

4th May 2010

Spa-Francorchamps 1000kms: final preparations

- After the Paul Ricard HTTT race, the Team ORECA-Matmut is about to begin its second phase of preparation for the Le Mans 24 Hours.
- Panis-Lapierre-Duval have but a single aim – gain experience by taking on the works Peugeots and Audis.



After the 2010 season's kick-off in the Le Castellet 8 Hours in which the Team ORECA-Matmut squad set pole and came fourth, the French team is heading for Belgium to race in the Spa-Francorchamps 1000kms. The event in the Ardennes already has a whiff of Le Mans about it with three works Peugeot 908 HDi FAPs and three Audi R15 Pluses. The Var-based squad has put its faith in the three drivers who will be at the wheel of the Peugeot in the Sarthe. Loïc Duval will join Olivier Panis and Nicolas Lapierre in the 908, which will carry the colours of the 'Fondation de l'Avenir' on an exceptional basis.

Before taking part in the second round of the 2010 Le Mans Series, the Team ORECA-Matmut carried out a private test session on the Le Castellet circuit to continue getting to know the 908 HDi FAP. "These tests were positive," states David Floury, the technical director. "We were able to work on a certain number of points where we have to progress: in particular, we did a lot of work in the area of mechanical interventions. We completed our programme – long runs, fuel consumption, night driving - and the drivers complemented one another perfectly. We got to know the car better; we're better prepared. And our aim is to be even better after Spa!"

In Belgium, the overall quality of the field will be much higher with a bigger selection of LM P1 cars. The aim, though, hasn't changed: "We're sticking to the same philosophy – learning before Le Mans. At Le Castellet, some things went well, others didn't. We have to retain the positive aspects and eliminate the negative ones. Spa will be a real "little" Le Mans with the presence of the Peugeots and Audis. We're expecting a ding-dong battle, but we've got to strike the right balance. We want to see where we stand, and we'll know from the result. On the other hand, we mustn't get carried away: our priority is to see the chequered flag to give the drivers maximum driving time. Our target is Le Mans!"

The second phase of preparation for the Le Mans 24 Hours will be a very enriching one. The Spa-Francorchamps circuit with its famous Eau Rouge Raidillon is a really selective layout. "Concerning the mechanical setup, Spa will be much closer to Le Mans than Le Castellet," points out Floury. "We're going to learn more about the Peugeot 908 HDi FAP, and as the weather is often very changeable on this circuit, it'll be a very useful experience in view of the 24 Hours."

The Team ORECA-Matmut drivers will arrive at Spa in tip-top physical condition after spending several days together on a fitness training course in the south of France.



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Nicolas Lapierre: "We know it's going to be tough"

Nicolas, how do you feel about tackling the Spa 1000kms?

"We're determined to take our revenge after our disappointment in the Le Castellet 8 Hours. We showed our level of performance and now we have to turn it into a result. In parallel, we know we're still learning before Le Mans, especially at Spa where we'll be up against very tough opposition. We'll be able to see where we stand in relation to the works Peugeots and Audis. I love Spa. I'm always delighted to go there – even more so this year!"

How important is this race?

"As everybody says, it's the final rehearsal before Le Mans. The field is very like that of the 24 Hours. I think each team is going to give 100% and we'll have a much clearer picture of the overall situation after Spa. It's important to have a good race to put us in the best possible frame of mind. It's the last opportunity to find our marks - especially as Loïc will be with us - and to hone our skills."



Will you play a waiting game as you're up against Audi and Peugeot?

"No, I don't think so. We want to be in the thick of this battle as much as possible. You can't play a waiting game in a six-hour race. It's a real sprint run at a searing pace right from the start. We know it'll be hotly contested. On the other hand, our main aim is to gain experience for Le Mans. We have to find the right balance. The quality of the field may well be high but so are our aims!"



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