

## **FIRE AND DRAMA IN CLOSING STAGE OF SEASON OPENER FOR SAE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS**

**Report: SAES National Championship Rd 1**

**Red Star Raceway, Delmas, 9<sup>th</sup> March**

Drama in the final moments of the SA Endurance Series season opener at Red Star Raceway, Delmas saw Henk Lategan take the chequered flag in the BBR Racing Porsche a mere 0,8 seconds ahead of the Promigen Audi - this after a brief fire aboard the Slingshot Backdraft of Steve Clark bring out the safety car.

With just one racing lap to go after the safety car left the track, Paul Hill tried everything he could but had too many backmarkers to pass to catch the Porsche.

Lategan, sharing with Heinrich Lategan and Verissimo Tavares gained the lead during the pit stop phase with half an hour of the race left to run and, at that point 44 seconds ahead of the Paul Hill/Bradley Liebenberg Audi with the Mike McLoughlin/Steve Clark Slingshot in second place.

"Absolutely heartbreaking," was how Mike McLoughlin described the events that robbed them of a podium position.

Consistency in endurance racing is a must and the Karah Hill /Jurie Swart pairing in the Kalex VW Polo proved that by finishing third overall, taking up the place after the Slingshot fire and having run for the majority of the race in fourth spot.

The consolation for Steve Clark was being able to nurse the Slingshot through to fourth overall ahead of the Mark Harvey/Dean Wolson/Philip Meyer Pple Group/Adapt Signage Backdraft that claimed the win in the Backdraft Roadster National Championship – the first win in the newly promoted class.

On Index of Performance, it was that car which claimed top honours from the McLoughlin/Clark Slingshot and the Tradecore Racing VW Golf of CJ Blackman/ Jean Paul Briner and Anthony Hoare ahead of Trevor Graham/Dan Hirsch (Backdraft) and Rosh Sooful/Denver Branders Race Co Backdraft).

### **PRACTICE**

With Highveld temperatures hovering around the 30-degree mark, the initial 3-hour open practice session was dominated by the Promigen Audi GT3 with Bradley Liebenberg posting a lap time of 1m52,343 to be 2,290 seconds quicker than Mike McLoughlin in the Chevy-powered Backdraft Slingshot he is sharing with Steve Clark.

A mere 0,69 seconds adrift was Henk Lategan aboard the BBR Racing 992 Cup car, partnered by Verissimo Tavares and Hein Lategan.

The Kalex VW Golf driven by Karah Hill was fourth quickest ahead of the Trinity VW Polo piloted by Nathan Hammond, this just ahead of the Andrew Horne Xena Chemicals/ Camtech SA Ligier that will be contesting the race-within-a-race in the form of a 1-hour dash.

The newly promoted V8 Roadster national championship contenders were headed by Fabienne Lanz, putting in a best lap of 2m09,770 and finishing the session 0,9 seconds ahead of Richard van Heerde with Barend Pretorius in the Pesty Racing entry a further 0,3 seconds back.

The heat did punish some of the Lexus V8 Backdraft Roadsters with Jean-Paul Briner being the first to feel the effects of an overheating powerplant that turned into a more serious oil pressure issue, necessitating a complete engine change.

“Some cars are running hotter than normal,” said Backdraft’s Brian Martin, “but we should be able to resolve that for official practice and the race – and the weather report predicts some rain in the latter stages of the race.”

Also going well was Fikile Holomisa who slotted into fourth place in the category just 0,34 seconds ahead of Setshaba Mashego.

## **QUALIFYING**

Bradley Liebenberg blitzed the qualifying session, posting a pole-setting time of 1m50,729 in the Promigen Audi GT3 to start ahead of the Slingshot Backdraft with the fastest time coming from Steve Clark 1,8 seconds behind pole.

Henk Lategan handled the session for the BBR Racing Porsche 992 to pick up third spot some 2,8 seconds quicker than the Samlin Racing Lamborghini driven in the session by Farhaan Basha and ahead of the Xena Chemicals Ligier of Andrew Horne.

With some of problems except for tyres not warming up quickly enough ironed out on the Kalex Polo, Jurie Swart still managed to claim sixth place ahead of the Mikaeel Pitamber Backdraft and Dawie van der Merwe (Samlin Racing VW Golf) and Damian Hammond in the second of the Samlin Racing Lamborghinis with David Franco’s Graphics Supply World VW Golf in 10<sup>th</sup> place from the Korridas VW Golf of Joao Martins.

## **Backdraft V8 Roadster**

Lonika Maartens was “on fire” as her driving partner Fabienne Lanz described it, putting their Backdraft on pole position in the Roadster category (and 11<sup>th</sup> overall) with a swift lap of 2min08,54 – but only 0,97 seconds ahead of Setshaba Mashego in the car he shares with Mark Owens.

Pesty Racing, with Barend Pretorius at the wheel qualified third quickest, running on the same tyres they used for the Nine Hours of Kyalami with a brand-new set ready for the race itself. The three-driver Ppl Group/Adapt signage Backdraft of Philip Meyer/Dean Wolson/Mark Harvey was fourth quickest ahead of the Dutchman/Browndeck Roofing car crewed by Gavin Rooke and Richard van Heerde.

“The car is running fine and new engine feels strong, so we are quite confident,” said Hammond.

Trevor Graham and Dan Hirsch were sixth fastest from the Team Qhubani pairing of Fikile Holomisa and Baphumze Rubuluza with the Tradecore Racing Backdraft of CJ Blackman/Jean Paul Briner and Anthony Hoare in eighth place and ahead of the KZN pairing of Rosh Sooful and Denver Branders.

“This is our first time at Red Star, so we are still trying to learn the track,” said Sooful. “The main aim for today is to finish the race.”

## **RACE**

Bradley Liebenberg used his pole position slot to good advantage to power the Audi into an early and growing lead as the opening laps unfolded with the main tussle a way back between McLoughlin in the Slingshot Backdraft and the BBR Racing Porsche.

Sadly, the Samlin Racing/Trinity Lamborghini suffered a terminal gearbox issue in the morning warmup and had to be withdrawn, while the Supacup Polo Nathan Hammond was in charge of, came in early when the fuel pump to the reserve tank failed, creating fuel starvation on some corners.

The team resolved the issue after a lengthy pitstop – and equally as long for the Korridas Golf that was pitted when the rubber bushings on the engine mountings failed and the whole drivetrain started to move forwards and backwards.

The first safety car was deployed around the half hour mark when Lonika Maartens had her Backdraft Roadster cut out and refuse to restart. It was towed back to the pits, tweaked and she was able to rejoin.

The next major issue of the race arrived for Pesty Racing just on the hour mark and the team was forced to change both fuel pumps when the car started to lose fuel pressure.

As the clock ticked past the first hour of racing, Liebenberg’s Audi had completed 31 laps and was a lap ahead of Heinrich Lategan in the BRR Porsche who, in turn had gained a lap on the McLoughlin Slingshot.

Running fourth on the road was Andrew Horne in the Ligier and the sole competitor in the 1-hour sprint so as soon as he pulled off to collect the winners' accolades, Karah Hill moved the Kalex Volkswagen into the vacant slot ahead of Richard van Heerde who was then the leader in the Backdraft Roadster category.

Moving on through the first round of tyre changes and fuel stops, the Audi continued to lead but on 90 minutes Lategan has reduced the deficit to just 11,7 seconds with McLoughlin holding station in third place some 48 seconds adrift of the leader.

Karah Hill was staying steady in fourth place with Kishoor Pitamber in a Class B Backdraft now up to fifth place on the road ahead of the new leader in the Roadster class, Dean Wolson with Dan Hirsch in seventh spot followed by Roberto Franco in the Graphix Supply World VW Polo and Anthony Hoare in the Tradecore Racing Backdraft completing the top 10.

The problems for Pesty Racing were not over and the car pitted once again, this time the problem traced to the earth on the dual fuel pump system – the team electing to do a complete change to new high-pressure pumps and to use the remainder of the race as a test session.

Further drama unfolded when the Team Qhubani Backdraft stopped near Turn 8 with flames coming from the front end.

"I think it was a steering pipe because the flames appeared every time, I hit the brakes and started to turn," said Baphumze Rubuluza.

There were also problems for the Van Heerde Backdraft and the car was brought into the pits for a rear differential change – all of this shaking up the midfield order as the Audi continued to rack up the laps.

Crossing through the halfway mark of the race, Liebenberg continued his domination of proceedings, having opened up the gap on the Porsche, now with Verissimo Tavares at the wheel and a lap adrift of the flying 'green spectre'.

Steve Clark in the Slingshot Backdraft was in third place one lap further back with Jurie Swart having taken over duties in the Kalex Volkswagen in fourth place ahead of Kishoor Pitamber, Dean Wolson, Roberto Franco, Mark Owens, Trevor Graham and Anthony Hoare.

Behind them Rosh Sooful continued to run at a steady pace and Fabienne Lanz, battling to recover from a bout of flu, was trying to recover some of the ground lost early in the race.

Sadly, for the Pitamber pairing overheating brakes meant they had to slow the pace and they started to drop back, forsaking fifth place for ninth as the race passed through the 2,5 hour mark, although they retained fourth place overall in Class A.

Going towards the final hour of the race the single pitstop strategy by the Slingshot team paid handsomely and Steve Clark leapfrogged the two cars ahead of him to lead the race, initially with a 13 second advantage over Paul Hill in the Audi but then the car briefly had a gearbox issue that slowed them through turns 1 and 2 – enough for the Henk Lategan Porsche to seize the advantage and move itself into the lead.

“The Audi is catching us, so it’s going to be a close one at the finish,” said Mike McLoughlin.

For the Pitamber family though, the day was done with a differential failure finally sidelining their car.

Those prophetic words from McLoughlin then turned to disbelief with the big fire that put the car out of contention and off the podium, turning the whole race on its head.

The next round of the National SAES Championship takes place on 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> April at Zwartkops Raceway.

Issued by Eric Buijs (Media Officer SAES)

[eric@saeseries.com](mailto:eric@saeseries.com)

+27 82 66 246 10