



INFORMATIONS

DEPARTEMENT COMMUNICATION

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Sunday Testing – First Session

After weeks of anticipation and two days of technical inspection of almost every aspect of the cars, the action finally moved on to where it counts – the circuit. At 9:00 am precisely, the first cars hit the track at the start of a four-hour test session.

First out was the No.93 Scuderia Ecosse Ferrari 360, with Andrew Kirkaldy at the wheel. As a newcomer to Le Mans, Andrew needs to complete ten laps today, so the team set out to get that task out of the way before moving on to more general testing. First to complete a lap in the session was Harold Primat in the No.8 Rollcentre Racing Dallara-Nissan.

Over the first few minutes, most cars went out and returned to the pits immediately, doing a lap of the 13.65 km/8.48 mile circuit to check out the systems. The first driver to start lapping seriously was Soheil Ayari, going round in the low 3:40s bracket in the No.17 Pescarolo-Judd.

Ten minutes later, British fans had something to cheer about when the two Aston Martin DBR9 cars came out of the pits. The honour of completing the first lap went to Stéphane Sarrazin in the No.59 car he is sharing with David Brabham and Darren Turner, closely followed by Tomas Enge, at the wheel of the No.58 he is crewing with Peter Kox and Pedro Lamy.

By 10:00am, after an hour's running, competition for the lead of the various classes had started to hot up. In the main LMP1 category, Pescarolo Sport had the upper hand, the No.17 Pescarolo-Judd of Loeb/Helary/Ayari leading on 3:36.394, just under a second ahead of the sister car No.16 of Collard/Boullion/Comas, with the No.18 Rollcentre Racing Dallara-Judd of Short/Barbosa/Ickx third. The No.25 RML MG-Lola of Erdos/Newton/Hughes led the LMP2 category in ninth overall, almost fifteen seconds off the quickest time, but over four seconds ahead of the No.39 Chamberlain Synergy Lola-AER of Evans/Berridge/Owen.

The Aston Martins had already confirmed their pre-race status as amongst the favourites in GT1, the Brabham/Sarrazin/Turner car in twelfth overall, two seconds clear of the Kox/Lamy/Enge DBR9. In GT2, first and second spots were held by Porsche 911 GT3 RSRs, the No.90 White Lightning Petersen/Long/Bernhard – last year's winning car – ahead of the No.76 Raymond Narrac team car of Dumas/Dumez/Narrac.

Over the course of the session numerous cars had incidents, all of them fairly minor. The Dunlop Chicane and the descent beyond the Dunlop Bridge seemed particularly troublesome, with cars spinning into the gravel traps but all being able to continue after being hauled out. There was also a rash of punctures, possibly caused by debris on the circuit.

Up to midday, the two Pescarolo cars continued to make small improvements to their lap times; in the second hour the Collard/Boullion/Comas car went to the top of the timesheets with a 3:34.617, and over the next hour the Loeb/Helary/Ayari car managed a lap in 3:35.893 to retain second overall; neither improved over the final hour of the session.

Regulation changes imposing more restrictive limits on older cars could be having an impact on the three Audi R8 cars here this year. However, the quickest still managed third overall; the No.2 Champion Racing car of Biela/Pirro/McNish was over 6s slower than the lead

Pescarolo, lapping in 3:40.652, but it was fractionally quicker than the No.3 sister car of Lehto/Werner/Kristensen.

In LMP2 there was a clear leader; the No.25 RML Lola-MG of Erdos/Newton/Hughes, which hovered on the fringes of the top ten for the entire session. At the end, they wound up eleventh overall, their 3:45.668 almost 1.5s ahead of their nearest competitor, the No.32 Intersport Racing Lola-AER of Fiske/Halliday/Hancock. Third in class, a further 1.5s back, was the No.37 Paul Belmondo Courage-Ford of Belmondo/Andre/Sutherland.

It was first blood to the Aston Martin squad in GT1, who led the category for almost the entire session. The Brabham/Sarrazin/Turner DBR9 claimed seventeenth overall with a time of 3:52.619. The trio always had an edge over the sister car of Kox/Lamy/Enge, which ended the session 1.7s back. Third went to the No.64 Corvette C6-R of Gavin/Beretta/Magnussen, almost 2.5s back from the leading Aston Martin. It was no surprise to Corvette Racing Programme Manager Doug Fehan:

“Oh, those guys are going to be the fast guys,” he admitted, “We never win the pole. But that’s not what’s important,” he added with a smile.

The top three places in GT2 were monopolised by Porsche 911 GT3 RSR cars; quickest was the White Lightning squad of Petersen/Long/Bernhard, 34th overall on 4:04.915. They had a 1.6s advantage over the No.71 Alex Job entry, driven by Rockenfeller/Lieb/Hindery, while third in class went to the Raymond Narac crew of Dumas/Dumez/Narac.

It is worth noting that not every driver mentioned is actually here for test day. When a driver has recent Le Mans experience, then attendance for the test session is optional. A couple of the experienced drivers are in Brno for the DTM race, for instance. One driver who *has* to be in Le Mans is reigning world rally champion Sébastien Loeb. His problem is that until late this Sunday morning, he was busy winning the Turkish WRC round. A carefully-orchestrated combination of a helicopter, a private plane and a fast car has been arranged so that he can jump into the Pescarolo he will share with Soheil Ayari and Eric Hélary and complete the ten laps that are required of every first-time Le Mans driver – some rookie!