

ONE-STOP WONDER

Was having the fastest car essential for Sundowner GP success? Just ask the winners...

By Michael Banovsky

BOWMANVILLE, ON – CASC-OR's first endurance race in nearly 30 years went off without a hitch on Sunday, May 22. The Sundown Grand Prix – an almost forgotten famous Canadian race whose winners include the likes of Roger Penske – attracted 20 cars and thousands of fans.

It's necessary to talk a little bit about this race from a driver's perspective. Because it's been so many years since the last Sundown, most (if not all) of the drivers haven't raced more than 90 minutes at a time. They had to find pit crew members for pit stops – including refueling – and had to share a car with another driver. Allan Lewis, the eventual winner of the event, said that strategy also played a large part in the race.

"I had never run a race longer than 90 minutes, nor had a co-driver before, so I thought this would be an interesting experience," Lewis said. "[Before the race,] we were also optimistic that the strategy we had would give us a serious chance of winning our class, even if the field was as large as hoped."

Nick Majors, who finished third overall and first in Class 3, said that the preparation done before the event was key to their success.

"Most of the work and our success on the track was due in large part to the decisions made and the what we did before the race as much as during it," Majors said. "Selecting the right crew members, getting the correct equipment (refueling rig, tire compounds, etc), training everyone on the team with not only their known responsibilities – but also with how they should react if unknown situations arise. We were getting ready to think on our feet!"

Technical ace, race director, and Class 1 competitor Gunter Schmidt drew up regulations that allowed for a large number of eligible cars placed into four balanced classes. Class 1 was open to GT-O, GT1, and TGTC-SGT cars. Class 2 included cars from GT-U, GT-A, and TGTC-GT. Class 3 had a mix of GT-B, GT-C, TGTC-T, and FAQ-TC. Finally, Class 4 was open to competitors from GT-D, Honda Michelin, and the Toyota Echo Cup.

Two important regulations that a few cars fell foul of were the pit lane speed limit (set at 50 km/h for this event), and the "fuel spillage" rule. Competitors were penalized for fuel spillage that exceeded a set template. This was done to discourage NASCAR-style sloppy refueling.

Schmidt's team of himself, Rob Smith, and Peter Carpenko started at the front of the grid



(Main) Even though it was almost 10 minutes long, a one-stop strategy helped the Lewis/Dimoff BMW win the three-hour Sundown Grand Prix. (Inset) The Schmidt Racing Volkswagen had to pit one extra time after spilling fuel in the pit lane, which meant a stop-and-go penalty.

PHOTOS BY BRAD BUCKLER

in their Class 1 Volkswagen Corrado with a 1:33.810. Rob Pacione in his Porsche 944 Turbo was outside front-row, with the team of Jody Trudeau, Karl Thomson, and Steve Kent in a Chevrolet Camaro rounding out the top three qualifiers.

Schmidt made a clean getaway, and led a few laps with Pacione trailing in second. However, after pit stops, they both faded, handing the lead to the (visiting) #74 Kensai Racing Acura TSX of Michael Thornley and P. Schwarzott – followed by the # 252 Lewis/Dimoff BMW E30.

Basically the race settled into the expected rhythm – the faster cars covered more ground but had to pit more, and the slower cars were slower but pitted less. Lewis' earlier mention of their strategy came into play in the middle of the race. In their class, the main competition was the much-faster Kensai Racing entrant. In fact, at one stage, it made up 23 seconds in 19 laps over Christopher Sorensen in the #254 ActionFront BMW E36.

The Kensai Racing entry eventually retired, cementing the ActionFront BMWs lead in Class 3. The win was still wide open, however, between the one-stopping Lewis/Dimoff car and Schmidt's Class 1 Corrado. The win depended largely on the Lewis/Dimoff pit stop. As Dimoff says, the stop was interesting.

"When I think about it now it's hilarious. It

was Allan's job to fuel the car when he came into the pits. So after racing for almost an hour and a half he got out of the car, put his visor down and took the fuel jug from my hands," Dimoff said. "The first thing that happened was that his sunglasses fogged up. The second thing that happened was that his visor fogged up big-time. He was staggering around like a blind man trying to put the fuel nozzle into the receiver and then feed the fuel in without kinking the hose or splashing it onto the ground unnecessarily. In the end, our brilliant one-stop strategy resulted in the car sitting in the pits for over 10 minutes. There were other teams that made two stops and finished with less time in the pits than we did!"

In the end, the Lewis/Dimoff car won by two laps over the Schmidt Corrado (who fell victim to the fuel spillage rule, making them come in for a stop-and-go penalty). According to Lewis and Dimoff, the win was a result of hard work and their successful race strategy.

"The result was that we won the race overall by a two-lap margin. Many teams had large crews with uniforms and overhead fueling rigs," Dimoff said. We had Rob McNeil (crew chief), our wives and gas cans. Every time I see Allan now neither of us can wipe the stupid grin off our faces. I expect that it will be much more difficult to win the Sundown Grand Prix next year." ■