



The wait is finally – almost – over. The qualification session already gave the first patterns of the season, but tomorrow is the D day. The first race of the season is a leap in the dark for everybody, but there are very few brand-new cars in 2010. The engineers have worked hard for the whole off-season to improve the existing cars.

Unlike in Barcelona last year for the kick off of the season, Saturday was hardly a day of surprises in Le Castellet – Nicolas Lapierre on the front row, Audi Sport Team Joest looking a genuine threat to pole sitters Team ORECA-Matmut. But whose pace was for real and who was disguising their true performance? And who are the genuine contenders for victory on Sunday evening?

STRAKKA RACING PUTS PEUGEOT AND ORECA-MATMUT IN THE SHADE

Peugeot versus Audi: the European race-fans have been waiting for the dual for almost one year. Both teams know the track very well as the Paul Ricard circuit is their favorite test track. What about ORECA-Matmut? The workshop is only a few kilometers away from the track, so this is home race for Nicolas Lapierre and Olivier Panis. Polesitter Nicolas Lapierre confirmed: "We know every corner of the track and we did the best that we could. We found a good setup for the race and if I had traffic in my first lap, I could set my best time in the second one. The race should be tough tomorrow because rain is expected and Audi will push from the beginning to the end."

It is probably going to be a season where the lesser lights will be praying for the stars to suffer unreliability, but the reigning champion, Aston Martin Racing, demonstrated that they should be once again one of the quickest cars as Stefan Mücke posted the third time, but their rivals are not far behind, which is promising for the race.

In the LMP2 class, Danny Watts and Strakka Racing have been head and shoulders above their opponents. The British driver was more than two seconds quicker than the second fastest one. "This is the car, not me," Danny Watts modestly said. "The car is too good for us at the moment. I drove at the limit and the pace was really good. We need to feel more comfortable with the car, but it is a fantastic car that achieved a lot in USA these last past years." Strakka Racing is the only LMP2 team fitted with Michelin tyres, and obviously, the French tyre manufacturer has made a big step forward over the winter. Last year's winner Quifel-ASM Team and the other contenders should have a harder time this season.

Edoardo Piscopo was happy with his performance as he set the afternoon's best time in the Formula Le Mans class. When he arrived at the circuit on last Wednesday, he knew neither the track nor the car! The Italian driver was very surprised to be at the press conference with the other polesitters, and explained that he got better and better at every practice session.

FERRARI GAINS THE UPPER HAND

The Larbre Compétition Saleen is the only car in the GT1 class, and Gabriele Gardel, who qualified the car, said: "for us tomorrow's race will be like a test session. We can test different tyres and setups for the 24 Hours of Le Mans, and for Spa, where there the field will be stronger."

Unlike the GT1, the GT2 class is set for one of the most open seasons in years with six cars in the same second. If Ferrari won the first battle, Porsche hasn't give up yet. Team Felbermayr-Proton is the reigning champion, but Gimmi Bruni, who lost the title for one point last year, will have at heart to take his revenge. "We couldn't achieve a better result. We worked a lot on the setup, but we also worked with Michelin over the winter and before the race. I have a very good team-mate, but the GT2 class is very strong this year, so the race is going to be tough."

The warm-up is scheduled to start at 8:20 a.m. tomorrow.

