

DUCATI ESPRIT RACING TEAM #121 – Press release

ENDURANCE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP 2016/2017 – BOL D'OR Race – 17-18th september 2016

The 17th and 18th of September 2016 was the date for the famous Bol d'Or 24 Hours Endurance race at the mythical Paul Ricard racetrack at Le Castellet in the Var (South of France). Among the 56 teams engaged was the Ducati Esprit Racing Team, flying proudly the colours of the Bolognese motorcycle manufacturer from flag to flag.

The first and, sadly, only twin engaged in the new category "Supertwin" proposed by the FIM in the World Endurance Championship to encourage manufacturers of twin cylinder motorcycles to compete with the four cylinder bikes prevalent in the EWC and Superstock classes, the team 100% amateur and passionate for the Ducati brand had opted for the 1299 Panigale, selected for its performance and reliability.

The preparation of the two machines was undertaken by Peter Clark of Esprit Racing, with the qualifying machine being used as a development bike ridden by Stéphane Cancela in the French Protwin championship, and the race machine being carefully run in, then prepared for maximum reliability, with the chassis being the focus of attention for improving the wheel changing, quick removal of fairings, adoption of the 24 liter fuel tank and quick-filler system allowed in the rules, Öhlins suspension and the electrical lighting harness dedicated for the needs of endurance racing. The team was made up exclusively of riders who compete in the French Protwin championship, thus familiar with the characteristics of the fabulous Ducati Panigale, with Stéphane Cancela (the prime mover of the project and 4th overall rider in the 2014 championship), Michaël Fudala (actual leader of the 2016 championship), Stéphane Geslin (winner of the championship in 2014) and Laurent Zanetto (3rd in the 2015 championship) as the stand-in rider for the Bol d'Or.

The team of volunteers led by Team Manager Olivier Ribette, president of the Ducati Club de France, was composed of Michel Cheylan (strategist), Roman Beaussier (pit-stop panel), Pierre Dumaître, Céline Goin, Thierry Buraud, Francis Schroeder and Aubry Archambault (chronometers and signaling), Peter Clark and Nicolas L'hoste (mechanics and responsible for front wheel changing), Pierre Galnon and Christophe Guglielmino (mechanics and responsible for rear wheel changing), Georges Lions, Jean-Raymond Cayre, Rémy Geslin and Éric Bouton (refueling and fire security), Stéphane Berlivet (wheels and tyres), Alan Durante, Jean Pelle and Karine Mas (osteopaths and kineositherapists), Olivier Lecomte (photographer), Bernard Giraud and Aubry Archambault (communication), the chief cook was Philippe Hourdequin (gastronomy) with Patrick Sauveau (table service), Adeline Di Via and Lise (grid girls), Thierry Mulot (support and lending of the team truck), as well as Isabelle Clark, Ghislain Gruau, Fabrice Mallet and Fred Buhler (assistances and support in the preparation of the event).

The adventure was made possible by the financial and logistical support of ADN Unipromotion (site decontamination after accidents), Esprit Racing / Peter Clark (preparation of racing motorcycles), the Ducati Club de France (one of the largest and most passionate Ducati owners club in the World), Ducati Marseille/Nimes/Toulon (main Ducati dealer in the South-east of France) and Ducati West Europe, Bridgestone tyres (excellent racing tyres and the support of one of the most experienced tyre engineers in racing, Peter Baumgartner, former tyre technician for Valentino Rossi), Speedway Accessories (motorcycle superstore in Marseille), RSX Design (graphic design of the motorcycles and pitbox), Lenevette Assurances (Insurance for racing and extreme events), AFAM (chains and sprockets which go the distance), Igol (oil and workshop products), MGB Moto (loan of the chronometers cabin), Akrapovic (exhaust systems), and the numerous contributors and supporters who helped via the on-line donation site "Leetchi.com", the team Scuderia 121 thanks you all profoundly !

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The team of passionate Ducatisti spent the week at the Paul Ricard track, with the first free practices on the Tuesday allowing the riders to get to grips with the machine. Technical scrutineering was passed on the Wednesday, and the official free practices, first qualifying and night qualifying all went without any problems on Thursday the 15th. The riders averaged lap times between 2'05" and 2'08", and qualified the bike in 43rd place out of 56, concentrating more on race set-up than outright qualifying grid importance. Top speed down the 1.8km Mistral straight was around 310 kph. Friday qualifying was rained out, so the team concentrated on perfecting the machine and setting up the pit box ready for the race.

The race began at 15:10 on Saturday the 17th, after a delay caused by the crash of Louis Rossi on the warm-up lap, and Stéphane Geslin sprinted to begin his relay of 50 minutes, (determined by the fuel consumption of nearly 1 liter par lap, about the average of the other teams racing the 5.8 km distance of a lap of the track)

With regular performance and quick pit stops, the team passed from 41st position to 25th just before 19:00. It was then that Michaël Fudala was victim of a violent high side while accelerating hard, and this would drop the team down the classification, as well as having knock-on effects after the bike returned to the box, was repaired and sent back out. A battery, damaged in the crash, caused parasite problems with the electronics, leading to the electronic assistance (ABS, wheelie and traction control and other aids for the rider going to fail-safe mode, allowing the bike to work, but without electronic assistance). The riders then had to control manually the 200 hp of the Ducati, no easy task. Michaël attempted to carry on riding but was in too much pain, and was declared unfit to continue by the circuit medical staff, leaving the two Stéphane's to continue the rest of the race.

During the night and in the early dawn light, a broken exhaust header, damaged bearings in the gear selector and a vibration in the front end kept the mechanics busy, further slowing down the climb back up the classification.

As the Sun rose on Sunday, the team was encouraged by the amazing support of the spectators and circuit marshals around the track and in pit lane, and surprised to see that so many of their fellow competitors had experienced even worse luck than them. The riders girded their loins and gave full effort to ensure the joyous bellow of the Ducati's Akrapovic exhausts was enjoyed by the fans as they consolidated the 30th place, too far back to enter the top 20, and keeping strategically ahead of the 31st placed team.

The Bolognese twin ran perfectly the entire race, stretching her legs down the long straight to the surprise of many factory teams, and crossed the finish line to joyous applause in the 30th place out of the 55 teams who started the race.

The "Ducati Esprit Racing Team" finished this legendary race with the satisfaction of achieving the initial dream of bringing a Ducati across the finishing line of this most mythical of all races and validating the reliability of their favourite twin cylinder motorcycle, as well as generating a "buzz" around the event and forming a team both competent and convivial capable of going the full distance with an eye on competing in the entire championship.

This encouraging experience leads the team to contemplate seriously continuing the project for the full season of the World Endurance Championship 2016/2017, namely the next races, the 12 Hours of Portimao (Portugal the 17th / 18th of March 2017), the "24 Heures du Mans" (Le Mans, France, 15th / 16th of April 2017), the 8 Hours of Oschersleben (Germany, 19th / 20th of May 2017), a further 8 Hours race (TBA) in Europe the 23rd / 24th of June 2017, and terminating at the legendary 8 Hours of Suzuka in Japan on the 29th / 30th of July 2017.

An enormous and heartfelt "thank you" to everyone who contributed to and supported this incredible experience, and to the many more adventures to come.

Stéphane Cancela

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