

LARBRE COMPETITION CLINCHES ANOTHER FIA WEC TOP-FIVE RESULT IN SHANGHAI

• *Wet conditions mask dry weather pace*

Larbre Competition left China with a sense of accomplishment after finishing a solid fifth in the LMGTE Am class at the 6 Hours of Shanghai last weekend (October 30 – November 1). The #50 Corvette C7.R could have even secured a maiden podium at round seven of the FIA World Endurance Championship had tricky weather conditions and a pair of untimely full course yellow periods halfway through the race not stymied the team's progress.

Coming off their season-best result at Fuji, the French GT specialists looked to continue their front-running form at the Shanghai International Circuit. Indeed, their intentions were soon made clear when Paolo Ruberti, Gianluca Roda and Nicolai Sylvest – who returned after a convincing debut in Japan – topped Friday's opening free practice.

Riding on the back of a perfectly set up Corvette C7.R, Larbre approached Saturday's qualifying shootout aiming to make amends for their confiscated pole position at the previous round in Fuji. The Vigeant-based squad nearly pulled off a similar feat by logging the third fastest time, less than two tenths shy of the LMGTE Am benchmark.

As in Japan three weeks earlier, rain swept across the Chinese Grand Prix venue on Sunday, which meant the race got underway behind the Safety Car. Regular starter Ruberti had to wait 14 minutes before the green flags were waved but, having quickly moved into the class lead, the Italian's wet-shod Corvette soon started to suffer from understeer. Despite dropping back behind the #77 Porsche, Ruberti maintained very strong pace throughout the opening stint before handing the car over to Roda.

Larbre took the opportunity to make an aggressive strategy call by switching to Michelin's intermediate tyres. Despite treacherous track conditions, Roda kept the car pointing in the right direction to complete an error-free stint and stay in contention for a podium finish. Next up was Sylvest, whose double spell behind the wheel would contribute to Larbre's eventual result.

Indeed, the Danish youngster soon fell foul of a first full course yellow period when the slower lap times led to a significant drop in tyre temperature, which affected his pace once racing resumed. Sylvest had barely managed to get up to speed again before his efforts were hindered by another set of yellows.

However, the #50 car wasn't the only one to struggle on its intermediates: the 6 Hours of Fuji-winning #77 Porsche was experiencing similar issues, and as both contenders slipped down the order so they continued to fight over what became fourth place.

Following Sylvest's consistently fast second stint Roda climbed back aboard for the penultimate hour and was pleased to see the C7.R's pace improve with better track conditions. Over the final stint, fellow countryman Ruberti continued to close in on the Porsche ahead until a mild racing incident hindered his charge. The Italian would eventually greet the chequered flag in fifth just 20 seconds behind the #77 machine, earning Larbre 10 more valuable FIA WEC points.

Paolo Ruberti: "We were unlucky with the weather last weekend. We'd been very quick in dry conditions, but the rain hurt our pace.

"We had some understeer when racing on full wets and a bit of oversteer after swapping for intermediates. We really had to fight for grip, which meant we lost a lot of time to the leaders.

"It was all the more frustrating considering that we were very quick again during the final two stints after the track had dried up."

Gianluca Roda: "I experienced two very different stints at Shanghai. During my first spell behind the wheel there was a lot of water on the track and I was running on intermediates, which made things quite tricky. Still, conditions started to get better towards the end and lap times improved.

"I'm very happy about my second stint, which took place on a mixed circuit. The car was very fast and fun to drive.

"In the end we scored another fifth place so I can't be entirely satisfied, but I'm quite pleased with the way I drove overall."

Nicolai Sylvest: "My first stint was really difficult. Jack warned me that conditions weren't great and I quickly found out how right he was! The problem was that I had lower tyre pressures, which made it hard to bring the rubber up to optimum working temperature.

"We then had a first full course yellow, so we lost some heat out of the tyres once more. We managed to warm them up a little bit after that, but we were then hindered by another caution period.

"The second stint went better, though the tyres were pretty old by then."

Jack Leconte: "This weekend showed how much we have optimised the set-up on our Corvette C7.R, which is very competitive. We were a bit disappointed to come within a whisker of another pole position as 15 hundredths isn't a lot! Nevertheless, we'll aim to bag another one next time out.

“While our dry weather settings have been optimised, we’re perhaps slightly behind Porsche in the wet.

“Paolo delivered a very strong first stint before we switched to inters. Nicolai was not entirely used to keeping the tyres warm during the full course yellows, but his second stint was really good since he was not hampered by another caution period.

“Speaking of which, I think it’d be wiser to replace the FCY procedure with a Safety Car when it’s raining. During a full course yellow competitors are forced to drive at 80kph all around the circuit. This triggers a big drop in tyre temperature, which makes driving conditions extremely tricky when the green flag is waved again. Indeed, in rainy conditions tyres and brakes lose too much heat and become less efficient. This led to a lot of cars spinning when racing resumed, as they could immediately set off at full speed after the restart. By comparison, the Safety Car allows you to go faster outside the area where there’s been an incident, which in turn enables the driver to maintain the necessary grip levels.

“The team did a fine job on the car’s setup over the two Asian events. The drivers’ feedback has been positive and they are very pleased with the car’s handling and set-up. We only have one more chance to secure a podium this season, so that’ll definitely be the target at Sakhir!

“Furthermore, I can confirm that Kristian Poulsen will be back alongside Paolo Ruberti and Gianluca Roda for the 6 Hours of Bahrain, after Nicolai Sylvest brilliantly stepped in for two races.”

The 2015 FIA World Endurance Championship season finale takes place at Bahrain International Circuit on November 19-21.