

Emphatic win for Porsche at the WEC season opener in the Ardennes

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01/05/2021 Porsche has won the opening round of the FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC) at Spa-Francorchamps. Works driver Kévin Estre and Neel Jani drove a commanding race in the No. 92 Porsche 911 RSR to claim victory in the hotly contested GTE-Pro class.

The race

For Estre (France), who had already dazzled at Friday's qualifying with a record lap, this marks the second win in a row at the six-hour race in Belgium. Jani triumphed at his first outing with the Porsche GT Team. The sister car driven by their brand colleagues Richard Lietz (Austria) and Gianmaria Bruni (Italy) crossed the finish line in fifth place after a difficult race.

In sunny conditions and temperatures of around ten degrees Celsius, Estre left no doubt of his intention to secure another victory at Spa right from the start. The 2018 Le Mans class winner fended off his rivals' attacks in the first lap and proceeded to pull clear at the lead. The Frenchman tapped the full potential of the Porsche 911 RSR and after two laps had opened up a gap of around 15 seconds. Not even an early pit stop due to a puncture could throw Estre off his game. Neel Jani (Switzerland), the 2016 overall winner of the Le Mans 24-hour race, followed up with a powerful performance at his first race in the GTE-Pro class and handed the car back to Estre still in first place. The Frenchman then brought home a secure victory with an advantage of about 35 seconds.

In the sister car of the winning team, Bruni and Lietz were plagued by bad luck. First, the No. 91 car got caught in heavy traffic on the 7.004-kilometre racetrack, then they were hampered by a puncture. A shunt from a Hypercar about halfway through the race resulted in the rear section of the car having to be replaced. Under these circumstances, only fifth place was possible.

Alexander Stehlig, Head of Operations FIA WEC: "We began this season as we concluded last year – with a win. It was an intense race with several punctures, most of which were caused by debris left on the track. It's a shame that the number 91 car was shunted by a Hypercar. The resulting tyre blow-out ultimately threw the crew out of contention for a podium spot."

"We can hardly wish for a better start to the season. In qualifying, the Porsche 911 RSR set a lap record, in the race, Kévin and Neel were untouchable. Unfortunately, the teammates in the number 91 car experienced a lot of misfortune. Still, based on their lap times, we clearly saw how much potential our car has," concluded Pascal Zurlinden, Director Factory Motorsport. "Our customer teams were very unlucky at Spa today. I'm sure that we'll see a significantly better result in the GTE-Am class at the next round in Portugal."

Many setbacks for the customer teams

Porsche's customer teams had to cope with many setbacks during the event in Belgium. The No. 88 Porsche 911 RSR fielded by Dempsey-Proton Racing was on a steady course for the podium over long stretches, but was handed a drive-through penalty with five minutes left to the flag. Local hero Alessio Picariello, Andrew Haryanto from Indonesia and Germany's Marco Seefried concluded the race fifth in their class. The No. 77 sister car retired half an hour before the finish with an electronic defect. Prior to this, works driver Matt Campbell had given an impressive show: During his first stints, the Australian ploughed through the field from the last grid spot to the top. His teammate Jaxon Evans from New Zealand and team owner Christian Ried (Germany) followed up with steady laps at the wheel of the racer.

The GR Racing squad was unable to even start the race. On the way to the pre-start, Britain's Michael Wainwright damaged the vehicle in an accident. The damage could not be repaired in time for the start of the race. The customer team Project 1 had withdrawn both 911 RSR from the race after accidents during test drives and the qualifying session. The team from Germany will be back on the grid at the

next race.

Round two of the World Endurance Championship WEC will be contested on 13 June at the Autódromo Internacional do Algarve in Portimão, Portugal.

Drivers' comments on the race

Kévin Estre (Porsche 911 RSR #92): "This race wasn't nearly as easy as it might have seemed from the outside. Both cars got punctures. The early wheel change meant we lost our pit stop rhythm, which may have resulted in an additional stop. So, it really hung by a thread. Everything worked out in the end and we crossed the finish line as the winners. Neel did a terrific job at his first stints in the Porsche 911 RSR in the WEC and maintained the lead. That was fantastic."

Neel Jani (Porsche 911 RSR #92): "Victory at my GT debut in the FIA WEC – that's awesome. It couldn't have gone better. When Kévin had to pit earlier than planned due to the puncture, we were a bit concerned at first because I had to save some fuel during my stints for tactical reasons. But a caution phase helped us at the right moment, so it was no longer an issue. It went well for me."

Gianmaria Bruni (Porsche 911 RSR #91): "A lot of negative things happened today for us. We had several punctures, bad luck overtaking traffic and finally an accident that destroyed the rear of our car. It simply wasn't our day. Obviously, our sister car's win is great. I'm pleased for our colleagues. All in all, we scored a lot of points for Porsche – that's great."

Richard Lietz (Porsche 911 RSR #91): "Mediocre – that's how I would describe today's race. Our tyres were damaged, we were shunted and ultimately we ran out of fresh rubber. We really didn't need anything more to happen. That says it all. First, we had no luck and then we were hit by bad luck."

Result GTE-Pro class

1. Estre/Jani (F/CH), Porsche 911 RSR #92, 153 laps
2. Pier Guidi/Calado (I/GB), Ferrari 488 GTE #51, 153 laps
3. Serra/Molina (BR/E), Ferrari 488 GTE #71, 153 laps
4. Garcia/Gavin (E/GB), Corvette C8.R #63, 152 laps
5. Bruni/Lietz (I/A), Porsche 911 RSR #91, 152 laps

Result GTE-Am class

1. Perrodo/Nielsen/Rovera (F/DK/I), Ferrari 488 GTE #83, 152 laps
2. Keating/Pereira/Fraga (USA/L/BR), Aston Martin Vantage #33, 152 laps
3. Lacorte/Sernagiotto/Fuoco (I/I/I), Ferrari 488 GTE #47, 151 laps

5. Haryanto/Seefried/Picariello (RI/D/B), Porsche 911 RSR #88, 151 laps
DNF. Ried/Evans/Campbell (D/NZ/AUS), Porsche 911 RSR #77, 138 laps
DNS. Wainwright/Barker/Gamble (GB/GB/GB), Porsche 911 RSR #86, 0 laps

The qualifying

Works driver Kévin Estre turned the 7.004-kilometre lap in the Belgian Ardennes at the wheel of his No. 92 Porsche 911 RSR in a time of 2:11.219 minutes and promptly set a new qualifying record for GTE-Pro vehicles. On his flying lap, the Frenchman was more than a second faster than his closest pursuer. His brand colleague from Austria Richard Lietz planted the No. 91 sister car on the third grid spot.

The new qualifying format for the World Endurance Championship guaranteed high suspense and plenty of action. In contrast to previous years when the average time of the fastest laps of two drivers per car was used to determine the grid position, the fight for top positions now follows the motto: “One driver, one car, ten minutes flat-out.” The result: The drivers, especially amateurs in the GTE-Am class, come under huge pressure in the extremely short session. The qualifying was interrupted twice due to accidents.

Despite this, Kévin Estre did not let the red flags ruffle him. Last year’s Spa-Francorchamps winner used the first lap to meticulously warm his tyres then promptly set a record time on his first flying lap. But then, to everyone's surprise, on his second lap, the Frenchman once again undercut his time. The Porsche GT Team was incredulous: “That was a crazy lap,” the team radioed into the cockpit of the No. 92 car – Estre's answer was a loud cheer. Teammate Richard Lietz got caught behind rival vehicles during his hot laps and was unable to make full use of the Porsche 911 RSR’s enormous potential. Ultimately, the Austrian was just 0.019 seconds short of a front row spot.

“This pole is a perfect start to the season. To be more precise, it was a mega-pole!” stated Alexander Stehlig, Head of Operations FIA WEC. “That was typically Estre: the way he planted the car on the front grid spot in a record-setting time. We’re very pleased, but there’s a lot of pressure as we look ahead to race day. We want to make the most out of the good conditions and at least finish the six-hour race in the same positions.”

In the GTE-Am class, Andrew Haryanto was the fastest driver in a Porsche 911 RSR. At the wheel of the No. 88 car fielded by the Dempsey-Proton Racing customer team, the Indonesian qualified in third place. Britain's Michael Wainwright put the identical number 86 vehicle of GR Racing on P8. Early on in the qualifying session, Project 1 driver Egidio Perfetti from Norway and the German Christian Ried (Dempsey-Proton Racing) had an accident in the Raidillon area – better known as Eau Rouge – and were unable to clock a lap time. Both drivers were uninjured in the incidents.

Round one of the World Endurance Championship WEC takes off on Saturday, 1 May 2021, at 1:30pm (CEST) and runs over six hours.

Drivers' quotes on the qualifying

Kévin Estre (Porsche 911 RSR #92): "Everything perfect, simply unbelievable! I had huge grip, but I made tiny errors on the first lap. Still, even that lap time would've been enough for pole position, but we made another attempt. On lap two, everything came together perfectly. With an incredible setup, little fuel onboard and a lot of grip with fresh tyres, the Porsche 911 RSR drove like a dream. I'm very proud of this lap."

Richard Lietz (Porsche 911 RSR #91): "First of all, it's important that no one was injured in the accidents. The interruptions made the qualifying session a bit chaotic, obviously. We had to mount a second set of fresh tyres so we have one set less than we'd anticipated for the race. It didn't go as smoothly as we'd hoped, but it's not too bad. The race runs over six hours, so anything is possible."

Andrew Haryanto (Porsche 911 RSR #88): "The qualifying was a little crazy, but I knew the team had provided me with a great car. For me as a newcomer, the setup was perfect. I only got one flying lap and I simply tried to keep the car within the track boundaries. That was the best I could do and I think I did pretty well."

Result GTE-Pro class

1. Estre/Jani (F/CH), Porsche 911 RSR #92, 2:11.219 minutes
2. Serra/Molina (BR/E), Ferrari 488 GTE #71, 2:12.315 minutes
3. Bruni/Lietz (I/A), Porsche 911 RSR #91, 2:12.370 minutes
4. Pier Guidi/Calado (I/GB), Ferrari 488 GTE #51, 2:12.443 minutes
5. Garcia/Gavin (E/GB), Corvette C8.R #63, 2:13.106 minutes

Result GTE-Am class

1. Keating/Pereira/Fraga (USA/L/BR), Aston Martin #33, 2:14.660 minutes
2. Dalla Lana/Farfus/Gomez (CDN/BR/BR), Aston Martin #97, 2:15.615 minutes
3. Haryanto/Seefried/Picariello (RI/D/B), Porsche 911 RSR #88, 2:16.319 minutes
8. Wainwright/Barker/Gamble (GB/GB/GB), Porsche 911 RSR #86, 2:18.813 minutes
10. Perfetti/Cairoli/Pera (N/I/I), Porsche 911 RSR #56, no lap time
11. Ried/Evans/Campbell (D/NZ/AUS), Porsche 911 RSR #77, no lap time

Full results and championship rankings on fiawec.alkamelsystems.com.

The prologue

In the official two-day tests on the Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps in Belgium, the two Porsche 911 RSR covered a total distance of 2,977 kilometres. The main focus of the tests was on the setup and

tyre use as well as optimising the procedures within the team. In the so-called prologue of the WEC, the two factory cars from Weissach impressed with fast and steady lap times. Works driver Kévin Estre from France turned the fastest lap in the GTE-Pro class in 2:12.916 minutes.

“The prologue was great,” says Alexander Stehlig, Head of Operations FIA WEC after two sunny, labour-intensive days in Belgium. “We ticked everything off our programme and there were no surprises. Our ideas for the setup worked positively out on the track. That was our priority on Monday. On the second day, we practically ran a full simulation of the race weekend, included qualifying and long stints. The lap times looked good, but they don’t say much yet. All in all, we feel well prepared for the start of the 2021 season.”

The customer teams GR Racing, Project 1 and Dempsey-Proton Racing sent a total of five nine-elevens from 2019 to take part in the two-day tests on the 7.004-kilometre “Ardennes rollercoaster” racetrack. In the GTE-Am class this year, the campaigning of the latest generation Porsche 911 RSR is possible. The three teams used the prologue to familiarise themselves as much as possible with the new racing cars. All teams managed to collect extensive data and make significant progress in setting up their vehicles: Only Project 1 experienced a setback during the test drives: After an accident on Monday morning involving Anders Burchardt (Norway), the No. 46 car could no longer participate in the tests on the following day. Burchardt and his teammates Dennis Olsen from Norway and Axcil Jefferies from Great Britain will be unable to compete on the upcoming race weekend.

Round one of the World Endurance Championship (WEC) takes off on Saturday 1 May at 1:30 pm (CEST) and runs over a distance of six hours.

Drivers' comments on the prologue

Gianmaria Bruni (Porsche 911 RSR #91): “Two things were at the centre of our work – figuring out the best possible vehicle balance and perfecting the interaction between the drivers and the new race engineer. We made noticeable progress in both areas. We’ve completed the planned programme and we feel well prepared. My teammate Richie put in a strong long run. It looks promising, but there are still a couple of things that could be improved in the lead-up to race day.”

Neel Jani (Porsche 911 RSR #92): “The prologue ran really well for us. We drove a total of 220 laps with our number 92 car and tried a few new setup solutions. In the process, we learned a lot. Our simulated racing stints looked good, so we head to the start of the season this weekend feeling positive. We were extremely productive during the two days of testing and, for me personally, it was an important experience because I’ve never driven the Porsche 911 RSR at Spa-Francorchamps before.”

Results

GTE-Pro class (all sessions combined)

1. Estre/Jani (F/CH), Porsche 911 RSR #92, 2:12.916 minutes
2. Bruni/Lietz (I/A), Porsche 911 RSR #91, 2:14.214 minutes
3. Pier Guidi/Calado (I/GB), Ferrari 488 GTE #51, 2:14.313 minutes

GTE-Am class (all sessions combined)
1. Lacorte/Sernagiotto/Fuoco (I/I/I), Ferrari 488 GTE Evo #47, 2:14.509 minutes
2. Perfetti/Cairoli/Pera (N/I/I), Porsche 911 RSR #56, 2:14.736 minutes
3. Ried/Evans/Campbell (D/NZ/AUS), Porsche 911 RSR #77, 2:14.872 minutes

The preview

The Porsche works team tackles the opening round of the FIA World Endurance Championship at Spa-Francorchamps on 1 May with two 911 RSR racers. For the six-hour race in the Ardennes region of Belgium, the factory drivers Gianmaria Bruni from Italy and Richard Lietz from Austria share the cockpit of the GT racing vehicle with the starting number 91. The crew in the identical No. 92 sister car has changed from previous years: this season, Frenchman Kévin Estre, the 2018/2019 WEC champion, shares the vehicle with Neel Jani. In preparation for his WEC mission with the Porsche 911 RSR, the experienced Swiss racer contested the final round of the 2020 IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship in Sebring and took part in extensive tests.

“We’re thrilled that the management of the World Endurance Championship has succeeded in putting together a racing calendar with six events – despite the ongoing restrictions caused by the global pandemic. Our factory squad is ready to take up the hunt for the FIA WEC crown. I’m very much looking forward to the upcoming duels, especially between Porsche and Ferrari,” says Fritz Enzinger, Vice President Porsche Motorsport.

The Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps is located in the far east of Belgium close to the German border. Opened in 1921, the 7.004-kilometre course is the longest dedicated racetrack on the FIA WEC calendar. With 21 corners and several long straights, the track undulates through the Walloon countryside – not surprisingly, the circuit is also known as the ‘Ardennes rollercoaster’. Fast passages like Raidillon/Eau Rouge and Blanchimont are as notorious as the La Source hairpin at the end of the start-finish straight.

“Our team has prepared meticulously for the 2021 season. With a top result at the opening round in Spa-Francorchamps, we’d like to send a clear signal from the very start that there can only be one goal for us: to win the world championship,” says Pascal Zurlinden, Director Factory Motorsport. “Our class win in 2020 at the first round in Belgium clearly underlined that the latest version of the Porsche 911 RSR suits the special characteristics of the ‘Ardennes rollercoaster’ very well,” adds Alexander Stehlig, Head of Operations FIA WEC. “During test drives at Hockenheim, among other venues, we gave our teams and cars the final touches. At the two-day prologue in Spa, we’ll do our utmost to find the best set-up for the special characteristics of this track. We’re ready to race!”

Before the start of the race weekend at Spa-Francorchamps, a prologue will be held at the venue. Porsche and its customer teams take part in the two-day test session on 26 and 27 April with a total of seven 2019-generation 911 RSR cars.

The Porsche GT Team drivers

In the No. 91 Porsche 911 RSR, the works team relies on Gianmaria Bruni and Richard Lietz for the third year in a row. In 2019, the experienced pair won the season-opening round at Silverstone in the UK. Kévin Estre, who shares driving duties in the No. 92 car with Neel Jani, travels to Spa-Francorchamps as last year's winner. Last season the Frenchman also won the finale in Bahrain and concluded the year ranking third. Jani returns to the WEC after competing for the Porsche TAG Heuer Formula E Team.

The customer teams

Dempsey-Proton Racing fields two Porsche 911 RSR at the start of the WEC season. Works driver Matt Campbell from Australia joins forces with the team owner Christian Ried (Germany) and the former Porsche Junior Jaxon Evans from New Zealand. Andrew Haryanto from Indonesia, German Marco Seefried and Alessio Picariello from Belgium have been announced as the drivers in the No. 88 sister car. The German customer team Project 1 also campaigns two 911 RSR in all six events this season. The squad from the German town of Lohne in Lower Saxony tackles round one with the Norwegians Dennis Olsen and Egidio Perfetti as well as the Italians Matteo Cairoli and Riccardo Pera. The all-British driver crew, Michael Wainwright, Ben Barker and Tom Gamble, compete for GR Racing in the No. 86 car.

Drivers' comments before the race

Richard Lietz (Porsche 911 RSR #91): "We're all excited for the season opener on this wonderful racetrack. We've celebrated many successes there in the past. We're expecting a tough fight in Spa. This year we're working with a new engineer and a few new mechanics on our number 91 car. First we have to get used to each other. We made a lot of progress during our Hockenheim tests. Now we want to build on that in Spa-Francorchamps and win the class if possible."

Gianmaria Bruni (Porsche 911 RSR #91): "It's hard to imagine a more beautiful setting to start the season than Spa-Francorchamps. The racetrack is fantastic and is always good for action-packed racing. If you want to be fast in the spectacular and demanding passages, you must have a perfectly balanced car. This is exactly what we'll focus on at the two-day prologue. I'm really looking forward to finally getting started again."

Kévin Estre (Porsche 911 RSR #92): "Spa is always a huge challenge. The track demands a lot from the tyres, so it's important to have a particularly good strategy. Plus, we know how the weather can be in the Ardennes: an unpredictable mix of cold and warm temperatures, rain, dry and sometimes even

snow. It's critical to be well prepared for all thinkable conditions. Last year we saw that our Porsche 911 RSR is particularly strong at Spa. We're travelling there as last year's winners and we want to celebrate another success."

The schedule (all times CEST)

Thursday, 29 April
15:30 to 17:00 – Free practice 1

Friday, 30 April
9:30 to 11:00 – Free practice 2
14:00 to 15:00 – Free practice 3
18:20 to 18:35 – Qualifying GTE-Pro and GTE-Am

Saturday, 1 May
13:30 to 19:30 pm – Race

2021 WEC calendar

26/27 April – Prologue in Spa-Francorchamps (Belgium)
1 May – 6 Hours of Spa-Francorchamps (Belgium)
13 June – 8 Hours of Portimão (Portugal)
18 July – 6 Hours of Monza (Italy)
21/22 August – 24 Hours of Le Mans (France)
26 September – 6 Hours of Fuji (Japan)
20 November – 8 Hours of Bahrain (Bahrain)

MEDIA ENQUIRIES



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Video

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Subline: Dempsey Proton's No. 88 Porsche 911 RSR concluded the race fifth in their class.

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