

Communiqué n°

18/06/2005 19h00

16h – 19h

The final preliminaries of the 73rd running of the 24 Hours of Le Mans got under way at 15:26 hrs. when the green flag was waved to indicate that the track was open. Cars pulled away to do almost a full lap of the 13.650km circuit; at the end of which they could either run slowly through the pit-lane and set off on another lap, or head for their appointed slot on the grid.

Last-minute drama. The No. 69 JMB Ferrari 575 GTC had to be push-started; it will be interesting to see how the team cope with their first pit-stop. There was more drama for the No. 8 Rollcentre Dallara Nissan; this car did not line up on the start-finish straight as the team completed a late engine-change. The change was complete by 15:30 hrs, but agonisingly the car then refused to rev; the team diagnosed an electrical problem and were forced to start yet another engine change. Finally, the No. 23 Gerard Welter WR failed to take up its grid slot, starting the race from the pit lane.

The No. 36 Belmondo Courage Ford had to be pushed off the grid when the engine failed to start. It was pushed into pit-lane and back to its garage to have the battery changed.

The race got underway at the traditional start time of precisely 16:00 hrs. The pace car led the grid around the 13.650 km circuit so that the pole sitting No. 16 Pescarolo Judd crossed the start line at exactly the right moment. Ahead of the teams were over 5,000 kms of racing. As an added complication, the race is set to be run under scorching conditions, with temperatures well over 30 Celsius on both days.

As the cars roared up the start-finish straight the No. 16 Pescarolo Judd took the lead from pole with Jean-Christophe Boullion at the wheel, ahead of Soheil Ayari in the sister No. 17 Pescarolo Judd. Ryo Michigami, in the No. 5 Jim Gainer International Dome-Mugen, found a way past the No. 2 Champion Audi to claim third on the opening lap.

The Aston Martin DBR9 pair swapped over from their grid positions, the No. 59 Aston Martin DBR9 going past the sister No. 58 Aston Martin DBR9 to become the leading LM GT1 entry. Remarkably, on lap 3, Darren Turner managed to overtake the No. 37 Belmondo Courage Ford, which was running second in LMP2 – the class leader was the No. 32 Intersport Lola AER.

At the end of the opening lap the No. 10 Racing for Holland Dome Judd, with Jan Lammers driving, came into the pit-lane and took on a significant amount of fuel. The class lead in LM GT2 also changed hands, Bill Auberlen taking the No. 77 Panoz Elan to the front, ahead of the No. 71 Alex Job Porsche 911 GT3 RSR – a sizable achievement for a front engined car.

One of the favourites in the LMP2 class, the No. 25 RML Lola MG, endured a torrid start to the race. Tommy Erdos brought the car into the pits at the end of the second lap because of high engine temperatures, going out again shortly afterwards. However, he then brought it in at the end of the next lap with the same problem, again rejoining. The two Pescarolo entries set a searing pace at the front of the field despite the heat, lapping almost five seconds quicker than the third-placed car, opening up a 22-second lead after only four laps.

The troubled times for the No. 25 RML Lola MG continued, Tommy Erdos bringing the car slowly back to the pits at 16:20 hrs and going straight into the garage. Only a minute later came a blow for the No. 59 Aston Martin DBR9 leading the LM GT1 class as Darren Turner was hit with a stop-and-go penalty for hitting a marker cone. By 16:25 hrs the RML squad had diagnosed the problems being suffered by the No. 25 RML Lola MG as being gearbox-related; the team were forced to change the gear selector, which took just over ten minutes.

After just 29 minutes and eight laps, Soheil Ayari brought the second-placed No. 17 Pescarolo Judd in for what appeared to be a routine refuelling stop, rejoining down in eight place just ahead of the No. 13 Courage Judd.

At 16:32 hrs Darren Turner brought the No. 59 Aston Martin DBR9 in for his stop-and-go penalty. The rules prevented him from then stopping in his pit, so he headed back to the track. The time lost dropped him to third in LM GT1, handing the class lead to the sister No. 58 Aston Martin DBR9 and allowing Ollie Gavin in the No. 64 Corvette C6-R to move up to second. Just over a minute later, at the end of lap 9, Jean-Christophe Boullion brought the No. 16 Pescarolo Judd in from the lead for a refuelling stop, as per the sister car a lap earlier. That handed the overall lead to the No. 5 Jim Gainer International Dome-Mugen.

The top two in LMP2 did not change over the first 20 minutes, the No. 32 Intersport Lola AER still running ahead of the No. 37 Belmondo Courage Ford. In LM GT2 the

No. 77 Panoz Elan continued to hold the lead, still ahead of the No. 71 Alex Job Porsche 911 GT3 RSR as the first round of pit stops began to take place.

At 16:40 hrs Ryo Michigami brought the race-leading No. 5 Jim Gainer International Dome-Mugen into the pits – however, this wasn't just a routine stop as the driver had a problem with the paddle gearshift; the team lost a lap sorting the problem out. At the same time the No. 25 RML Lola MG returned to the pits for the fourth time, clearly still suffering technical problems.

The first round of pit stops caused a flurry of activity, with both No. 2 Champion Audi and No. 4 Audi Playstation Team Oreca Audi coming into pit-lane together from second and third overall; the changes saw Jean-Christophe Boullion resume the lead in the No. 16 Pescarolo Judd, with the No. 17 Pescarolo Judd sister car back up to second. After just 12 laps the Pescarolo duo had amassed a lead of almost a minute.

The race organisers are being very strict about crossing the white lines that indicate the edge of the circuit, handing out stop-and-go penalties to the No. 92 Cirtek Motorsport Ferrari 360 Modena GTC and No. 85 Spyker C8 Spyder.

At 16:45 third and fourth in LM GT1 came in almost together for routine stops, third-placed No. 59 Aston Martin DBR9 coming an ahead of No. 63 Corvette C6-R. Three minutes later the leading pair came in, with Peter Kox in the No. 58 Aston Martin DBR9 only a second ahead of Ollie Gavin in the No. 64 Corvette C6-R. It was close, but Gavin made it out ahead of Kox to claim the LM GT1 class lead in eleventh overall – first blood to Corvette in the pit-stop battle.

The crew of the No. 8 Rollcentre Dallara Nissan continued to be unable to get the engine to rev; the regulations state that had the car not left the pit-lane by 17:00 hrs it would be excluded. At 16:54 hrs Michael Krumm limped out of the pit-lane agonisingly slowly to meet the deadline, crawling around the circuit at no more than tickover. Phil Bennett, in the No. 30 Kruse Motorsport Courage Judd, took the lead in LMP2, already a lap down after less than an hour and just seconds ahead of the No. 37 Belmondo Courage Ford. The LM GT2 class lead also changed hands, with Mike Rockenfeller in the No. 71 Alex Job Porsche 911 GT3 RSR going ahead of the No. 77 Panoz Elan, which now has Robin Liddell at the wheel.

After the first hour the leading cars in each category are as follows:

LMP1

1. No. 16 Pescarolo Judd, Boullion

2. No. 17 Pescarolo Judd, Ayari
3. No. 2 Champion Audi, Pirro

LMP2

1. No. 30 Kruse Motorsport Courage Judd, Bennett
2. No. 37 Belmondo Courage Ford, Andre
- 3.No. 33 Intersport Courage AER, Zlobin

GT1

1. No. 64 Corvette C6-R, Gavin
2. No. 59 Aston Martin DBR9, Turner
3. No. 58 Aston Martin DBR9, Kox

GT2

1. No. 71 Alex Job Porsche 911 GT3 RSR, Lieb
2. No. 76 Raymond Narac Porsche 911 GT3 RSR, Narak
3. No. 80 Flying Lizard Porsche 911 GT3 RSR, Van Overbeek

The ambient temperature was still above 30 ° C and showing no signs of cooling off yet.. The No. 25 RML Lola MG worries carried on but the car got out of its garage and was running. After the delay, it was running last on the track with the No. 8 Rollcentre Dallara Nissan back in the pits..

Just after 17:00 hrs the No. 23 Gerard Welter WR arrived in the pits with a clutch problem. There have been a surprising number of 'Stop-Go' penalties, mostly to do with hitting cones. It came as no surprise that the No. 25 RML Lola MG came back inot the pits with continuing cooling problems. The No.8 Rollcentre Dallara Nissan managed to limp back in the pits for more work.

The excitement was building up nicely in GT1, as the Turner in the No. 59 Aston Martin DBR9 passed Gavin's No. 64 Corvette C6-R . They carried on racing neck and neck. The top three GT1 cars were just 4.5 secs apart at 17:10 hrs in what was shaping up to be a great battle.

In GT2, Auberlen brought the No. 77 Panoz Elan in for an unscheduled stop. The team removed the front body work and taped up various bits of body work, in the process, losing the class lead. A gardening trip into the gravel traps? This put the No. 71 Alex Job Porsche 911 GT3 RSR into the Class lead.

Fifteen minutes after the hour, the No. 64 Corvette C6-R Corvette suffered a puncture at Mulsanne and had to struggle back to the pits. It was a long, slow trip back to the pits as the left rear tyre gradually fell to bits. Fortunately, it did not look as if there had been serious damage to the bodywork.

By 17:21 hrs, the No. 64 Corvette C6-R was back in the race after its puncture, with Beretta at the wheel. There was rumour of a water leak but that came to nothing. The No. 77 Panoz Elan, with Liddell driving, arrived in the pits again; the marshals having insisted on a more substantial repair to replace the tank tape used earlier. Twenty-five minutes into the hour, Cochet brought the No. 13 Courage Judd back into the pits with clutch problems again and the fear was that the engine might have to come out to sort it out.. The No. 59 Aston Martin DBR9, still being driven by Darren Turner, was in trouble with race officials again, after either hitting marker cones again or having four wheels over the white lines. This was his second offence, so he had to stop for three minutes on the penalty. A third offence could bring exclusion from the race. Turner then went through the gravel traps and pitted again to hand over to Sarrazin. The No. 58 Aston Martin DBR9 driven by Kox was having a steadier race and still led the GT1 Class.

No. 8 Rollcentre Dallara Nissan team owner and co-driver Martin Short commented that there are still all sorts of problems with the car, which will not yet run properly. He thought the cause might have been a faulty crankcase sensor.