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INTENSE TCR TITLE FIGHT MAKES FOR ENTERTAINING RACING



Photo: TCR Official

The TCR International Series started off just as the 2015 season had ended, as a dominant performance by SEAT at the curtain raiser in Bahrain saw Pepe Oriola take two wins, emulating Gianni Morbidelli's result from last year in Monza. However, the second event of the year at Estoril, Portugal, saw 2015 title challenger Gianni Morbidelli take a win in the first race at the wheel of his Honda Civic TCR, with James Nash taking his maiden victory in the series in Race 2 in the Craft-Bamboo Lukoil SEAT. More different winners came in Spa-Francorchamps, as Aku Pellinen also took his first career win in Belgium in the WestCoast Racing Honda, with Jean-Karl Vernay leading a Volkswagen 1-2-3 ahead of team-mates Stefano Comini and Antti Buri for Leopard Racing in the second heat.

Rather than drawing conclusions from what we have seen in the first three events of the year, we can look with satisfaction at a brilliant beginning. At the start of the season there was no doubt the new version of the SEAT Leon was a bit too fast, but from the second event on the Balance of Performance made sure the potential of the different models was pretty similar. That's why we have already had three different manufacturers winning a race, with SEAT, Honda and Volkswagen sharing the wins. The Spanish cars, who are in their third year of service, albeit with a sequential racing gearbox en lieu of the DSG used last year, are still the most popular machines in the TCR Series, not just the International version but also in other series.

Nevertheless, Honda's commercial and sporting success is now a matter of fact, and Volkswagens are also popular, especially in Germany. The Golfs still need a bit of work though, as they are in fact twins to the Leons but the aerodynamics make the car less efficient in a straight line. Subaru, Alfa Romeo and Opel are yet to show their potential, and the Peugeots are still a big question mark despite a one-off outing in Spa-Francorchamps, as the engine is downsized and down on power at the moment.

The top three manufacturers are quite close, though, and with drivers such as Pepe Oriola and James Nash for SEAT, Gianni Morbidelli for Honda and 2015 Champion Stefano Comini alongside new team-mate Jean-Karl Vernay for Volkswagen, the outcome of the championship is impossible to predict.

That's what makes it exciting!

Pietro Casillo

TCR

Rounds 3 & 4 – Estoril, Portugal – 22 / 24 April 2016

SATURDAY REPORT

Mat'ò Homola on pole after breathtaking qualifying

Mat'ò Homola and B3 Racing Team won their first pole position on their second appearance in the TCR International Series.

Once again it was a very close session, with the ninth fastest drivers covered by only six tenths and three different brands – SEAT, Honda and Volkswagen – filling the top-three positions within three tenths.

The young Slovak and his SEAT edged out the rest of the field with an impressive lap of 1:48.518 that was posted on their first run in Q2. Gianni Morbidelli placed his WestCoast Racing Honda in second position, only 0.155 seconds behind the poleman (1:48.673).

The Leopard Racing duo of Jean-Karl Vernay and Stefano Comini fought for the third position until the very end; eventually the Frenchman's 1:48.860 beat the reigning champion's 1:48.965 by one tenth.

After topping the time sheet in Q1, Pepe Oriola qualified in a disappointing seventh position, while Loris Hezemans was classified tenth and won pole position on the reverse grid for the second race .

The first race will start tomorrow at 11:25 local time on the distance of 15 laps, with the green

light for the second race at 17.05.

Qualifying 1: One lap is enough for Oriola

It took only one lap to Pepe Oriola for posting the fastest lap at the beginning of the session. His time of 1:49.231 was nearly two tenths faster than everybody else's.

Jean-Karl Vernay (1:49.424) climbed to second fastest in the latest moments, demoting Mat'ò Homola (1:49.479) to third. After aborting one attempt due to a mistake, Gianni Morbidelli salvaged the situation with a last lap of 1:49.508 that placed him in fourth, ahead of Stefano Comini and James Nash.

The leg was disrupted by the red flag after only four minutes, when Dušan Borković lost his car and hit the barrier head-on at Turn 3.

The following drivers advanced to Q2: Oriola, Vernay, Homola, Morbidelli, Comini, Nash, Afanasyev, Gleason, Pellinen, Hezemans, Kajaia and Tassi.

They were all covered by only nine tenths of a second.

Qualifying 2: SEAT beats Honda and Volkswagen
Mat'ò Homola's SEAT set an impressive fastest lap of 1:48.518 that was good enough for claiming pole position.

The other drivers did their best and improved their times, but not enough. Gianni Morbidelli managed to post the second best lap (1:48.673), while Jean-Karl Vernay (1:48.860) beat his teammate Stefano Comini (1:48.965) for third.

Rounds 5 & 6 – Spa-Francorchamps, Belgium – 5 / 7 May 2016

Qualifying: Borković beats Oriola in the fight for the pole

Dušan Borković gave B3 Racing Team its second consecutive pole position in the TCR International Series after that won by Mat'ò Homola at Estoril two weeks ago. After being stripped of the fastest Q1 lap by a penalty, the Serbian driver posted an impressive 2:33.065 in Q2, beating Pepe Oriola by a bit more than two tenths. "It's great to get the

pole, it was a good reward for the team after the difficult weekend in Portugal. Considering the car that has done the pole here is exactly the same that suffered the accident at Estoril, you realize how well the boys worked. Today, everything worked well: car, tyres, strategy... I just tried to keep calm after one of my best laps in Q1 was deleted and remain focused," Borković said. Him and Oriola locked the front row on the Race 1 grid for SEAT. Aku Pellinen's Honda Civic qualified in third, the only car able to compete with the Spanish machine for the top positions. The first Volkswagen Golf – Stefano Comini's – qualified in eighth, while the other two Honda cars of Kevin Gleason and championship leader Gianni Morbidelli surprisingly did not make the cut for Q2. An impressive Jimmy Claret managed to qualify 11th in his Peugeot 308, while local hero Pierre-Yves Corthals posted the tenth fastest lap and won pole position on the top-ten reverse grid for Saturday's Race 2.

RACE 1 REPORT

Aku Pellinen signs maiden win under the Belgian sun

Aku Pellinen has joined the club of TCR race winners, after taking a clear win in Race 1 at Spa, on a sunny Friday afternoon. Once again, the young Finn of WestCoast Racing took an excellent start from row 2 and kept the lead throughout the entire race with his Honda Civic TCR. Pepe Oriola and Dušan Borković concluded in second and third, after the Spaniard passed the Serbian on lap 1, both achieving their main goal of scoring heavy points. Mat'ò Homola, Gianni Morbidelli, Kevin Gleason and Davit Kajaia took positions from 4th to 7th, after Jean-Karl Vernay and James Nash had ended their duel with a contact that cost several positions to the Briton (he eventually finished 8th) and a drive-through to the Frenchman, who dropped from fourth to 14th. The last points were scored by Sergey Afanasyev and Antti Buri who both had stalled at the start. It was an even worse day for Stefano Comini, as the reigning champion's car was stopped by a broken driveshaft before joining the grid. The young Attila Tassi had a scary shunt in the last lap, caused by a puncture,

but luckily he escaped unhurt. Today's result have closed the gap at the top of the points standings, with Morbidelli leading now only by 2 points on Oriola and 6 on Nash. Race 2 will start tomorrow morning at 12:35. Key facts Grid – Comini's car stops at the bottom of the pitlane and is pushed back to the pits with a drive-shaft problem

RACE 2 REPORT The championship heats up after the Belgian round

The 2016 TCR International Series' first visit to Spa-Francorchamps resulted in an exciting weekend that heated up the championship further. After Aku Pellinen had claimed his maiden TCR victory in yesterday's Race 1 at the wheel of a WestCoast Racing Honda Civic, today it was Jean-Karl Vernay's turn to score a first win for himself and Leopard Racing. It was also the first success of a Volkswagen Golf Gti in the current season. These results meant that five different drivers and three different brands of car manufacturers have won in the six races held so far. Quite obviously the Drivers' championship's classification is extremely close. After Gianni Morbidelli had managed to jump on top of the standings at the end of Race 1, Pepe Oriola retook the leadership after Race 2. The Spaniard has now a two-point margin ahead of James Nash, while Morbidelli is third, two further points adrift. But the others are not far away. Pellinen, Stefano Comini, Vernay, Sergey Afanasyev, Mat'ò Homola and Dušan Borković fill the positions from fourth to ninth, with the latter having a gap of 37 points from the leader. The championship will resume at Imola, Italy on May 22, for rounds 7 and 8.

A triumphant day for Vernay and Leopard Racing

For a maiden win, it was a real triumph! Leopard Racing conquered its first TCR success very close to its Luxembourg headquarters and signed a stunning 1-2-3 with its three drivers: Jean-Karl Vernay, Stefano Comini and guest TCR Germany racer Antti Buri. It was also the

first victory of the year for the Volkswagen Golf Gti cars and the maiden TCR success for Vernay. The Frenchman has proven a quick adaptation to touring car racing and took a well-deserved victory after a close duel with teammate and reigning champion Comini. Mat'ò Homola and Aku Pellinen took fourth and fifth respectively after a relatively troublefree race, while James Nash, Pepe Oriola, Kevin Gleason and Sergey Afanasyev animated the final laps with a close fight for sixth position. Local hero Pierre-Yves Corthals took the last point in a race that saw much action at the back of the field, with the Peugeot 308 cars shining in the first part of the race, when Jimmy Claret ran as high as eighth. Following today's races, the situation in the championship is closer than ever, with the three first drivers (Oriola, Nash and Morbidelli) covered by only 4 points.

Rounds 7 & 8 – Imola, Italy – 22 May 2016

RACE REPORT

Comini and Grachev shared race victories in eventful day

The all-in-one-day event at Imola provided plenty of drama, glory for new faces and a shake-up on top of the Drivers' Championship.

Stefano Comini (Leopard Racing Volkswagen Golf Gti) and Mikhail Grachev (WestCoast Racing Honda Civic) shared the race victories. It was the first one in the season so far for Comini and the first one ever for Grachev.

Two other drivers were able to achieve the first podium results for themselves and their teams: Mat'ò Homola (B3 Racing SEAT León) who was second in Race 2, and Davit Kajaia (Liqui Moly Team Engstler Volkswagen Golf Gti) who finished third in Race 1.

The dark side of the day consisted in the merciless bad luck that hit Gianni Morbidelli and James Nash. They both had arrived in Imola with the hopes to move further up in the standings, but eventually came away empty-handed, and not because of their faults.

Pepe Oriola was able to stay away of troubles and scored precious points that stretched his leadership to 15 points ahead of Comini, who is now his closest competitor.

Maybe it a prelude to a repeat of last year's duel that ended up only at the last race in Macau. But it's not granted, because the fight is closer than ever and provides continuous surprises as it is proved by the fact that seven different drivers in three different types of cars have been victorious in the eight races held so far.

The series will resume in fifteen days at the Salzburgring, Austria, on June 4 and 5, for rounds 9 and 10.

Morbidelli was on pole position for his home event

Italian fans' favourite Gianni Morbidelli achieved his first pole position of the season for his home event at Imola. The former F1 driver set the pace throughout the Qualifying session, posting the fastest laps in both Q1 and Q2.

His best lap of 1:53.228 was only 0.057 faster than Pepe Oriola's 1:53.285, which promises a very close fight between them in Race 1.

Davit Kajaia and Stefano Comini will fill the second row of the grid, while Mikhail Grachev and Mat' Homola will share the third row.

The Qualifying session was also incredibly close, with the nine fastest drivers covered by less than eight tenths.

Jordi Gené and Sergey Afanasyev qualified in tenth and ninth respectively and will be on the front row of the top-ten reversed grid for Race 2. Actually James Nash had posted the ninth fastest lap, but he was demoted to 11th after the Stewards disallowed his fastest lap for trespassing the track limits.

Stefano Comini wins a Race 1 full of drama

Reigning champion Stefano Comini claimed his first victory of the season at the end of a race that was plenty of drama and gave Leopard Racing and Volkswagen their second consecutive win after Jean-Karl Vernay's in Spa Race 2.

The outcome of the first race in Imola spoke

in favour of Pepe Oriola as far as the title fight is concerned, because the Spaniard's closest rivals – Gianni Morbidelli and James Nash – were both scoreless. The Italian seemed on the way to secure a comfortable win when a power steering failure resulted in a dramatic incident that involved his own teammate Alain Menu. As for Nash, he was first slowed down by engine misfire and then hit by another car.

Door-to-door fights resulted in a number of contacts and clashes that eliminated or slowed down some of the top players such as Jordi Oriola, Borkovi ć and Vernay .

The Frenchman was later demoted from 6th to 12th by the Stewards who imposed him a double penalty for trespassing the limits of the track and for his incident with Borkovi ć.

Attila Tassi, Carlotta Fedeli and Alessandra Neri managed to finish in seventh, ninth and tenth positions respectively and scored their first points in the championship.

Mikhail Grachev claims first victory in new car

Motorsport can be funny sometimes. The very same car that had won Race 1 in Spa, was victorious in Race 2 at Imola, but with a different driver: Mikhail Grachev who has just joined WestCoast Racing in the place of Aku Pellinen.

The Russian had reasons to rejoice, as this move granted him that first TCR race win he was chasing since last year. And the icing on the cake for him was that he took the lead overtaking the very same car he had driven until the previous event.

Mat' Homola finished second and climbed on the TCR podium for the first time, while Stefano Comini secured third place after an epic battle with Pepe Oriola.

With both, Gianni Morbidelli and James Nash sidelined by technical issues, Oriola and Comini are now first and second in the Drivers' Championship, separated by only 14 points.