

12H MUGELLO 2021
12th overall and 1st in class 991
Broggi - Nicolae - de Castro



Willi Motorsport by Ebimotors. ONE YEAR ON

Heading into the 2021 24H SERIES season, Italy's Ebimotors and Romania's Willi Motorsport had just one goal: make the finish.

One year later, the collaboration returns to the Hankook 12H MUGELLO with another, loftier goal in-mind: to win.

On the 24H SERIES' last visit to Tuscany, Italy's Ebimotors and Romania's Willi Motorsport entered a 12-hour endurance event collectively for the first time. And won. Now, one year on, the alliance returns to the Hankook 12H MUGELLO as reigning champions.

Admittedly, for Como-based Ebimotors, championship success is nothing new. Italy's first official Porsche motorsport facility has been a category frontrunner in Porsche Mobil 1 Supercup, the FIA GT Championship, and most recently the FIA World Endurance Championship since opening in 1998, and was the team to beat in Carrera Cup Italia from 2008 onwards. In 2018, its inaugural 24H SERIES season no less, Enrico Borghi's eponymous team walked away with three class victories and the 991-class championship. They can, demonstrably, get the job done.

Granted, Willi Motorsport is no stranger to championship success either. The team has collected multiple title honours on a national level in its native Romania, most notably in the Romanian Endurance Championship in which the Bucharest-based outfit brought home title honours four years in a row. Nevertheless, Sergiu Nicolae, a defending 991-class champion alongside long-standing teammates Fabrizio Broggi and Sabino de Castro, is fully aware how difficult defending their newly won 24H SERIES titles will be in 2022 with his family team...

"It's going to be tough, but our goal this year is to win," Sergiu explains to CREVENTIC, valiantly fending off a rather nasty cold he's picked up during the week. "We want to win at Mugello again in particular. And Spa-Francorchamps. It's an amazing tracks, and it would give us a lot of momentum for the rest of the season. But winning an endurance race is never easy!"

Indeed, Willi / Ebimotors' title defence didn't get off the best of starts at the season-opening Hankook 24H DUBAI (an event at which, admittedly, neither team had previously competed). Niggling gearbox problems during free practice led to the transmission being replaced in its entirety ahead of qualifying, and though at one stage the #955 Porsche 991-II Cup was leading its class by just over two minutes, the gremlin returned during the third hour, losing the team more than 70 minutes and 27 laps in the garage.

Only gearbox issues (ironically) for long-time leader Red Ant Racing allowed Willi Motorsport to recover to 2nd in-class, albeit 64 laps adrift of eventual winner NKPP by Bas Koeten Racing courtesy of a suspension-breaking clash with a TCR backmarker three hours from home.

That the next step of the 2022 season takes the Willi-Ebi alliance to Mugello though could be the ace in the hole that gets the team's title defence back on-track. Sergiu is a keen fan of the Tuscan Autodromo after all, which just

so happens to be home turf for team partner Ebimotors as well as the site of Willi Motorsport's maiden podium AND maiden win in the 24H SERIES.

"It's an amazing track, especially the Arrabbiata 1 and 2," Sergiu continue. "Really amazing! With the Toyota" – more on that in a second – "it was flat. But in the Porsche Cup, you really need to commit to those corners in particular. It's very rewarding!"

That Tuscany was also the circuit chosen for Willi Motorsport's 24H SERIES debut back in 2017 is similarly prophetic, considering how much the team has evolved since then. On that occasion, the then-named 'Endurance Team Romania' boasted a five-driver line-up, with Sergiu and Fabrizio joined by Romanian contemporaries Mihai Costin, Stefan Unchiasu and Viorel Nicolae. Their charge, competing in the series' pseudo-entry level 'A2' class, was a Toyota GT86 CS-V3, and was supported by both Toyota Bucharest North and MotorPark Romania itself.



That the 12H MUGELLO was the team's first 'true' endurance race, running almost six times longer than any of its drivers, none of whom had previously raced at Mugello, had experienced before, made the learning curve that much steeper. As indeed did the Romanian tricolour on the Toyota's bonnet, a near-constant reminder that 'ETR' was representing its country at an international level.

Despite this, the team finished an impressive 3rd in-class first time out having befallen no major incidents: debris that briefly blocked one brake disc was dislodged after a couple of laps, and a 14-second penalty, served when the Toyota exceeded the speed limit during an early Code 60, was a mistake that wasn't repeated.

"Honestly, we didn't hope to finish on the podium. We'd done the Romanian Endurance Series before that, but two hours is not really an 'endurance' race. So our main goal was just to finish. So it was a big, BIG bonus for us to finish on the podium. I have a lot of very good memories from that weekend."

The only significant gripes were the quintet's consistency – lap times during the first half of the race ranged from 2m 14s to nearly 2m 30s – and, in fairness, the Toyota's lack of pace: Sergiu's 2m 14.655s fastest lap was a full SIX seconds slower than that of category winner Team Eva Solo/K-Rejser's Peugeot RCZ: "the

podium was important for us too because we were there with, what felt like, the heaviest car on the grid. It was 300kg over the minimum weight!"

Save two further outings in 2018 at Navarra and Barcelona – both with an interim Ginetta G55 – Endurance Team Romania would not begin its first full 24H SERIES campaign until 2021, whereupon things had changed significantly.

Now, 'Willi Motorsport' – "Willi" is a nickname for my father, Viorel, which we used at the beginning, but it really stuck!" – the more experienced driver line-up now boasted Italian GT Sprint class champion Sabino de Castro alongside Fabrizio and Sergiu, the latter of whom by now had won another national title in Romania.

Gone also was the Toyota, as in its place stepped a brand-new Porsche 991-II Cup boasting a more vibrant, almost psychedelic colour scheme...

"The Toyota was quite a simple car, and it was really just to help give us more experience of endurance racing. It was a very well-balanced car, very good in the corners, but it had only 200hp, so it was quite slow on the straights and on the exit of the corners. That was a big problem.

"So at the end of 2020, we got our new car. We

discussed, after the season in Romania, which car to buy, and a friend of ours in Romania had a 991, the first generation GT3 Cup. We liked the car a lot and felt there was a lot of potential, so in the end it was an easy decision."

More significant than even this though, a new working relationship with 2018 class champions Ebimotors had also been confirmed.

"We've known the guys at Ebimotors for a long time now because we stayed – in Navarra I think it was – in the same pit box with them in 2018. So when we bought our Porsche, we decided to talk with them to see if we could do something together. It was just a good fit, and we started working together two months before Mugello last year.

"Ebimotors has helped us so much with their experience, because they know the car, they know the best setups... they just know EVERYTHING about the Porsche, and that can only be a good thing for us." ▶



12H HOCKENHEIMRING 2021
11th overall and 4th in class 991
Broggi - Sergiu - de Castro

24H BARCELONA 2021
8th overall and 1st in class 991
Broggi - Sergiu - de Castro



12H HUNGARY 2021
5th overall and 1st in class 991
Broggi - Nicolae - de Castro

Once again, despite the newly acquired experience, the learning curve was high. Still, as they had done four years earlier at the same venue, Fabrizio and Sergiu, now with Sabino alongside and Enrico Borghi's encyclopaedic knowledge of the Porsche working away in the background, rose to the occasion. Sabino fell just 0.3s shy of class pole position during qualifying, a personal best for Viorel Nicolae's family team. Thereafter, bar a mild brush early on with JR Motorsport's BMW M3, the team put nary a wheel wrong, waltzing to its maiden class win, three laps clear.

That 'Romania's' first 24H SERIES win had come at Mugello, site of Endurance Team Romania's first race five years earlier, and in Ebimotors' back yard no less, seemed particular fitting: "we couldn't have asked for a better place to take our first win!"

Next time out at the Hockenheimring, the team looked set to continue its newly-discovered form. From 3rd on the category grid (just 0.4s off pole this time), the #955 Porsche hit the front after three hours and had soon built a two-lap lead.

Fate had other plans this time, however. Heading into the overnight intervention, Sergiu, Fabrizio and Sabino were already one lap down thanks to unfortunately timed Code 60s and a careless penalty picked up for speeding. A podium still looked likely until a recurrent brake problem struck just 90 minutes from home, the 12 minutes lost rectifying the issue dropping Willi-Ebimotors to 4th at the flag.

"We were focused at Hockenheim and we wanted to win that race. But we had a strange problem with the brakes: all the teams changed brakes only one time; we changed two times at the front and once at the rear! Basically, it had been damp on the Saturday morning, but we hadn't looked at the ABS properly and had forgotten to switch the settings back. So, yeah, a driver mistake.

"It was almost funny, looking back: we have two engineers – one Romanian, one Italian – and we could hear them speaking to each other: 'who wants to tell them that we're not on the podium?!' They waited until the finish before they told us we weren't on the podium!"

As a safeguard, Ebimotors conducted a full strip down of the Porsche ahead of the next round at Barcelona, a precautionary measure that arguably fostered the team's most commanding performance of the year. Sergiu secured the family team's first category pole position that weekend, and the #955 sailed to its second class win, 19 laps clear of its nearest competitor, after leading the class for 23 of the 24 completed hours.

"Barcelona was the only race where we didn't have problems. We knew it was important to stay on the track, and not to push too hard in the beginning. We managed the tyres, we managed the brakes... we basically did everything we could to stay out of the garage! We'd learnt a lot from those 12-hour races.

"Originally, we wanted to compete in two, three races, maximum. Mugello, Hockenheim, Barcelona. But then we went to Mugello, and we won. And we went to Barcelona, and we won! After that, we looked at the calendar and thought, 'we could be champions this year'..."

With renewed focus, Willi Motorsport took an easy win as the sole 991 entrant at the Hankook 12H HUNGARORING, which meant the title could now be won or lost at the final round of the season at the Sebring International Raceway in Florida. A track neither

Willi Motorsport nor Ebimotors had competed at before, and an event where pre-race preparation was made even more difficult by, extraordinarily, a hurricane, which delayed delivery of both Porsche and equipment by several days.

Were that not enough, heavy rain on Saturday evening and Sunday morning – the latter of which led to a brief red flag period as standing water was removed from Sebring's infamously slippery start-finish straight, meant finishing, let alone winning, was by no means a foregone conclusion.

In the end, consistent and cautious running and a gearbox issue that ended up delaying nearest rival RPM Racing meant Willi Motorsport by Ebimotors took its fourth class win in five outings at Sebring. Remarkably, such was the attrition rate among the GT3 runners, the alliance's "impeccable race" was good enough to secure not just a 991-class title five years in the making, but also the final spot on the overall podium at Sebring.

The perfect culmination of a season that had delivered far more than even Willi Motorsport had expected...

"That entire season, we showed how competitive we can be with Ebimotors. We tried every time to win every race. Sometimes we hit technical problems, but that's motorsport. But we proved we could win, and that meant a lot to all of us. Now we want to do it again. Maybe there's a little bit more pressure on us, because we are the champions, but we want to win – we need to win – again this year."

Clearly neither Romania nor Italy isn't ready to give up the gold just yet... ■

Check out the full feature on [24hseries.com](https://www.24hseries.com)

Under the Lid Sergiu Nicolae

The reigning 991-class champion was a national karting champion in 2005 and 2006 before making the switch to cars in 2012, starting with the Autoslalom National Championship and, later, the Romanian Endurance Series. Since 2017, Sergiu and his family teams have been regulars in the 24H SERIES.

Name?

"My name is Sergiu Nicolae."

Age? You can lie about that if you want...

"I'm 28 years old."

Where and when was your first ever car race, and how old were you?

"My first ever car race was in Romania in 2015, and it was an Autoslalom.* And I was 18 at the time."

* Sergiu competed in Romania's Campionatul Național de Autoslalom (the Autoslalom National Championship) between 2012 and 2015, winning the title in 2013.

What is the best moment of your racing career so far?

"My best moment was last year in Mugello. It was my first race victory in the 24H SERIES!"

Apart from the Nürburgring, which is your favourite circuit and why?

"Well my favourite IS the Nordschleife, but I also like [the Autodromo Inter Mugello and also the Oschersleben is a nice track. I love technical tracks."

Describe the strangest thing that's ever happened to you at a motor race...

"[Pause] Probably the [Hankook] 12H HOCKENHEIMRING last year. After 10 laps, the car didn't have any traction and there was so much understeer, we couldn't go any faster. After 10 laps, it just wasn't normal to be like this."

Describe your helmet design to us, and what it signifies...

"I don't actually have one. I need to make one either this year or next year. I'm not sure what the design will be though, so I'll have to think about that..."



What is your greatest strength?

"[Pause] Probably, my greatest strength, I can go to a new track, and within 10 laps, I am faster than others because I can adjust to these [circuits] and the cars quickly."

If Hollywood made a movie about you, which actor would play you and why?

"[Loong pause]... I'm really not sure..."
How about George Clooney? Leonardo DiCaprio? Tom Cruise? Brad Pitt?
"Oh, Brad Pitt!"

What would you like to achieve before retiring?

"I want to win many titles. As many as I can."

Tell us a random fact about yourself that your fans might not know...

"I get angry very, very fast behind the wheel. But, strangely, I think this helps me drive faster. So the team usually encourages this!"

Finally, what do you enjoy most about competing in the 24H SERIES?

"It's a very nice place to be. I enjoy [the series] because I can be on the track for a long time, and I can battle with the fastest drivers. Hopefully, after Covid, we will have more cars in our class in the fight too."

Sergiu Nicolae was speaking with Mart Boksem and James Gent at the 2021 Hankook 12H HOCKENHEIMRING. Images courtesy of Petr Frýba.

Enrico Borghi... on Mugello

Alongside the first class win for Willi Motorsport, last year's Hankook 12H MUGELLO also marked the first time former 991-class champion Ebimotors had landed the top step of a 24H SERIES podium in four years.

To do so in Mugello, the team's home circuit, was a fitting tribute. Ahead of this year's event, CREVENTIC caught up with team founder Enrico Borghi to discuss the team's new working relationship, the secrets to victory, and the allure of Tuscany.

Enrico, during that first race weekend together in Mugello, how much did Ebimotors need to adapt to working with Willi Motorsport?

"We were immediately in-tune. Excellent synergy, respecting our own role without stepping on any toes. The technical preparation of the car is performed by Ebimotors in our garage in Cermenate, while the car strategy/management is managed by both teams: Enrico Borghi, Willi Nicolae, and our race engineer."

Mugello has been on the 24H SERIES calendar since 2014. What is it about the Autodromo that you think interests teams and drivers so much?

"Mugello is one of the most beautiful circuits in Europe, and you particularly feel that when you're on-track. It is also situated in an amazing and very charming region."

Last year, Ebimotors actually ran two cars at the Hankook 12H MUGELLO: an entry with Willi Motorsport (955), and a standalone Porsche for 'Ebimotors' (973). Did this create an inter-team rivalry in the garage?! Or do you always want both cars to finish?

"Definitely no rivalry. Mugello is our home circuit and we receive a lot of requests to take compete there, so the focus on the cars, as well as on our clients, is always the same: may the best win!"

The Willi Motorsport/Ebimotors entry (955) had a flawless run in Mugello last year. The standalone Ebimotors Porsche (973) had a couple of on-track incidents but still finished 4th in-class. Just how important is it to stay out of trouble during an endurance race?

"It's an essential aspect. In endurance races, we need to try to predict and manage any potential collision, or overtaking opportunity, as best we can. This is most important when a driver starts feeling tired, or during a night stint when there is poor visibility. Strategy, concentration and driving consistently are the key features to doing well."

In 2018, Ebimotors won its first race in the 24H SERIES. In 2021, Ebimotors won its first race in the 24H SERIES with Willi Motorsport! Even though Ebimotors clearly knows how to win a race, did it surprise you how quickly that first win arrived?

"Winning a race is never easy, but we showed up with a top car and a well-balanced crew, so all it takes to be good. This allowed us to start on the right foot, but you can never lower your guard."

How difficult do you think it will be to defend your 24H SERIES title in 2022, given how competitive the 991 class is?

"New year, new adventure! We are taking a great deal of responsibility and humility into this 2022 season to defend our title. We will knuckle down, and we are looking forward to testing ourselves against rivals, new and old, on-track once again this year in the 24H SERIES."

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