



BLANCPAIN GT SERIES ENDURANCE CUP

Round 1 - MONZA (Italy) - 13 & 14 April 2019

A Silver Cup victory to launch Team AKKA-ASP's 2019 season!

Monza, the Italian temple of sport, was the scene of the first round of the Blancpain GT Series Endurance Cup. The 2019 season got underway with a race full of twists and turns (with tricky weather conditions) during which Team AKKA-ASP was in front on many occasions. With the race pace determined by the many rain showers and daring tyre choices, this first event finished with a superb victory in the Silver Cup (4th overall) after claiming pole position, for the trio of Nico Bastian, Timur Bogulavskiy and Felipe Fraga in the #90 Mercedes-AMG GT3. One of the star crews in practice (1st in pre-qualifying and 4th overall in qualifying) as well as in the race, the drivers of the #88, Raffaele Marciello, Vincent Abril and Michael Meadows, shined throughout but were unable to bring their car to a well-deserved conclusion after a broken shock absorber 20 minutes from the chequered flag. Leaving Italy with no points, the Pro-AM crew of the #87, Jean-Luc Beaubelique, Jim Pla and Mauro Ricci, were definitely on the pace but were forced to retire mid-race, having gone off further to contact, while leading their category. The championship hit the ground running, promising a thrilling and exciting season ahead.



Qualifying disrupted by the weather

After their 2018 titles in the Blancpain GT Series, the winter break had not dented Team AKKA-ASP's motivation to launch themselves towards new conquests.

With three solid, experienced driver line-ups, entered in the Pro, Silver Cup and Pro-Am categories, Jérôme Policand's team headed back to the track

with their competitiveness intact, both in the dry and under the torrential rain.

In free practice, all the competitors were getting their bearings, and as early as pre-qualifying, the lap times started coming down. Behind the wheel of the #88 Mercedes-AMG GT3, Raffaele Marciello, sharing the car this year with Vincent Abril and Michael Meadows, was the fastest.

This tendency was confirmed the next day during qualifying, when, despite the conditions made more complicated by rain and reduced visibility, the trio claimed the fourth position on the grid. The #90 Mercedes-AMG GT3 of Nico Bastian, Timur Boguslavskiy and Felipe Fraga was equally energetic and successful, resulting in pole position in the Silver Cup, and a place on the first row of the grid (P2)!

As for the Pro-AM crew in the #87 car, of Jim Pla, Jean-Luc Beaubelique and Mauro Ricci, they put in some fine performances, including a third-fastest time in the first session, but were delayed by gearbox problems (which resulted in an off-track excursion, damaging the front and the wing). They claimed a place on the 20th row of the grid.



A race full of twists and turns

Just a few hours after Qualifying, this first race of the season appeared, just like the qualifying, to be subject to the caprices of the weather, and the race started behind the safety car.

The rain, spray and reduced visibility did not give optimal racing conditions, but despite all expectations, the pack went carefully through the first corners when the safety car pulled off. The pace of the next three hours of racing was set by a number of Full Course Yellow interventions, as well as safety car periods.



At the start of the race, the #90, second on the grid, held on to his position, Nico Bastian behind the wheel. After fifteen laps, the German driver was in control of the race, while his team-mate, Vincent Abril in the #88, was lying fourth and setting a solid pace. Starting from the 20th row, Jean-Luc Beaubelique was pushing hard and gaining positions lap by lap, lying fourth in the Pro-AM category.



At the driver change, Timur Boguslavskiy took over the #90. As the rain had stopped, the team gambled on the fact that the track was likely to improve, and tried slicks. It was a daring choice, but one that could make the difference... On the #88, rain tyres were also replaced by slicks, while Raffaele Marciello took over the car. In the Pro-AM car, after a perfect stint, Jean-Luc Beaubelique handed over to Jim Pla.



Team AKKA-ASP continued to make progress, setting a good pace, and the tyre choice appeared to be paying off: the #88 was leading the race while the #90 (10th) claimed first place in the Silver Cup.

But the machine was soon to be stopped... while overtaking, Jim Pla, leading Pro-AM in the #87, was unable to avoid contact and hit the wall head-on. Although the driver was luckily unhurt, the car was severely damaged. Retirement was unavoidable, and the Safety Car was called into action.

Unfortunately, a few minutes later, the rain was back. At the restart, Raffaele Marciello, on slicks, was unable to withstand the attacks from his rivals on rain tyres. The Italian driver fell back a few places before handing over to Michael Meadows, who this time went back out with wets on the car. It was a similar situation for the #90, when after a remarkable stint, Timur Boguslavskiy gave the car to Brazilian driver Felipe Fraga.



The AKKA-ASP drivers climbed back up to the front of the race. Michael Meadows was 5th, just ahead of Felipe Fraga, second in the Silver Cup. A ferocious battle was taking place for the championship points, as Michael Meadows was well aware. Unfortunately, going over a kerb in Ascari, a shock absorber gave way. It was another heavy blow for the team as the #88 had to give up.

But Felipe Fraga had not said his final word in the #90. His aim was to claim the Silver Cup victory, and that was what he would do. With a fantastic drive, he took the class lead fifteen minutes from the end of the race. Lying in fourth overall, the overall podium was within reach, but he took the decision not to risk his category win, and the Brazilian driver crossed the finish line with great relief, claiming his first victory in Europe.



For Jérôme Policand this first weekend was a learning experience: "Monza is never an easy event, and this weekend proved it again. Despite everything, we showed our speed: fastest in the dry, lap record, and two cars in the top four. All three cars put in a fantastic job, but our points score is rather disappointing. This first victory in Silver Cup is very nice, but the season is only just getting underway..."

The next Blancpain GT Series event will be at Brands Hatch on May 5th and 6th, for the first round of the Blancpain GT World Challenge Europe (formerly the Sprint Cup). After the rain in Italy, will it be hot and dry in England?



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