

MICHAEL STEPHEN SUPREME IN ZWARTKOPS SUMMER SUNSHINE

REVIEW: SA GT NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP – RD 1 AND 2

ZWARTKOPS RACEWAY

4TH MARCH 2023

Michael Stephen dominated the opening rounds of the SAGT National Championship at Zwartkops Raceway when the Southern African Endurance Championship decamped at the Pretoria circuit for the first time.

Stephen honed his car to his liking during the four free practice sessions on Friday ahead of the late afternoon qualifying session and his hard work paid off, claiming pole position by a substantial margin over the chasing pack.

Andrew Culbert upheld Mercedes-AMG's honour with his best result to date, ending as runner-up twice in his rumbling Bigfoot Express machine as he scooped double ProAM class honours while Scuderia Scribante had a weekend best forgotten.

Practice and Qualifying:

While Stephen honed his Ultimate Outlaws Audi R8 LMS Evo2 into an effective weapon, he also helped set up the two Ultimate Outlaws McLaren MP4-12C entries of Izak Spies and Roelf du Plessis.

Stephen set a blistering time of 58.976 seconds to claim pole position by a full second from the reigning SAGT Champion Silvio Scribante's Cemza Cement Lamborghini Huracan GT3 Evo.

Culbert duly took third on the grid ahead of Aldo Scribante's Scribante Concrete Lamborghini Huracan GT3. Scribante's Huracan Evo suffered electrical problems during testing in the week before the race, and with parts ordered but not received in time, he borrowed Dad Aldo Sr's Huracan, a pre-Evo model.

Hein Lategan put his BBR Porsche 991 GT3 in fifth on the grid, ahead of Roelf du Plessis and Izak Spies' Ultimate Outlaws machines.

Newcomer Joseph Ellerine rounded out the grid in his MJR Motorsport Audi R8 GT4 on his debut in the SAGT Championship.

Race 1:

Silvio Scribante peeled into the pits at the end of the formation lap, parking his Cemza Lamborghini with terminal fuel injector issues.

Stephen put the hammer down from the moment the lights turned green, reveling in the handling of his Audi. His lap times were consistently in the 60 second mark, dipping occasionally into the 59 second bracket.

As the fuel load lightened and the tyres wore out, the Audi was still immaculate allowing Stephen to set his fastest race time on his very last lap, posting a qualifying style lap of 59.625 seconds.

Andrew Culbert was delighted with his second place overall and first place in the ProAM class, having run consistent times while nursing the big Mercedes' brakes and tyres in the hot conditions.

Culbert and Aldo had a moment approaching turn eight when Aldo locked up while defending against Culbert. While Aldo's attention was invested in keeping the car on the track, Culbert shoved the nose of his car down the inside and claimed the position.

Although Aldo Scribante missed the aerodynamic advantage of his Huracan Evo, damage limitation saw him bag third place points at the beginning of the season.

Race 2:

Starting from pole, Stephen once again blasted his Audi into the lead, the multiple SA champion driver reveling in the Audi's consistent handling, once again grinding out laps in the sixty second mark.

Stuart White, in the Into Africa Lamborghini Huracan GT3 Evo chased Stephen hard after carving his way through the pack, catching, and passing the Audi in a surgical move on lap five. White quickly opened a gap on the Audi before the team elected to retire the Lambo having repaired it after a practice incident and run it to second place in the SA Endurance race earlier.

Culbert was a delighted second overall after a cautious race spent nursing his brakes and tyres. As the Mercedes became a bit of a handful, Culbert pitted and the one minute stop allowed the tyres to cool sufficiently to restore the Mercedes' on-rails handling.

On lap four, Henk Lategan - having flown in from the Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge on the morning of the race – touched Aldo Scribante, spinning the black Lamborghini around. Ten minutes into the race, Aldo pitted, handing his car over to his brother Silvio to allow the champion to bank some points at this early stage of the season.

Roelf du Plessis raced his Ultimate Outlaws McLaren MP4-12C to fourth place, the old-school V8 racer doing well in his first outing in the sophisticated British car.

The next rounds of the SAGT National Championship take place at Red Star Raceway on 28 and 29 April.

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