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Motorsport

Sebring, 17 March 2002

Audi celebrates third Sebring victory in a row

Audi have won the 12 Hours of Sebring, one of the most demanding motorsport events, for a third time in a row in front of a record crowd of more than 150,000 spectators. Because of the bumpy Sebring track, the American endurance classic is known to be a tough test, the 50th running of the event being even more difficult compared to the recent years: Intense heat of up to 34 degrees celsius even melted the track's tarmac at the opening round of the American Le Mans Series (ALMS), requiring repairs at the beginning of the final third of the race.

The high temperatures and humidity did not affect the winning Infineon Audi R8. After last year's "rain battle" at Le Mans the most successful sportscar of today mastered also the "heat battle" in Florida. Audi is only the fourth manufacturer that was able to achieve three Sebring victories in a row.

While Rinaldo Capello repeated his victory from last year, Johnny Herbert and Christian Pescatori managed to win the endurance classic at their first attempt. Only one incident threatened the win of the Italian-British trio: A collision in heavy traffic in the hectic early stages damaged the left rear suspension of the R8. The repair relegated Capello/Herbert/Pescatori temporarily to third.

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Also their team mates Frank Biela, Tom Kristensen and Emanuele Pirro, the 2000 Sebring winners, were involved in a collision which caused a number of unscheduled pit-stops. Changing the steering, finally took all chance of victory away from the number one Infineon Audi R8. From 9th position, Biela/Kristensen/Pirro recovered to fifth place.

Audi's customer team Champion made it tense during the entire race. Stefan Johansson, Jan Lammers and Andy Wallace always stayed in touch with the eventual winners with their 2001-spec R8. Because this Audi was also running like clockwork, the gap was never bigger than one lap to the 'works' team. Despite a spin in the final corner, the Champion team finished second behind the Audi Sport North America team making it an Audi 1-2.

Quotes after the race

Rinaldo Capello (Infineon Audi R8 #2): "It was a great race and as hard as always. It was incredibly hot. We did three stints in a row right from the beginning which was really difficult in these conditions. Of course we were luckier today compared to the number one car."

Johnny Herbert (Infineon Audi R8 #2): "We put in a lot of hard work for this win. Having achieved it, it's fantastic. The Audi R8 is still the car to beat. In the end I was basically trying to conserve the fuel and the brakes. I set a comfortable pace which was enjoyable as well."

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Christian Pescatori (Infineon Audi R8 #2): "I am so proud that we were able to win this race. Last year Michele celebrated his last victory here. Dindo and I wanted to win this race for him. I am really happy that we achieved this. The race was very hard, especially in the beginning when there were so many cars. It was really difficult to overtake."

Stefan Johansson (Audi R8 #38): "The Audi just improved with every lap. I was really hooked up in my second stint and the car allowed me to be pretty aggressive. A caution period when we managed to get back on the lead lap in the closing stages would have made the finish interesting but it didn't materialise. It's both pleasing and frustrating to finish second."

Jan Lammers (Audi R8 #38): "Spinning at the last corner on the final lap shows that I still have a lot to learn! The car was extremely good throughout the race, it didn't miss a beat, and the team worked extremely hard all week. We only just missed out on the top spot."

Andy Wallace (Audi R8 #38): "At the start of the race, the handling was not great. But the car was superb for my next stint. All three of us drove really hard. We gave everything - but it wasn't quite good enough."

Frank Biela (Infineon Audi R8 #1): "For Audi, this victory is of course a great thing. However, for our car it didn't work out that good. But it just shows that you can never take anything for granted. But we were fast the entire week and so I'm optimistic for the next races."

Tom Kristensen (Infineon Audi R8 #1): "Twice I did three stints in a row – under that cruel heat this is a real tough start to the season. It's a shame we didn't get the reward for that. Until the race day everything went well. But these incidents can occur at any time."

Emanuele Pirro (Infineon Audi R8 #1): "Perhaps we have been a little bit spoiled during the last three years, because we never had any technical difficulties at all. The sad thing is that we were at the front in almost every session, but during the race we had all the bad luck you could have. But hopefully, next time it's the other way around."

Reinhold Joest, Team Director Audi Sport North America: "This was an important and serious test for Le Mans. Of course the victory here at Sebring is a great success. But on the other hand we have learned the hard way, that we still have a lot to do. Now we will concentrate all our effort to work on that."

Dr Wolfgang Ullrich, Head of Audi Sport: „To win Sebring again, is a great success for the whole team which was achieved under extreme conditions. The temperatures and the speed were enormous, this was a very good test for Le Mans. However, not everything was going as planned today, especially with car number one. But most of the troubles were somehow related to the early crash which affected the car quite a lot. The crew did a great job to bring this car to the finish. We have seen today how important it is to have two equally strong driver teams."

Race results

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1. Capello/Herbert/Pescatori (Infineon Audi R8)	346 laps
2. Johansson/Lammers/Wallace (Audi R8)	1 lap behind
3. Mathews/Smith/Goossens (R&S-Elan)	9 laps behind
4. Weaver/Leitzinger/Forbes-Robinson (R&S-Lincoln)	16 laps behind
5. Biela/Kristensen/Pirro (Infineon Audi R8)	19 laps behind
6. Collins/Vann/Wilson (Ascari)	23 laps behind
7. Field/Dayton/Durand (MG Lola)	23 laps behind
8. Herta/Donohue/Auberlen (Panoz)	27 laps behind
9. Fellows/O'Connell/Gavin (Chevrolet)	29 laps behind
10. Konrad/Seiler/Borcheller (Saleen)	37 laps behind

Photos and further information are available on the internet:
www.audi-sportpress.com (accreditation required)

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