



FIA WEC - Qatar 1812km - A round to learn from.

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#News

For their first participation in the FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC), Akkodis ASP Team was discovering the series and the magnificent Losail circuit, in the Emirate of Qatar. Preceded by a slightly disrupted Prologue due to logistics delays, the inaugural race of the 2024 season (10 hours or 1812 km), was going to be rich in lessons to learn for the French team. The two teams entered, José María López, Esteban Masson and Takeshi Kimura in the #87 Lexus RC F GT3, and Kelvin Van der Linde, Timur Boguslavskiy and Arnold Robin on board the #78, had diverse fortunes, punctuated by penalties all along this motorsport marathon. In the end, only the #87 Lexus RC F crossed the finish line (P16 LMGT3), while the #78 had to retire due to a technical issue. No time for regrets, the next race is already coming up quickly and all eyes are already on the 6 Hours of Imola (Italy) planned on the 21st of April.



Disrupted Prologue!

After three test days at the Paul Ricard circuit at the start of February, followed by the shipment of the cars and material, it was at the Losail circuit, close to Doha (Qatar), that the 2024 season began. The start of the Prologue was delayed by two days to allow all material and cars to eventually reach Qatar after circumstances in the region caused transportation delays.

The delayed delivery did not dampen the spirits of the two Akkodis ASP Team crews though; José María López, Esteban Masson, Takeshi Kimura (#87) and Kelvin Van der Linde, Timur Boguslavskiy and Arnold Robin (#78) were ready to discover this quick 5km circuit and its 16 corners.

After three test sessions, which came to 13 hours of driving before the inaugural round of the championship, the two Lexus RC F made it under the 1:55 lap time, ending up twice in the Top 3 - once with Esteban Masson (#87) and once with Kelvin Van der Linde (#78).



In the starting-blocks

The first free practice session of the 1812km of Qatar allowed the 18 entered LMGT3 cars to properly enter into the competition, elaborate strategies and find the right setups. The drivers not only had a new circuit to discover, they had to adjust to the track limits procedures, which were under particular scrutiny.

The two Lexus finished in the top 12 for the #78 and in the top 16 for the #87, with mainly Bronze drivers at the wheel ahead of the qualifying session.

The pressure mounted as the qualifying sessions began. The new format of this exercise would take part in two steps: a 12 minute session with the crew's Bronze driver at the wheel, followed by a Hyperpole for the 10 fastest. At the end of the 12 minute session, Akkodis ASP Team placed their two Lexus RC F GT3 in 15th (#78 Arnold Robin) and 16th (#87 Takeshi Kimura) place in the category, not enough for the Hyperpole.



Learning phase in a demanding championship

At 11 o'clock (local time), the weather (21°C) and the track conditions were ideal, the lights went green for the first race of the 2024 FIA World Endurance Championship. The race would start in the daylight and finish at night.

Arnold Robin in the #78 Lexus RC F GT3 and Takeshi Kimura in the #87 were at the start and got off to a good pace for their first stint. After fewer than ten laps, the Hypercars were already lapping the GT3 cars. The traffic caused some contact and the #78 received a drive-through penalty.

At the end of the first hour, the two Akkodis ASP Team cars were P14 (#87) and P15 (#78) and adopted two slightly staggered strategies. Esteban Masson slid into the #87 after an hour, while Kelvin Van der Linde took the wheel of the #78 after 1h30.

The laps went by and the pace accelerated, allowing the #87 to reach the top 10. A brief Full Course Yellow disrupted proceedings, but the race quickly picked up again. Timur Boguslavskiy got behind the wheel of the #78, and then a bit later, it was José María López's turn in the #87 to make the most of his car.

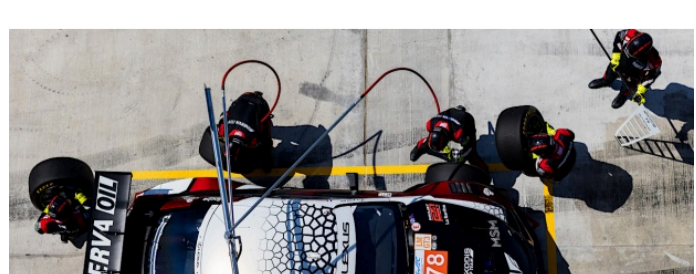


But track limits were a factor in the race too and both cars paid the price, with penalties of 10s and 30s before a drive through. During the Full Course Yellow, a procedural infringement also incurred a penalty. That lost time impacted the race chances of the two Lexus RC F GT3, which had managed to climb up to P10 (#87) and P11 (#78) by the halfway mark.

In the second part of the race, with darkness setting in, events were gathering pace. The #87 had to head to the pits to address a brake balance issue, before quickly returning to the track.

While there were still three hours left, the #78 was at the edge of the top 10 and the #87 P17. There were still opportunities to win some positions before the chequered flag, but with less than 1h30 to go, the #78 made an unplanned pit stop. A sudden loss of power affected Kelvin Van der Linde in the pits. The engineers quickly got to work, but the minutes went by and the car was unable to resume. José María López (#87) crossed the finish line P16.

This first race came to a frustrating end, but it was full of lessons to learn for the rest of the season, and points to improve. The Akkodis ASP Team is already thinking about the 6 Hours of Imola (21st April), a well-known track, but where traffic management will be more delicate than in Qatar.



Photos @Sergiy Savrasov & Harry Parvin