



Tough breaks put brakes on Team RLR's Estoril challenge

Team RLR wrapped up its first full season in the Le Mans Series with a fifth place LMP2 class finish after an eventful race at the Six Hours of Estoril.

The MG Motor UK backed outfit's prospects of challenging for a podium place were dashed early on after a brake failure almost ended the MG Lola EX265's race completely, but Rob Garofall, Barry Gates and Warren Hughes battled back to finish 17th overall from 27 starters after 201 hard fought laps in Portugal.

The race got off to a smooth start in the baking heat at Estoril, and as the field pulled away from the rolling start Garofall picked up a couple of places to move into ninth overall. He settled into a quick pace and was posting very competitive times when just after starting his 19th lap he thundered down the start/finish straight and entered the braking zone for turn one – only for the brakes to partially fail. He tried to steer through the slide but caught a wheel on the gravel and spun into the trap, having to be towed free and limp back to the pits for the damage to be repaired.

On inspection the problem was caused by a large piece of rubber picked up on track breaking a brake line. The incident cost Team RLR around 15 minutes in the pit box and around seven laps to its LMP2 class rivals - effectively sinking the chances of pushing for the podium position targeted prior to the event. Garofall returned to track in the MG Lola to begin the fightback eighth from eight in LMP2 and 24th overall.

An hour and 45 minutes into the race he returned to the box to switch with Barry Gates. Gates' spell at the wheel started well as he posted some very quick times and benefitted from a the number 39 Pecom car coming unstuck to make up lost ground. However, a small spin resulted in contact that forced Team RLR into an unscheduled stop, which meant at the halfway point the Lancashire-based team were at the tail of the LMP2 class and 23rd overall, despite showing great pace when running.

When P2 rivals Strakka hit problems Gates moved up into 6th in class and 20th overall, but almost immediately technical gremlins struck and an electrical problem meant Gates was left with no readings on the steering wheel dashboard. He did a sterling job to drive around the problem without losing too much time before bringing the MG Lola EX265 back in to hand over to team-mate Warren Hughes.

Hughes had only just begun to get into his stride when the electrical problem reared its head again, causing the car to cut out briefly. The Team RLR pit crew tackled the issue during a quick stop and Hughes returned to the 4.18km to set some blistering times, matching and often bettering those of the class leaders.

However, the experienced endurance racer was under pressure as the HPD of Strakka Racing tried to mount a comeback from its earlier difficulties and turned up the heat in the final hour. Hughes was forced to wring every last piece of performance from the MG Lola EX265 and push its Dunlop tyres to

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the very limits in a bid to stay ahead and retain his position.

With 10 minutes to go he was only 26 seconds ahead of the fast-closing Danny Watts behind, but responded with some superb times even as his tyres went off to close out the race in style. Hughes' outstanding effort combined with the number 45 Boutsen Energy Racing car suffering an extremely unfortunate last lap failure meant Team RLR was elevated to fifth in class and 17th overall at the chequered flag in a dramatic finale.

The result handed the British LMP2 squad a fourth top-five class finish from five Le Mans Series races in 2011.

Team RLR will now look to build on its fine showing in its first full LMS season by working with its existing partners to attract new sponsors to strengthen its programme ahead of challenging for both Le Mans Series and 24 Hours of Le Mans honours in 2012.

Nick Reynolds, Team RLR team principal, said:

"Another frustrating day in many respects as we really felt in a good place before this race and had no issues whatsoever in the build up on Friday and Saturday. We just couldn't have foreseen the problems we had today as they were just really unfortunate circumstances, but it put us back foot right at the start. These things happen in racing though and they can happen any time from the first lap to the last. In endurance racing you just have to try and keep a cool head and work as hard as you can to manage these situations as they arise. In terms of the season as a whole the team has developed tremendously, we've learned a lot and taken a lot from it. I can only thank all the drivers and especially the boys in the garage for the huge amount of effort they have put in both on and off the track throughout the year. We've got such a strong team and I'm looking forward to showing just how good we are when we finally get a clean run."

Warren Hughes, Team RLR driver, said:

"We should have taken a lot more than the result we got today but the issues we had just cost us too much. It was a really difficult finish to the race as we decided to triple stint the last set of tyres to try and keep the car behind at bay, and I wasn't sure that they would last on such an abrasive track. In the end I was just relieved to be able to bring it home and finish as I really was pushing to the limit all the way. Once again the team deserved a bigger result than another fifth place, they have all worked so hard and have so much potential, we just needed a little more luck."

Barry Gates, Team RLR driver, said:

"I felt the race was very frustrating as a few relatively small issues ended up costing us quite a lot of time in the pits. It really was a case of what might have been. The MG Lola was very good when we were on track though and I think all three of us showed some good pace when we got into clean air. It was a good battle at the end and we stuck to our task well to take the best finish we could, no one's head ever goes down in this team. It's been a steep learning curve for us this year, but it's also clear that the performance penalties imposed on the car meant it was difficult to be on the ultimate pace in the class. I'm certain that if we can overcome a few things like that which have been holding us back we can achieve some very good results in the future."

Rob Garofall, Team RLR driver, said:

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“Today could’ve have been a lot better, but it could also have been a lot worse had the brakes gone completely and our race could’ve have come to a very quick, and potentially painful for me, end early on. We fought back and got to the finish again though so all was not lost. It was very satisfying to be able to go right to the wire and defend our place against some very tough opposition too. If you look at where the team as a whole and where it has come from since the start of the year, in its first full season at this level, it has grown so much and everyone has gelled together so well. There is such a determined and positive atmosphere, and it’s a great bunch of people who have done a fantastic job to get the most out of the package.”

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Media contact and images available from Graeme Cleland

t: +44 (0) 1357 523 188

m: +44 (0) 7795 388473

e: graeme@the-inside-line.co.uk

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