

Porsche wins the GTE-Pro class at the WEC season opener in Sebring

19/03/2022 The Porsche GT Team has kicked off the new season of the FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC) with a victory at the Sebring International Raceway.

The race

Michael Christensen from Denmark and Frenchman Kévin Estre won the GTE-Pro class at the 1,000-mile race in the US state of Florida ahead of the Corvette crewed by Nick Tandy (Great Britain) and American Tommy Milner. Richard Lietz from Austria and Italy's Gianmaria Bruni finished third with their ca. 378 kW (515 PS) 911 RSR. The eight-hour WEC race had to be halted and ultimately discontinued a good 60 minutes before the end of the race due to a thunderstorm warning. In the GTE-Am class, American Brendan Iribe and the two British racing drivers Ollie Millroy and Ben Barnicoat finished third with the identical 911 fielded by the Project 1 customer team.

“We scored important points towards the championship. Unfortunately, it wasn’t quite enough for a

one-two result today – which would have been possible," commented Thomas Laudenbach, Vice President Motorsport. "During a pit stop, we couldn't get a wheel off the No. 91 car for a moment. We need to take another close look at that. This incident prevented us from finishing first and second. Still, it was a great start to the season. I have nothing but praise for the drivers and the team. We can be happy with this result. Of course, it would've been nicer to achieve this success over the full eight-hour distance."

Successful season opener

"That was a long and crazy race. And we won – the season couldn't have started better," said Alexander Stehlig, Director Factory Motorsport FIA WEC. "We had a great run over the entire time in Sebring and we managed to work our way through each session steadily and systematically. The Corvette proved to be a strong rival. At times we held the advantage, sometimes they did – it was fun. We kept our cool during the interruptions and ultimately took home a well-deserved victory. We're happy to harvest the points and we're looking forward to the next WEC race at Spa-Francorchamps."

This marks the third time that a World Endurance Championship WEC event has been contested on the former military airfield in Florida. In 2012, works drivers Richard Lietz (Austria), Marc Lieb (Germany) and Patrick Pilet (France) finished second. In the 2018/2019 season, Lietz and his Italian teammate Gianmaria Bruni won the GTE-Pro class with the Porsche 911 RSR. Porsche is by far the most successful manufacturer in the long history of endurance racing at Sebring, with the Stuttgart marque notching up a total of 18 overall wins.

As the starting drivers, Kévin Estre and Gianmaria Bruni initially took the lead of the eight-hour race. However, after a good 30 minutes, the Italian had to relinquish his spot to Nick Tandy's Corvette when he was held up by traffic. While both factory-run Porsches pitted to change two tyres and swap drivers at the first pit stop, Tandy only refuelled. Thanks to the time saved, the British racer moved up to first place. Moreover, due to rule violations in the formation lap before the start, the race director had handed a 15-second penalty to both 911 RSR in the GTE-Pro category, which they had to serve at the second pit stop. Nevertheless, both nine-elevens were still ahead of the Ferraris fielded by the AF Corse factory squad.

A serious accident involving a vehicle from the Hypercar class after three and a half hours of racing resulted in a 45-minute break. Estre, who had in the meantime taken the wheel again from Michael Christensen, grabbed his chance shortly after the restart: The Frenchman swept past the leading Corvette and pulled away. A good 35 minutes later, Bruni had worked his way up the order to second place after a spirited charge. But that wasn't the end: A problem during a tyre change heading into the final quarter of the race cost about 20 seconds. As a result, Richard Lietz was relegated back to third place at the wheel of his No. 91 Porsche. At this point, as the season-opening race was about to be halted, the Austrian had closed the gap and was poised to reclaim second place, however, he ran out of time to make the decisive overtaking move.

In the GTE-Am class, two Porsche customer teams had chances to win. Initially, the 911 RSR campaigned by Dempsey-Proton Racing with team owner Christian Ried from Germany and the British racing drivers Sebastian Priaulx and Harry Tincknell had the most promising prospects. In the second half of the race, Britain's Ollie Millroy and Ben Barnicoat as well as American Brendan Iribe took control and briefly moved into the lead of their class. In the final spurt, however, both teams were hampered by bad luck with the timing of their pit stops. Iribe/Millroy/Barnicoat ultimately finished the race in third place in the same lap as the winners, followed closely by Ried/Priaulx/Tincknell.

Drivers' comments after the race

Kévin Estre (Porsche 911 RSR #92): "What a crazy race! We were really strong at the start and led the field. But the Corvette was fast, too. Unfortunately, a 15-second penalty set us back a bit, but we didn't let that rattle us and afterwards, we drove without a single mistake – that was our big advantage and it was enough to win. I'm thrilled."

Michael Christensen (Porsche 911 RSR #92): "It was a weird end to an otherwise great race. The team did a fabulous job over the entire time at Sebring. We deserved this victory – regardless of the race being stopped. Our car was quick over the distance, and we made the best use of that to claim our first win of the year."

Richard Lietz (Porsche 911 RSR #91): "In the USA, there's a general rule that all employees must be brought to safety during a thunderstorm. That's why the race was eventually stopped. We might have managed to drive a little longer because the anticipated rain didn't arrive for quite some time. Still, safety must come first, of course. Our race was okay: initially, we struggled with oversteer but we got that under control. Third place isn't perfect, but it's still a decent start to the season."

Gianmaria Bruni (Porsche 911 RSR #91): "It's a shame that we didn't quite manage to hand Porsche a one-two result. We lost a lot of time and one position with our No. 91 car at the last pit stop. Had we not been held up with the wheel change, we'd easily have achieved a double victory, because we were right behind our sister car."

Ollie Millroy (Porsche 911 RSR #56): "That was great fun – this is my first time driving a Porsche 911 RSR. I headed into this race with zero experience. But we worked together perfectly as a team and wrapped up this adventure on the podium. Our bronze driver Brendan Iribe gave a very strong performance and withstood the pressure perfectly at the start – we're all very impressed and we're delighted with this great start to the WEC season."

Race result

GTE-Pro class

1. Estre/Christensen (F/DK), Porsche GT Team, Porsche 911 RSR #92, 183 laps

2. Milner/Tandy (USA/GB), Corvette Racing, Corvette C8.R #64, 183 laps
3. Bruni/Lietz (I/A), Porsche GT Team, Porsche 911 RSR #91, 183 laps
4. Calado/Pier Guidi (GB/I), AF Corse, Ferrari 488 GTE Evo #51, 183 laps
5. Fuoco/Molina (I/E), AF Corse, Ferrari 488 GTE Evo #52, 182 laps

GTE-Am class
1. Dalla Lana/Pittard/Thiim (CDN/GB/DK), Northwest AMR, Aston Martin Vantage AMR, #98, 180 laps
2. Keating/Latorre/Sörensen (USA/F/DK), Aston Martin Vantage AMR, #33, 180 laps
3. Iribe/Millroy/Barnicoat (USA/GB/GB), Team Project 1, Porsche 911 RSR #56, 180 laps
4. Ried/Priaulx/Tincknell (D/GB/GB), Dempsey-Proton Racing, Porsche 911 RSR #77, 180 laps
10. Poordad/Lindsey/Andlauer (USA/USA/F), Dempsey-Proton Racing, Porsche 911 RSR #88, 169 laps

The qualifying

The Porsche GT Team has locked out the first grid row with the two 911 RSR for the season-opening round of the FIA World Endurance Championship WEC. Works driver Michael Christensen turned the fastest qualifying lap in the GTE-Pro class for the 1,000-mile race on the Sebring International Raceway in the US state of Florida. The Porsche 911 RSR remains unbeaten after topping the timesheets in a WEC final qualifying session for the tenth time in a row. Christensen shares the No. 91 nine-eleven racer with Frenchman Kévin Estre. In the No. 91 sister car, Gianmaria Bruni posted the second quickest time just 0.15 seconds off the polesitter. This season, the Italian again joins forces with Richard Lietz from Austria. In the GTE-Am class, the American Brendan Iribe set the best time, planting the 911 RSR fielded by the Project 1 team on the third grid spot.

“A perfect start to the season!” says a delighted Alexander Stehlig, Director Factory Motorsport FIA WEC. “We're on the front row with both cars, the two 911 RSR were at exactly the same level. We were already pretty thrilled in the practice sessions. We finally worked out a perfect setup in the third free practice – that was an important step. With a view to tomorrow's race, there can only be one objective: we want to win.”

The first qualifying session of the 2022 WEC season got underway on Thursday at 7 pm local time. As the sun started to set, the summery air and track temperatures still hovered around 30 degrees Celsius. The Porsche GT Team had tweaked the two 911 RSR to the special characteristics of the Sebring International Raceway during the three practice sessions and the two test days of the previous weekend: the circuit includes a former military airfield, with about a third of the track made of concrete slabs. The hefty bumps put enormous stress on the car and drivers.

The qualifying was interrupted early in the ten-minute session when a privateer 911 RSR slid off the track. At the restart, Bruni promptly set the fastest lap in 1:57.383 minutes. Literally in the last second, Christensen trumped this result in 1:57.233 minutes after a series of top sector times, which was enough to earn the Dane pole position for the race.

In the GTE-Am class, Brendan Iribe was the fastest driver of a Porsche 911 RSR. The American achieved P3 at the wheel of the No. 56 campaigned by the Project 1 customer team and was a mere 0.079 seconds off a front row spot in this category. The two identical nine-eleven models run by Dempsey-Proton Racing take up the race from positions six and ten. Project 1's No. 46 entry takes up the first WEC race of the year from position twelve.

Drivers' qualifying quotes

Michael Christensen (Porsche 911 RSR #92): "That was a tough qualifying. When the red flags came out I wasn't sure if I could keep the tyres warm enough. Afterwards, I simply focussed on getting two clean laps in. I made a few minor mistakes on the first lap, at times the wheels locked up under braking. The second lap went really well, it was clean and fast, even though the tyres were no longer in the best condition. I hope we can turn our pole into a race win. We have a tough job ahead of us."

Gianmaria Bruni (Porsche 911 RSR #91): "Michael put in a strong drive, but my lap wasn't too bad either – the gap was tiny. We now have a promising starting position for the long race ahead of us. Let's see what we can do. One thing is certain: it'll be a hot and demanding first race of the year."

Brendan Iribe (Porsche 911 RSR #56): "I really enjoyed my first qualifying session in a GTE car – the Porsche 911 RSR is great to drive. I felt more and more comfortable in the car from session to session – and everything simply came together perfectly in the qualifying."

Qualifying result

GTE-Pro class

1. Estre/Christensen (F/DK), Porsche GT Team, Porsche 911 RSR #92, 1:57.233 minute
2. Bruni/Lietz (I/A), Porsche GT Team, Porsche 911 RSR #91, 1:57.383 minute
3. Milner/Tandy (USA/GB), Corvette Racing, Corvette C8.R #64, 1:57.696 minute
4. Calado/Pier Guidi (GB/I), AF Corse, Ferrari 488 GTE Evo #51, 1:59.299 minute
5. Fuoco/Molina (I/E), AF Corse, Ferrari 488 GTE Evo #52, 1:59.388 minute

GTE-Am class

1. Keating/Latorre/Sörensen (USA/F/DK), Aston Martin Vantage AMR, #33, 1:59.204 minute

2 Dalla Lana/Pittard/Thiim (CDN/GB/DK), Northwest AMR, Aston Martin Vantage AMR, #98, 2:00.570 minute

3. Iribe/Millroy/Barnicoat (USA/GB/GB), Team Project 1, Porsche 911 RSR #56, 2:00.649 minute

6. Ried/Priaulx/Tincknell (D/GB/GB), Dempsey-Proton Racing, Porsche 911 RSR #77, 2:02.079 minute

10. Poordad/Lindsey/Andlauer (USA/USA/F), Dempsey-Proton Racing, Porsche 911 RSR #88, 2:03.560 minute

12. Cairoli/Pedersen/Leutwiler (I/DK/CH), Team Project 1, Porsche 911 RSR #46, no time

The preview

Just six days after the so-called Prologue, the same venue will host the first race of the year. For the second time in the history of the World Endurance Championship, the race on the six-kilometre circuit marks the start of the season. At the last WEC race on this legendary US circuit, Porsche won the fiercely contested GTE-Pro class. In the GTE-Am category, two customer squads campaign four more of the ca. 378 kW (515 PS) nine-elevens from Weissach. The Porsche partner team Penske contests the LMP2 class with an Oreca-Gibson.

“We’re heading into a very special season: It’s our last year with the factory-run 911 RSR in the GTE-Pro class. We’ve notched up many victories since 2013 and we want to conclude the story in 2022 with a happy ending,” says Alexander Stehlig, Director Factory Motorsport FIA WEC. “In preparation for the new season, we travelled to Barcelona for a few days in February to do some testing. Our main priority there was on the new racing tyres from our partner Michelin. We gained some important insights and we head to the season-opener in Florida feeling very confident. The Prologue in Sebring should wrap up our preparations for an exciting year.”

“Last season, we had a firm grasp on the World Championship trophy right up until the very last race – only to have a contentious situation snatch it from our hands with 15 laps to go. The team hasn’t forgotten this,” explains Stehlig, and states the clear goal for 2022: “We couldn’t be more motivated. We want the World Championship title and to win our class at Le Mans!”

Over the eight-hour race, the fastest vehicles will cover a distance of around 1,000 miles (1,609 kilometres). This throws major challenges at the teams, the drivers and their cars. About a third of the 6.02-kilometre circuit in the heart of the Florida “sunshine state” consists of concrete slabs, which up until the 1940s were part of the runway at the former Hendricks Army Airfield. Due to the hefty vibrations, the racetrack is often mentioned on social media with the hashtag #RespectTheBumps. The fast and demanding circuit features 17 turns including the 180-degree right-hander dubbed “The Sunset Bend” – a popular spot for spectacular photos every year.

Sebring has hosted the World Endurance Championship twice so far. In 2012, works drivers Marc Lieb (Germany), Richard Lietz (Austria) and Patrick Pilet (France) finished second. In the 2018/2019 season, Lietz and his Italian teammate Gianmaria Bruni won the GTE-Pro class with the Porsche 911 RSR. Porsche is by far the most successful manufacturer in the long history of endurance racing at Sebring, with the Stuttgart marque notching up a total of 18 overall wins. The most recent outright victory was achieved in 2008 by Timo Bernhard (Germany) with Frenchmen Romain Dumas and Emmanuel Collard in the Porsche RS Spyder.

“Sebring is a mega event which we tackle alongside the IMSA series and the Porsche Carrera Cup North America,” says Alexander Stehlig with a smile. “It’ll be non-stop action out on the track. We’re expecting a big party just like we experienced in 2019!”

While the endurance classic of the North American IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship is contested over twelve hours, the WEC runs over a distance of 1,000 miles. Given the eight-hour race duration, the distribution of points for the season-opening round is multiplied by the factor of 1.5 based on the conventional points system 25-18-15-12-10-8-6-4-2-1. The result will be rounded up to 38-27-23-18-15-12-9-6-3-2. An additional point is awarded for achieving pole position. Another special feature: During the pit stops at Sebring, in typical US-racing-style, the mechanics must jump over the wall that separates the paddock and pit lane gantry from the racetrack. At all other WEC rounds, the teams work out of pit garages.

The Porsche GT Team drivers

For the 2022 season, the cockpit of the No. 91 Porsche remains unchanged with Austria's Richard Lietz and Gianmaria Bruni from Italy again sharing driving duties. Britain's John McGregor continues as their race engineer. The sister car is helmed by Frenchman Kévin Estre and Michael Christensen. The Dane, who is the 2018/2019 world champion and Le Mans class winner, returns to the Porsche's FIA WEC factory squad after a year's break. As the race engineer, Adam Hardy from Great Britain is responsible for the performance and tactical side of the No. 92 Porsche 911 RSR.

The customer teams

The accomplished German customer teams Project 1 and Dempsey-Proton Racing each field two Porsche 911 RSR racers in the 2022 WEC season. Matteo Cairoli from Italy competes for Project 1. At Dempsey-Proton, team owner Christian Ried joins forces in the No. 77 car with the two British racing drivers Harry Tincknell and Sebastian Priaulx. The No. 88 sister car is shared by Americans Fred Poordad and Patrick Lindsey with Frenchman Julien Andlauer. The British GR Racing outfit will start the season at round two in Spa-Francorchamps.

The Penske team, which will take over the racing commitments with Porsche in the FIA WEC and IMSA series from 2023 with the new LMDh prototype, contests the LMP2 class this season. The driver crew in the No. 5 Oreca-Gibson consists of the two new Porsche works drivers Dane Cameron from the USA and Felipe Nasr from Brazil with the experienced French racing pro Emmanuel Collard. Taking on the FIA WEC competition serves as preparation to compete in the Hypercar/GTP class from next year.

An overview of teams and drivers

GTE-Pro class
Porsche GT Team #91 – Richard Lietz (A) / Gianmaria Bruni (I)
Porsche GT Team #92 – Kévin Estre (F) / Michael Christensen (DK)

GTE-Am class

Team Project 1 #46 – Matteo Cairoli (I) / TBA / TBA
Team Project 1 #56 – Brendan Iribe (USA) / Oliver Millroy (GB) / Ben Barnicoat (GB)
Dempsey-Proton Racing #77 – Christian Ried (D) / Harry Tincknell (GB) / Sebastian Priaulx (GB)
Dempsey-Proton Racing #88 – Julien Andlauer (F) / Fred Poordad (USA) / Patrick Lindsey (USA)

Drivers' comments before the race

Richard Lietz (Porsche 911 RSR #91): "The WEC is booming – this year there's a huge grid line-up with almost 40 cars. That's nice and at the same time challenging because the traffic in a race with four different categories is heavier. We're very familiar with the Sebring track and have been extremely successful there. We're tackling the race in the number 91 car with the same crew, the same team and a car that we know very well."

Gianmaria Bruni (Porsche 911 RSR #91): "Finally we're back driving in the USA. I love the Sebring races and can hardly wait. Our Porsche 911 RSR is fully developed, and the team works impeccably. All of the ingredients for the next possible success after 2019 are there. The only goal can be a class victory – there's no question about it."

Kévin Estre (Porsche 911 RSR #92): "In 2021 we missed out on winning the title in the very bitter final metres of the race. That was difficult to stomach and will certainly give us additional motivation for the upcoming season. We have unfinished business – and we want to settle the score. I'm driving with Michael again this year, which I'm really looking forward to. This will be the last season with our factory team's 911 RSR. We have very clear goals: winning the world championship and class victory at the 24 Hours of Le Mans. We want to build a solid basis for a very successful season starting now at Sebring."

Michael Christensen (Porsche 911 RSR #92): "I'm really pleased to be able to drive the full 2022 season in the works team's Porsche 911 RSR again. The year kicks off with the great race at Sebring. The track in Florida has a rich history and some unique characteristics. The track surface is very old and partially made of concrete slabs. The hard bumps put enormous stress on the car and us drivers. Sebring is not only physically taxing but also mentally very demanding."

Dane Cameron (Team Penske #5): "After many years in the North American IMSA series, our involvement in the FIA WEC throws completely new challenges at me. It's no secret that this campaign serves as preparation for the upcoming races with Porsche Penske Motorsport starting in 2023. Our team would like to get to know the ins and outs of the World Endurance Championship at an early stage. For me personally, a dream will come true this year: I've often tried to get a seat at Le Mans. It never happened. Now I finally get to contest this legendary race."

Felipe Nasr (Team Penske #5): "It'll be a year of preparation for Penske and us, but by no means one without sporting demands – we want to win. At the same time, there's a lot to learn: the racetracks, the special WEC rules and the dynamics in the races. All of this differs from the IMSA series. However, as soon as we get out on the track, there's just one goal for Dane, Emmanuel, me and the team: to win our

class. I'm really looking forward to my first WEC season."

The schedule (local time, CET -5/-6 hours)

Saturday, 12 March
09:35 – 12:35: Prologue session 1
14:25 – 17:25: Prologue session 2

Sunday, 13 March
09:50 – 13:20: Prologue session 3
14:50 – 17:50: Prologue session 4

Wednesday, 16 March
11:05 – 12:05: Free practice 1
16:35 – 17:35: Free practice 2

Thursday, 17 March
12:05 – 13:05: Free practice 3
19:00 – 19:10: Qualifying GTE

Friday, 18 March
Midday – 20:00: Race

Video

https://newstv.porsche.com/porschevideos/205867_en_3000000.mp4
https://newstv.porsche.com/porschevideos/205771_en_3000000.mp4

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