frey/Gatting (B/CH/DK), Porsche 911 RSR #85, 218 laps
12. Hyett/Jeannette/Cairoli (USA/USA/I), Porsche 911 RSR #56, 215 laps

The Qualifying

Porsche Penske Motorsport tackles the season opener of the FIA World Endurance Championship WEC from positions six and seven. At the Sebring International Raceway in the US state of Florida, Kévin Estre turned a qualifying lap in 1:47.193 minutes at the wheel of his No. 6 Porsche 963. Hot on his heels, his teammate Michael Christensen posted a time of 1:47,210 minutes in the No. 5 hybrid prototype. In the GTE Am category, Sarah Bovy underlined the powerful form of the Iron Dames team's Porsche 911 RSR with pole position. The 1,000-mile race over eight hours gets underway on Friday at noon local time (5 pm CET).

The Porsche works team wrapped up the first qualifying of the new FIA WEC season with a midfield result in the hypercar class. The two new Porsche 963 hybrid prototypes qualified on positions six and seven for the eight-hour 1,000-mile race. Qualifying driver Kévin Estre from France, his German teammate André Lotterer and Laurens Vanthor from Belgium will start from the third grid row. Michael Christensen from Denmark, Dane Cameron from America and Frédéric Makowiecki from France line up next to them on P7.

"We're definitely not happy with our performance. The fact is we're not squeezing the upper limit out of our Porsche 963. We are convinced that the car is better than what we showed today," explains Urs Kuratle, Director Factory Motorsport LMDh. "One aspect is the braking. We know for certain that we need to improve in that area. But we also can't tap into the whole car package yet. This is especially true for qualifying. We anticipate our performance in the race to be much better but we still have work to do there, too. We'll get the full picture tomorrow evening after the race."

In the GTE-Am class qualifying, Sarah Bovy repeated the blistering pace of the Iron Dames Porsche from free practice. At the wheel of the pink 911 RSR, the Belgian topped the qualifying time sheet with 1:58.949 minutes. She starts the 1,000-mile race on Friday from pole position in her class with teammates Michelle Gatting from Denmark and Rahel Frey from Switzerland. In the second fastest Porsche, American PJ Hyett planted the vehicle fielded by Project 1 AO on P6. Proton Competition's No. 88 Porsche could not take part in the qualifying after becoming entangled in an accident caused by another competitor. Ryan Hardwick (USA), Zacharie Robichon (CAN) and Harry Tincknell (UK) are also unable to contest the race on Friday.

The 1,000-mile race on the revered 6.02-kilometre racetrack in the heart of the "Sunshine State" of Florida gets the green light at noon local time (5 pm CET) on Friday. The free TV station Eurosport 1 broadcasts the final phase of the WEC season opener live. RTL Nitro also televises a comprehensive report from Sebring. For a fee, the FIA WEC app provides a live stream and live timing. Just one day later, the second round of the IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship gets underway on the

Sebring International Raceway. On Saturday, 18 March, the storied 12 Hours of Sebring will be contested for the 71st time.

Qualifying quotes from the drivers

Kévin Estre (Porsche 963 #6): "We didn't make any mistakes. The car wasn't fantastic, but considering the overall package we have this weekend, it was pretty good. My lap wasn't perfect, but it definitely wasn't bad either. Now we need to look at where we're losing time. It felt much faster in the car than any lap we've done here in the past. But performances in qualifying and in the race are two very different things. It's obvious that our competitors have the upper hand, that's for sure. We need to get through the race unscathed and learn as much as possible, then maybe we'll stand a chance."

Michael Christensen (Porsche 963 #5): "The qualifying showed that we aren't quite where we want to be yet. We're missing some power, especially compared to the LMH cars, but even the Cadillac is slightly ahead of us. Now we need to understand what's missing and how to improve. The Porsche actually feels good, even though I'm lacking some grip. We'll keep working on it, the race is long."

Sarah Bovy (Porsche 911 RSR #85): "I knew it was going to be very close. I wanted to attack as hard as possible. But it's my first qualifying session with the Porsche 911 RSR, so it took me a while to find the limit. In the last lap, I actually felt really good – even though I nudged another car and was afraid of losing time while overtaking. I'm really happy about pole position. As a team, we managed to prove that we mean business with the new car. We worked hard towards that. Now, we're concentrating on the race. Even though we secured a good qualifying result, the most difficult task is still ahead of us tomorrow."

PJ Hyett (Porsche 911 RSR #56): "The Porsche handles phenomenally. I can hardly wait for the race tomorrow. Let's see what we can do then. The track offered a lot of grip in qualifying. My tyres overheated a bit at the beginning, but I managed to get them back into the temperature window. All in all, it went well for us."

Results

Hypercar class:
1. Fuoco/Molina/Nielsen (I/E/DK), Ferrari #50, 1:45.067 minutes
2. Buemi/Hartley/Hirakawa (CH/NZ/J), Toyota #8, 1:45.281 minutes
3. Conway/Kobayashi/Lopez (UK/J/ARG), Toyota #7, 1:45.548 minutes
6. Estre/Lotterer/Vanthoor (F/D/B), Porsche 963 #6, 1:47.193 minutes
7. Cameron/Christensen/Makowiecki (USA/DK/F), Porsche 963 #5, 1:47.210 minutes

GTE-Am class:
1. Bovy/Frey/Gatting (B/CH/DK), Porsche 911 RSR #85, 1:58.949 minutes

2. Keating/Varrone/Catsburg (USA/ARG/NL), Corvette #33, 1:59.345 minutes
3. Al Harthy/Dinan/Eastwood (OMN/USA/IRL), Aston Martin #25, 1:59.657 minutes
6. Hyett/Jeannette/Cairoli (USA/USA/I), Porsche 911 RSR #56, 2:00.588 minutes
11. Ried/Pedersen/Andlauer (D/DK/F), Porsche 911 RSR #77, 2:01.054 minutes
12. Wainwright/Pera/Barker (UK/I/UK), Porsche 911 RSR #86, 2:02.588 minutes
13. Schiavoni/Cressoni/Picariello (I/I/B), Porsche 911 RSR #60, 2:02.820 minutes

Video

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