

SAES AUTUMN MOTORSPORT FESTIVAL DELIVERS RED-HOT ACTION AT RED STAR

REVIEW: SA ENDURANCE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP RD -2

SA GT NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP – RD 3 AND 4

RED STAR RACEWAY – 28 – 29 APRIL 2023

Under warm skies, the SA Endurance Series gathered at Red Star Raceway outside Delmas in Mpumalanga for the second round of the SA Endurance National Championship and rounds three and four of the SA GT National Championship.

With the addition of the Silvercup Challenge to the race programme for the first time, fans were in for a treat.

Southern African Endurance Series brought another novelty to their series, running the second SAGT race during the first hour of the SA Endurance 3-Hour race, which added a new dimension to the event.

SAGT honours were shared between Michael Stephen and Silvio Scribante while the SA Endurance race saw a tense fight between the two Porsche entries from BBR Racing and Stradale Motorsport and a new winner on the top step of the Index of Performance podium.

Qualifying:

Many of the drivers were new to the 4km circuit and spent the practice sessions finding their way around the 13- corner facility but when qualifying got underway on late Friday afternoon, it was Riaan Botma who blitzed the timing screens in his Auto Investments Ligier-Honda JS53 Evo, setting a time of 1:53.4 on his second lap of the weekend.

Hein/Henk Lategan/Verissimo Tavares lined up on the front row of the grid in their BBR Porsche 911 GT3 Cup followed closely by the older Stradale Racing Porsche 997 GT3 Cup of Charl Arangies and Arnold Neveling.

Joseph Ellerine/Leyton Fourie planted their MJR Motorsport Audi R8 GT4 in fourth followed by the brand new prototype Backdraft Beast, powered by a 7 liter Chevy motor. In sixth was the Cape town-based Juno-Nissan of Byron Mitchell/Peter van der Spuy and the two Class D contenders Jurie Swart/Karah Hill and VW Motorsport's Daniel Rowe/Graeme Nathan, both teams in Polo GTis.

Heading the class E fight was Andrew Horne/Gerald Buys (Xena Nash-VW) and seven Backdraft Roadsters, the fastest of which was the Mad Max entry of Brendon Dean/Barry Ingle, followed by Benjamin/Crisjan/Ben Sr Morgenrood, defending Class E Champions Harm/Barend Pretorius, the PPLE-Adapt entry of Philip Meyer, Mark Harvey and Dean Wolson, the factory Backdraft of Brian Martin/Trevor Graham, Tradecor Steel's CJ Blackman, Jean-Paul Briner and Anthony Hoare with Team Qhubani's Fikile Holomisa/Bapi Rubuluza rounding out the grid.

Series owner Xolile Letlaka and Stuart White failed to qualify their Into Africa McLaren 650S after electrical problems stopped the car on track.

SAGT qualifying saw Michael Stephen set a new GT3 fastest ever lap at Red Star, hurtling his Ultimate Outlaws Audi R8 LMS GT3 Evo to a time of 1:48.005, a clear 1.7 seconds ahead of the reigning SAGT Champion Silvio Scribante (Cemza Cement Lamborghini Huracan GT3) and brother Aldo Scribante's similar Scribante Concrete Huracan.

Andrew Culbert, second on the championship points table, slotted his Bigfoot Express Mercedes-AMG GT3 into fourth, ahead of Paul Hill (Kalex Aston Martin Vantage GT) and Ultimate Outlaws twins Izak Spies and Roelf du Plessis, the latter battling to find his way around the clockwise-run circuit.

SAGT Race 1:

As the field headed to turn one, Culbert, who made a great start from the second row, braked a touch too late and tagged Silvio's car, pitching the yellow Lamborghini into a 180° spin. As the Mercedes driver tried to avoid him, he side-swiped the right rear corner, eliminating the champion from the race with terminal suspension damage.

Culbert pitted to repair bodywork damage, all of which left Stephen in an untroubled lead followed by Aldo Scribante, after taking to the grass to avoid the fracas unfolding in front of him at the first turn, followed by Roelf du Plessis in third, Paul Hill and Culbert, who was battling with brake issues.

Spies retired his McLaren with a failing clutch while White and Letlaka, now in the team's Aston Martin Vantage GT3, used the race as a test session to set up the unraced car for the Endurance race and pitted the British supercar after 10 laps.

SA Endurance Race/SAGT Race 2:

With the 25-car grid formed combining SAGT and SAE cars, it was Stephen on pole from Silvio and Aldo Scribante, Botma, Lategan, Hill, Culbert, Arangies the rest of the SAE teams.

The opening 20 minutes saw plenty of action as the SAGT cars quickly caught the slower SAE teams while Stuart White, who started from the back of the grid, quickly carved his way through the pack and 25 minutes into the race, was hot on the heels of race leader Michael Stephen.

It all came to naught though, for the Aston Martin retired just over halfway into the race with a broken clutch.

When the SAGT cars made their compulsory pit stop, Scuderia Scribante got Silvio out in double-quick time, while Stephen had traffic on his in lap and had a spin to avoid a slower SAE car, which was enough to change the race lead as Silvio Scribante emerged ahead once the race settled down again.

After the first hour and the end of the second SAGT race, Scribante was a delighted winner after a poor start to his title defense, having twice retired on the first lap in the last three races.

An exhausted Aldo Scribante completed the podium, followed by Roelf du Plessis, Marius Jackson (MJR Motorsport Audi R8 LMS Evo2) and Culbert's Mercedes.

Focus returned to the SA Endurance race, where the Lategan Porsche held sway over the Backdraft Beast with Arangies in third place and Rowe's Polo in a solid fourth.

When the first safety car was deployed, the leading GT car had lapped Arangies but not Lategan, allowing the BBR Porsche to catch the back of the pack, effectively gaining a lap over his rival. Pitting under the safety car, Tavares jumped in and caught the back of the train again.

The final stint belonged to Henk Lategan, who took a few laps to get up to speed, but once running strongly, quickly passed the Backdraft Beast that has assumed the lead and headed into the final hour with a 1.8 second advantage which he built into a 1:42 sec advantage by flag fall.

While the Arangies/Neveling Porsche had a pitstop advantage with a two-man crew versus the three driver line-up in the BBR camp, their challenge was blunted when plastic in the fuel rig meant Neveling was sent out without enough fuel to complete the race, and a late splash-and-dash would be required. The Stradale team knew their challenge for the win was over and second was the best result they could hope for.

Running a strong second and holding their own against the Stradale Porsche, McLoughlin brought the Backdraft in for a refuel but the car refused to re-start. Two laps were lost and the team dropped to third as the Arangies Porsche swept by; the problem was later diagnosed as an overheating fuel pump, which necessitated McLoughlin completing his stint with his finger pressed on the fuel pump switch.

Fourth overall was the Mitchell/van der Spuy Juno-Nissan; the pair suffered random fuel pressure issues which caused the car to lose power intermittently. The Red Star rookies benefitted from a safety car train which allowed them to close up on the fourth-placed Rowe/Nathan Polo and nip past once under green flag conditions.

The factory Volkswagen squad was nonetheless happy with their fifth place and class D victory given that this Polo is chassis #1, in essence a slower and heavier car than their regular endurance racer which was crated up and en route to the Simola Hillclimb.

Sixth overall and winning class E as well as the Index of Performance was the Xena Chemicals Nash-VW of a delighted Andrew Horne and Gerald Buys, recording their first finish in a year after a faultless race.

The Kalex VW Polo pair of Jurie Swart and Karah Hill ended seventh after losing four laps sorting out a braking issue. Once up and running safely they made up 1½ laps to end second in class and just two seconds ahead of the eighth placed PPLE/Adapt Backdraft of Mark Harvey/Philip Meyer/Dean Wolson.

The "Panda" Backdraft team lost communications and had no idea of their position and Harvey, running the final stint, set his fastest lap of the race on the final lap and bank second in class E as well as second in the Index of Performance ranking.

The Morgenrood trio brought their Ben Morgenrood Group Backdraft home in ninth overall, claiming the final class E podium place as well after what Ben Sr described as a “flawless race”.

Newcomers to the series competing in only their second ever race and the first time at Red Star, CJ Blackman/Jean Paul Briner (Tradecor Steel Backdraft) ended tenth overall, after backing off over the final stint with a worrying vibration in the car.

Brendon Dean/Barry Ingle brought their Mad Max Backdraft home in 11th position after a lengthy pitstop to investigate a vibration, this after replacing their rear diff after qualifying. Ten minutes before the end of Dean’s stint, the clutch failed and Ingle was stuck in fourth gear for the remainder of the race.

The final classified runner was the Joseph Ellerine/Leyton Fourie MJR Motorsport Audi GT4, who pitted just after half distance to investigate an electrical issue that caused the car to default to limp mode. Running repairs got the duo home though.

Unclassified but running at the chequered flag, Team Qhubani had a fraught race after a fuel tank strap broke which cost the team five laps to repair. Worse was to come when a sidschaft broke and although the team knuckled down to repair it, too many laps had been lost and Holomisa and Rubuluza remain pointless this season.

Defending class E and Index Champions Team Pesty had a torrid weekend. The car broke a diff in practice which bent the mountings. In the morning warm up, the rear mounting broke, which was again fixed for the race. An hour into the race, the right rear sidschaft broke and their race was run.

The first retirement was the factory Backdraft of Brian Martin/Trevor Graham lost a wheel as a result of a broken wheel bearing.

The SAES Winter Motorsport Festival is scheduled to take place at Phakisa Freeway in Welkom on 7 & 8 July.

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