



What did we learn from the 8 Hours of Le Castellet? 2010 has all the hallmarks thus far of a brilliant season, with Audi battling it out with reigning champion Aston Martin Racing, and ORECA-Matmut moving forward to challenge both of them with the Peugeot 908 HDi FAP.

The first victory from Audi with the R15 Plus, a very successful debut of the ARX-01 in Europe, a practice session for Larbre Compétition in GT1 and a brilliant race from Porsche finishing in a GT2 victory.

The intensive off-season development work has obviously paid off for the bulk of the teams, as very few teams retired. The race has been very exciting till the end on the 5.791 km legendary track.

FIRST RACE AND FIRST WIN FOR THE NEW AUDI

Allan McNish reminded everyone of his class as a driver with his brilliant passing moves on Stéphane Sarrazin and Stefan Mücke at the very beginning of the race. Audi took the victory - not a prediction many would have made ahead of Sunday's season opener in Le Castellet, but Audi's drivers have praised the performance of the new R15. Reliability has been good, and so has the speed, suggesting that the German car manufacturer is very well placed to claim another victory in one month at Spa, even if Peugeot should come back stronger. If Stéphane Sarrazin and the ORECA-Matmut Peugeot 908 HDi FAP was on pole yesterday, a mechanical issue put an early end to the hope of victory, and the expected duel came to a sudden end.

The race has been flawless for the German team, as Allan McNish explained: "This is very special because this is the first victory of a new car. I think we equaled the record – with the R8, the R10 and the R15 we took the victory at the very first race. We had good grip and the car was nice to drive. The race was tough because we didn't test so much."

Would Aston Martin Racing carry on where they left off in 2009? It may seem a reasonable assumption, given the speed and reliability that the British team has shown today on the Paul Ricard circuit. Stefan Mücke briefly led the race at the beginning after a move on Stéphane Sarrazin and Allan McNish, but the Scottish driver overtook again almost immediately. Second place was perhaps a surprise because the #009 car was not as fast as the ORECA-Matmut Peugeot, but reliability is as important as speed.

Stefan Mücke explained: "The race has not been easy for us because we had to push for the whole race. We didn't expect such a good result. This is a bit of a surprise. We had a small problem at the end, but the car has been good and consistent."

Rebellion Racing recovered extremely well after their engine problems on Friday morning. The team from Switzerland could not run for the second practice session because they had to change the engine. The team had made a big step forward over the winter, and can be happy with their progress although Jean-Christophe Boullion only set the qualifying session's fifth best time yesterday.

Jean-Christophe Boullion was surprised to be on the podium: "I am delighted because I joined a new team over the winter. The team did a great job because we had no problem on the car. We were not expecting a podium after the practice sessions – we didn't have the speed to be on the podium."

STRAKKA RACING TURNS THE TABLES

The LMP2 category saw the first ever victory of a Honda Performance Development ARX 01 on this side of the Atlantic. Great preparation and teamwork from Strakka Racing allowed Danny Watts, Jonny Kane and Nick Leventis to put up a memorable drive especially when they had to recover from a mechanical issue. The 1.44.989 qualifying lap put by Danny Watts was impressive as was the evolution of Nick Leventis that picked up a lot of speed to drive a solid race to the win together with his teammates. Strakka Racing claimed another trophy this weekend with the Michelin Green X Challenge, which means that the British team has been the best performer while using the least amount of fuel.



Danny Watts was delighted after the race: "We spent 12 minutes in the pits and we had to fight back. Every lap was a qualifying lap and the car was flying. The tires were perfect. The team kept me posted with the gap, but after I took the lead, I could control the pace."

Two cars challenged the British prototype seriously during the race - the OAK Racing Pescarolo-Judd from Richard Hein and Guillaume Moreau and the RML Lola-HPD from Tommy Erdos, Mike Newton and Andy Wallace. What a big surprise for the French team! An engine failure claimed the #35 car on Friday morning and the car started the race from the pit-lane as it didn't run for the qualifying session. RML is glad to be back on the podium after a very bitter season last year due to many engine failures.

Team Applewood Seven finally claimed the trophy in the Formula Le Mans class. A few laps before the end of the race, David Zollinger took the lead after Mathias Beche spun. So Hope Pole Vision finished second, two laps ahead of Dams third.

PORSCHE WINS THE FIRST BATTLE

The Larbre Compétition Saleen was the only car in the GT1 class and the three drivers tested the car in race conditions as the opposition will be back at Spa. The checkered flag was a relief for Patrice Goueslard, who has been hit by a prototype during the warm-up this morning and by another one during the race.

The GT2 class is getting stronger and stronger with 13 cars, and all of them can fight for the podium. Today, the winner is Porsche and the reigning champion Team Felbermayr-Proton. Richard Lietz qualified second yesterday but took the lead early in the race thanks to a good strategy as Marc Lieb said: "I am very, very happy to be here because a damper broke at the front and the car was jumping a lot. Fortunately, it was not too difficult to drive, and the Ferrari had to pit one more time. For us, this is a 1-2 victory."

Jean Alesi was on the podium for his first race in sportscars with his AF Corse Ferrari. "The race was long! But Giancarlo and I had a very good teacher with Toni Vilander. I had a good fight at the beginning of the race because all the GT2s were running together. Then I had traffic and it is new for me. It is good to be here."



In conformity with the regulations, as the first competitors completed more than 1 500 kilometers during the race, the points allocated for the 8 Hours of le Castellet are multiplied by 2, excepted the points allocated to the teams for the pole position.

PAST AND FUTURE IN SUPPORT RACES

The former stars are still very popular, and the Classic Endurance Racing paddock was overcrowded this weekend, as it normally is. Once again Lolas and Porsches fought fiercely till the end for the victory. Defending champion Jean-Marc Luco and his Porsche 936 Martini Racing team, who won the series early in the season last year, couldn't do better than second, as Patrice Lafargue claimed the trophy with his Lola T298 for the great pleasure of race-fans.

No less than 49 cars were on the entry list of the Formula Ford Historic races. Many famous drivers began their career on this kind of car, but an end was put a few years ago to the series. Nowadays, gentlemen drivers can enjoy racing their own car at reasonable costs. Daniel Carugati and Jean-Michel Ogier finished first of the two first races of the six-event championship.

The youngsters could also be part of the event this weekend thanks to the F3 Euro Series. For the kick off of the eighth season, Edoardo Mortara, the 2008 runner-up, won the first race with Team Signature, which is also involved in the Le Mans Series. Alexander Sims, one of the 2009 best rookies, and ART Grand Prix did the same on Sunday for Race 2.

The next race will be round two of the Le Mans Series at Spa (Belgium) on Sunday, May 9.



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