



BITTERSWEET SUCCESS

AF Corse came to Le Mans with low expectations, but managed to reach the podium—just not in the class it hoped for.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MICHIEL MULDER

It is half past ten in the evening at Le Mans. In the AF Corse pit box, last year's GTE-Pro class winner Toni Vilander anxiously awaits the arrival of Ferrari #71. The 458 GT is running sixth in class and 25th overall, and it's up to Vilander to improve the situation. The mechanics—professional, calm, focused—are preparing themselves for the pit stop.

Ten minutes later, the pit signal sounds. The car rushes in and brakes heavily. Smoke belows from inside the wheels, and the smell of fuel and hot

rubber fills the air. Suddenly the pit box explodes with activity. Driver Olivier Beretta crawls out of the car and Vilander slips in. A mechanic is already filling up the Ferrari with a full fuel load of 85 liters. When he retracts the fuel hose, the Ferrari jumps skyward on its hydraulic jacks. Two other crew members rush around the car and change the tires while Beretta helps Vilander fix the safety belts.

"Everything OK with the car?" Vilander asks. Beretta nods and closes the door.

The car drops from its jacks,



AF Corse's #51 Ferrari 458 GT qualified fourth in the GTE-Pro class at Le Mans, but finished the race in sixth, four laps behind the winner.

Vilander flicks on the lights and starts the engine. Then he's off to chase Aston Martins and Porsches through the night. He will return in about one hour.

AF Corse is the creation of Italian Amato Ferrari -no relation to the Maranello manufacturer. Ferrari started his racing career at the age of 15, in karts. Things became more serious when he changed to cars, racing in several British and Italian series between 1983 and '94, and winning two national titles, one being the Formula Alfa Boxer champi-

onship. At the age of 28, Ferrari reached a turning point and quit driving. He stayed on the scene as a team manager, however, and founded AF (for his initials) Corse in 2002. In the early 2000's, the team won the Italian Superturismo Championship and the Maserati Trofeo Championship.

AF Corse entered the big leagues in 2004, when Maserati entrusted the team with two MC12s for the FIA GT championship. The big Masers won in their second race.

By 2006, AF Corse had switched from Maserati to

Ferrari, lining up two F430s in the FIA GT2 Championship. Again, it enjoyed success, winning that year's team, driver and manufacturer titles. That achievement was repeated again in 2007. And 2008. And once more in 2009.

By 2010, Ferrari had set his sights on the 24 Hours of Le Mans, so he entered three F430 GTs in that year's Le Mans Series. In 2011, AF Corse won the Intercontinental Le Mans Cup (with a 458 GT), the Le Mans Series, the FIA GT3 Championship, the GT Sprint and the ECC.

It was memorable season, but the grand prize, Le Mans, had not yet been secured. That would have to wait until 2012, when, after victory at the 12 Hours of Sebring, AF Corse won the GTE-Pro class in the famed 24-hour race. The team also won the year's FIA World Endurance Championship (which had replaced the Intercontinental Le Mans Cup), meaning that 2013 would present a huge challenge. It's far different being the defending champion than the up-and-comer who wants to steal the title.



The 2013 World Endurance Championship consists of seven six-hour races and the 24 Hours of Le Mans. (The WEC is a collaboration between the FIA and the Automobile Club de l'Ouest, which organizes *Les 24 Heures*.) At the first round of the year at Silverstone, the GTE-Pro class looked to be an Aston Martin versus Ferrari battle, with Porsche and its new 911 RSRs as a dangerous outsider. Factory teams and highly motivated privateers set the pace in GTE-Pro, providing close racing and thrilling action behind the leading Audi/Toyota LMP1 prototype

AF Corse's #71 Ferrari (left) finished fifth in GTE-Pro, but the team enjoyed more success in the GTE-Am class, with its #61 458 (right) crossing the line in third and its #55 Ferrari (far right) coming home in second place.



fight. It's reminiscent of a period long ago—Aston DBR1 versus Ferrari 250 TR then, Ferrari 458 GT versus Aston Vantage V8 today—like a kind of sports-car heaven revisited.

Aston showed its ambition at Silverstone, finishing first and third; AF Corse's #71 Ferrari took second place. Round two, at Spa-Francorchamps, saw AF Corse's #51 Ferrari score the win, with an Aston in second and the #71 Ferrari third. It was a promising start to the season, but Le Mans looked to be different.

At Test Day, AF Corse's #71 Ferrari, piloted by Beretta, Vilander and Kamui Kobayashi, was only eighth quickest, nearly 1.7 seconds off the pace of the fastest Aston. In fact, the Astons were one-two, the Porsches three-four. The

reason? The WEC's Balance of Performance, a handicapping formula which is intended to make the cars even.

"The rules for the WEC changed since last year, and we built an entirely new car for this season," explained Ferrari. "But we are not happy with the BOP regulations because we are penalized by this. Porsche maybe benefits a bit too much, and Aston has a weight and fuel advantage. Therefore, the first rounds of the WEC did not go the way we hoped. The podium at Spa was plain lucky, because after a safety-car situation we had only nine seconds left of

two other Ferrari teams: JMW (in Pro) and Krohn (in Am). Although Tracy Krohn wrote off his Ferrari during practice on Wednesday, his team did the near-impossible, buying a 458 GT3 in Italy and transferring the wrecked car's hardware onto it within 11 hours—"With the aid of numerous people and uncountable cups of coffee," said Krohn. But the team made it to the start, which meant that seven Ferraris faced five Astons and six Porsches, as well as a handful of Chevrolet Corvettes, BMW Z4s and SRT Vipers. It was time for the show to begin.

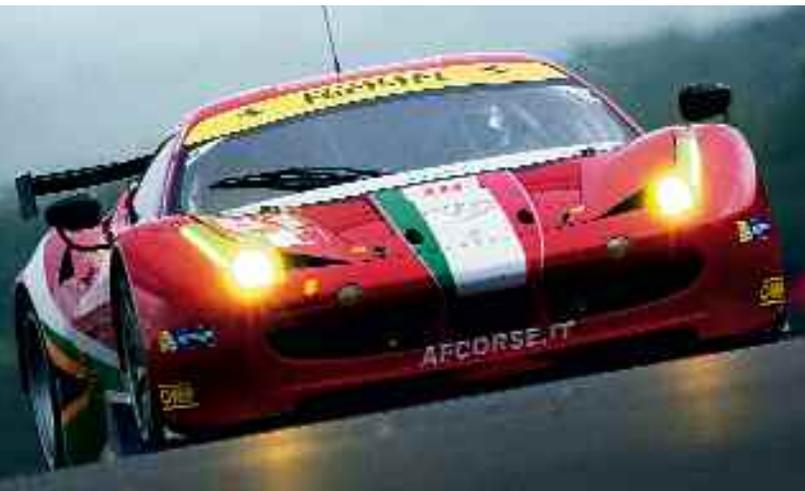
the circuit's medical center. Sadness rules in the pit lane but Simonsen's family insists that Aston Martin keep on racing, saying, "It is what he would have wanted."

After just two hours, AF Corse's #71 and #51 Ferraris have lost two laps. The reduced downforce equates to less grip, particularly in the wet, and a record number of safety-car periods also cause problems. Human error plays its part, too, as the #51 Ferrari pulls away from its pit box with the fuel hose still attached. Then, while still in pit lane, the #51 runs into an LMP2 car.

"Disappointing but not surprising" begins the Ferrari factory's post-race press release, which notes that, due to the BoP regulations, "in all track conditions, the Maranello cars were not competitive, lacking on every front: power, aerodynamic downforce and amount of fuel available for use."

Nevertheless, Amato Ferrari remains hopeful for the rest of the WEC season. "It will be difficult in the Pro class, but we aim to win the manufacturer championship again," he says. "We are only two points behind Porsche."

There is one bright spot at



our initial 50-second lead."

Specifically, the Ferraris are allowed 5 liters less fuel and a 100mm lower rear wing height than the Astons and the Porsches, while their curb weight is 20-35 kilograms higher. This adds up to more fuel stops and less downforce.

Things looked a little better for AF Corse in qualifying, when the #51 Ferrari of Gianmaria Bruni, Giancarlo Fisichella and Matteo Malucelli was fourth fastest, 1.3 seconds behind the pole-sitting Aston. Another Vantage sat in second, with a Porsche in third. The #71 Ferrari had to settle for sixth.

In total, Aston Martin presented a five-car Vantage lineup split between GTE-Pro and GTE-Am. AF Corse had the same configuration, backed by

At the 3 p.m. start, parts of the track are still damp after heavy rain two hours earlier. On lap two, an LMP2 car spins on the slippery curbs at Terre Rouge. One minute later Gianmaria Bruni pirouettes the #51 Ferrari, and immediately after Aston Martin driver Allan Simonsen loses his car at exactly the same spot. But Simonsen does not spin; instead, the Aston turns hard left and hits the barriers head-on. Normally, this kind of accident would probably not have serious consequences, but unfortunately there's a tree right behind the guardrail which keeps it from collapsing properly. The heavily damaged Vantage bounces back onto the track, a total loss, and while the medics arrive very quickly Simonsen dies of his injuries in

The remaining two Astons appear uncatchable, although one is soon written off at the Forza Chicane. The AF Corse 458s soldier on, hoping for a podium finish, but it is not to be. Adding insult to injury, the #74 Corvette C6.R, judged prospectless at Le Mans, slips past in the closing stages of the race to take over fourth position, behind two Porsches and the remaining Aston. The Ferraris are relegated to fifth and sixth.

When the checkered flag waves, silent enemy Porsche has done the unexpected and won the class. Perfect pit strategy, the benefits from the BoP rules and a good deal of luck with the weather have proven to be the recipe for victory, whereas the contenders from Britain and Italy had to deal with disasters and problems.

Le Mans for Maranello, as AF Corse 458s finish second and third in GTE-Am. Piergiuseppe Perazzini, Lorenzo Casè and Darryl O'Young take the second podium step with the #55 Ferrari, while third position goes to Jack Gerber (the oldest contender in the race, at 68 years of age), Marco Cioci and Matt Griffin in the #61. Both teams fought a long and hard battle with the winning #76 Matmut Porsche, changing positions often and finally arriving at the checkered flag within one lap of each other. It was a small success, but nonetheless a satisfying one.

Can AF Corse return to top form in GTE-Pro? We will have to wait until the fourth round of the WEC season, at Sao Paulo, Brazil on September 1st, to find out. ●