

DE FERRAN WINS WILD FAREWELL RACE IN MONTEREY

MAZDA RACEWAY LAGUNA SECA

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Gil de Ferran rode into the sunset with a victory in his final race Saturday, and Patrón Highcroft Racing had its own special ride as well at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca to close the 2009 American Le Mans Series. De Ferran and Simon Pagenaud won the Monterey Sports Car Championships presented by Patrón after the retiring Brazilian legend's thrilling duel with Adrian Fernandez in the final 30 minutes of the four-hour classic.

De Ferran beat his long-time open-wheel competitor by just 0.662 seconds to close his fantastic career. The victory was the fifth of the season for the de Ferran Motorsports Acura ARX-02a and by far the toughest. Twice, the Lowe's Fernandez Racing Acura ARX-01b entry from LMP2 got around the XM Radio Acura P1 on the final corner, only to have de Ferran's bigger engine give him the lead back on the long frontstretch.

"It certainly wasn't easy. There wasn't much time to think about anything else," de Ferran said. "Coming into the weekend, there were a lot of different thoughts going through my head. But I had a job to do as a driver. It was a tough weekend from that standpoint. In a way, the race was so intense that I never had time to think of anything else."

The Patrón Highcroft Acura finished second in class and third overall, more than enough to secure the LMP1 driver championship for David Brabham and Scott Sharp, and the team title for Patrón Highcroft. The championships were the first for all.

"When Robert Clarke first selected Highcroft to join the Acura camp," said team owner Duncan Dayton, "everyone was thinking, 'Who are these guys and what are they doing here? They're just vintage guys.' And that motivated us every single year. We've been the best Acura team each and every year. We are the most dedicated, and were it not for the passion we all have, we wouldn't be here. The guys at de Ferran are friends and teammates because we are all working for Acura. The sportsmanship they exhibit and the respect we all have is phenomenal."

For the early part of the race, it looked like the de Ferran Acura would walk away with a victory. Pagenaud drove a storming opening stint and led by more than a minute before handing off to de Ferran. Pit strategy and fuel conservation brought the Lowe's Fernandez Racing Acura ARX-01b to within striking distance in the final hour, and a decision to take four tires on its final stop nearly paid off. The de Ferran car did not take new Michelins on its final stop.

"We decided to keep the tires on during the last stop," de Ferran said. "We were having a hard time keeping heat in the tires, and we were very, very tight on the fuel window. I was trying to do my best and get through traffic to open a gap. It was the only way to save fuel. I needed to get on the straight far enough ahead where I could lift early and save fuel."

In last year's finale, Pagenaud and de Ferran finished second by 0.054 seconds to Tony Kanaan and Franck Montagny. After driving the closing stint in 2008, Pagenaud said he was more nervous watching from the pits this time.

"I was on a mission today for Gil. It was really emotional the whole weekend," he said. "In the first stint I was really happy with the car. I was able to make qualifying laps after qualifying laps and getting away from everyone. But the last lap was terrible and a nightmare! We had no fuel

in the car and didn't know if we could make the last lap. Gil did a great job of saving the last tiny bit of fuel. The engineers ran great numbers and calculated it well. On the last lap, they told me we were OK."

Autocon Motorsports' Tony Burgess, Chris McMurry and Bryan Willman placed third in P1 and fourth overall in the best finish for the team's Lola B06/10-AER this season.

Back in LMP2, Diaz and Fernandez closed their championship year in grand style, tying a class record for victories (8) in a season with their Acura ARX-01b. They combined for seven pole positions and five fastest race laps including one of each for Diaz on the weekend. It made up for a third-place finish two weeks ago at Petit Le Mans.

"After Road Atlanta, the guys at the shop decided we had to come back this weekend and show what we can do," Diaz said. "We had such a great car. A lot of P1s passed me at the start but we kept going and made no mistakes; it worked itself back out. Adrian had such a good race out there, I don't remember so many times yelling so much at a race. We were pushing so hard at the end and it was exciting to watch."

The class victory was doubly meaningful as the Lowe's Fernandez Acura won the prototype portion of the MICHELIN® GREEN X® Challenge and also came away with the season-long championship in the competition that measures overall performance, energy efficiency and emissions. It also was a large reason he was able to pressure de Ferran late.

"This is a great way to give an example to everybody about racing and technology," Fernandez said. "We always try to make everything more efficient and today was a way to improve it. I mean, Gil and I were trying to be efficient and save fuel so you can see how important that is."

"I knew from the beginning, this was the race we could challenge the P1s with the conditions and the problems the P1s were having," Fernandez added. "If we had a yellow I might have been able to get ahead of Gil, maybe get one or two corners ahead of him. We both drove hard and clean and it just never happened."

Team Cytosport's Porsche RS Spyder of Greg Pickett and Klaus Graf finished second in class despite retiring late in the race with suspension problems. Dyson Racing's Butch Leitzinger and Marino Franchitti placed third in their Mazda-powered Lola B09/86.

The GT2 finish was just as frantic as the overall result. Jörg Bergmeister and Patrick Long won in GT2 for Flying Lizard Motorsports in their Porsche 911 GT3 RSR, a victory enhanced by driver championships for the pair and the second straight team title for the Lizards. It also gave Porsche its 100th Series class victory, a first for any manufacturer.

Bergmeister finished 1.037 seconds ahead of Corvette Racing's Jan Magnussen after the two cars banged side-to-side coming out of the final turn. As they beat on each other toward the finish, Magnussen went around hard into the outside wall just before the start-finish line.

"I'm definitely sorry Jan went into the wall," Bergmeister said. "I didn't want that to happen. But it was a banging game. I'm glad he's OK. It was tough racing. The Corvette passed me the first time at the hairpin but he went in way too deep and I was able to get back around him. He was a little quicker I have to say. I wasn't trying to figure out where he was gaining time on me. I was trying to stay on track and in front."

It was the last in a number of moments between the two cars in the final hour. The two cars swapped positions numerous times and ran nose-to-tail for much of the final half-hour.

The championships - fourth for Bergmeister and second for Long - were assured when Risi Competizione's Ferrari F430 GT retired prior to the two-hour mark. Pierre Kaffer made contact with Marc Goossens in the RSR Jaguar XKR, an incident that damaged the Ferrari's front end including the radiator.

"There is a synergy between us," said Long, who won his first championship in 2005 driving a Porsche with Bergmeister. "We complement each other's strengths and weaknesses. We know each other and everyone knows us. The Flying Lizards complement us so well. The Risi guys have been a class act this year and given us a lot of challenge. The addition of the Corvettes and BMWs have been phenomenal, and that's how this class grows. The Porsche's record of reliability and success is obvious."

Farnbacher Loles Racing's Porsche 911 GT3 RSR of Wolf Henzler and Pierre Ehret was third in class.

The second Flying Lizard Porsche of Johannes van Overbeek and Seth Neiman won the GT trophy for the MICHELIN® GREEN X® Challenge and also claimed the season-long title.

ORBIT Racing's Guy Cosmo and John Baker were winners in the Challenge class in their Porsche 911 GT3 Cup car. The pairing, which started on the class pole, were originally second before the Velox Racing Porsche of Shane Lewis and Mitch Pagerey was excluded in post-race technical inspections. Gruppe Orange's Nick Parker and Don Pickering were second, Richard Rodriguez and Galen Bieker placed third for P7 Racing.

The result was more than enough to secure the class championship for the Snow Racing tandem of Martin and Melanie Snow, who had to retire early with engine issues.

The Snows are the only husband-wife duo to win a race in the Series - having taken a class win at Sebring in 1999 - and first to win a championship.

"I took about seven or eight years without racing," said Martin Snow. "Melanie dragged me back in when the Series first came to Miller Motorsports Park in 2006. When this class opened up, it was a good opportunity to jump back in."

It worked well. They scored three victories together including at their Utah home track.

"Today was really emotional for me," Melanie Snow said. "I was in first when the car broke. At first we were thinking it was fuel. I was really disappointed because I thought we had lost the championship. But we're a good team and more than just husband and wife. We work so well together. It's been so neat to do this."

The 2010 American Le Mans Series opens with the 58th Mobil 1 Twelve Hours of Sebring presented by Fresh from Florida, scheduled for a 10:30 a.m. ET start on Saturday, March 20 from historic Sebring International Raceway.

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