

Communiqué n° 1

13/06/2005 21 :30 hrs

First qualifying/practice session (19:00 – 21:00 hrs June 15, 2005)

The first practice and qualifying session for the 73rd 24 Heures du Mans saw a dry start followed by heavy rain, a red flag session of twenty minutes following a high-speed crash that left the driver unhurt but the car damaged, a promising first outing for Sébastien Loeb, a Japanese car at the top of the leaderboard, a demonstration of skill by six-time winner Tom Kristensen and a French car and driver at the head of the listings when it was over.

19:00 hrs

The Scuderia Ecosse Ferrari was in place at the pit exit ten minutes ahead of the official start time of 19:00 hrs. The Scottish team was determined to be first on the track and it was, followed by a gaggle of cars all determined to make the most of the time available.

Just ten minutes into the session, the rain began to fall across the whole of the circuit, but it didn't worry the Racing for Holland Dome driven by wet-weather specialist Jan Lammers, who set a time of 4'36.391 to head the time-sheets at the end of the first quarter-hour of practice.

19:40 hrs

The rain became heavier as the first session progressed; cars were now all on wet-weather tyres and using their headlamps, as much to be seen as to see. Lammers was soon displaced from top of the leaderboard by Collard in the No 16 Pescarolo-Judd. The local French team was showing early that the pre-race talk about the speed of the 'hybrid' cars was correct, but in second place was Finnish ace JJ Lehto in the Champion Racing Audi R8. He was showing that when the weather plays a part, an experienced hand at the wheel is very useful.

First to spin in the wet was Nicholas Minassian in the No 7 DBA-Judd, who went off at Mulsanne. He got the car going again, but returned to his pit slowly complaining of fuel-feed problems

20:00 hrs

The red flag was shown to call a halt to the first practice session at 19:49 hrs, following an accident to the No 39 Lola-AER of Chamberlain-Synergy Motorsport driven by Peter Owen. Owen was unhurt as the car spun off on the Mulsanne straight.

American Le Mans Series founder Don Panoz, interviewed about the weather, said: "The weather at Le Mans is always unpredictable, and it's one of the things that makes the race the world's greatest endurance event."

The two Aston Martins were on the course when the flag came out; the No 58 car of Enge/Kox/Lamy was a little late out of the pits after a minor electrical problem meant it would not start. It was soon fixed, however, and the car set out with 38 minutes of the session run.

20:20 hrs

The red flag was withdrawn at 20:10 hrs after the track was cleared following the accident involving the Lola-AER driven by Peter Owen. The pause in practice had lasted 20 minutes.

The rain was still falling and catching out some of the drivers, with the No 20 Pilbeam-JPX entered by the French Pierre Bruneau team and the No 52 Ferrari 550 Maranello of BMS Scuderia Italia both spinning without harm.

The alternator was being changed on the No.8 Rollcentre Racing - Dallara Nissan. Team owner (and co-driver) Martin Short said: "There's not much point to take out the No. 18 Rollcentre Racing - Dallara Judd.

20:40 hrs

The fastest time so far was down to Ryo Michigami in the No 5 Dome S101 HB – Mugen, who lapped in 4:17.340, but his time at the top of the heap was spoiled by a spin at the Michelin chicane, the second on the Mulsanne straight.

Rally star Sébastien Loeb went out in the No 17 Pescarolo-Judd and immediately came to terms with the conditions, holding fourth place at one point with a time of 4:21.938.

21:00 hrs

Just before the first practice session ended No 16 Pescarolo-Judd, driven by Emmanuel Collard, spun, but the French driver still held on to the fastest time so far, despite pressure from Kristensen in the No 2 Champion Racing Audi R8.

In GT1 the Ferraris were making the early running, with two 550 Maranellos ahead of the leading Aston Martin, the No 58 car of Enge, Kox and Lamy. But in the final minutes of the session the dice were thrown again and the second Aston, No 59, driven by Brabham, Sarrazin and Turner pulled ahead. But not by enough to displace the No 61 Cirtek Motorsport Ferrari 550 Maranello from the head of the GT1 list. It was lying eighth overall as the flag came out to end the session.