

# 2013

## Hofor Racing's day of days

In 2022, former series champion Hofor Racing makes its long-awaited return to the 24H SERIES at the Hankook 24H BARCELONA. An event that, nine years earlier, the Swiss team will never forget...

When the grid forms for the 2022 Hankook 24H BARCELONA, it will be the first 24H SERIES event to feature Hofor Racing, a former series champion no less, in over three years.

Since 2019, prolonged Covid hiatus aside, the Swiss outfit has enjoyed, what team owner Michael Kroll jovially calls, 'two baby breaks' courtesy of daughter Chantal, a former Overall GT Drivers' champion in her own right. And while the focus of the team's return is very much on 'having fun' – the line-up is a (nearly) all-family affair with Michael and Chantal driving with Chantal's husband Alexander Prinz, and Australian newcomer Michael Bailey – it's also likely to determine whether or not Hofor Racing will be back racing in 2023 as well.

"We decided that Barcelona would be a good 'restart,'" explains Hofor Racing team owner, and 2017 Overall GT Drivers' champion Michael Kroll. "And because the break was so long, we won't be running with the PROs, so we won't have Kenneth [Heyer] or Christiaan [Frankenhout] with us. The whole point is to go racing, have fun, and to see if this is still a good fit for us."

That Hofor Racing makes its return at the Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya is particularly fitting, given that the team signed off its 24H SERIES tenure (briefly, at least) at the 2019 event with a hard-earned 5th in-class. And six years before that, Hofor Racing had enjoyed its day of days.



Coming into the 2013 24H BARCELONA, Hofor Racing had, what was almost certainly at the time, *the* weapon of choice for GT3 competition: the Mercedes SLS AMG. Though still only two years into its run, the SLS had already monopolized the podium at its first major international event – the 24H DUBAI – in 2012, repeated that win one year later in January 2013, and gone on to take 24-hour wins at the notoriously tough Nürburgring and Spa-Francorchamps, to say nothing of a famous 12-hour win at Bathurst.

Unsurprisingly then, while the 24H BARCELONA in 2013, only the third to be hosted by CREVENTIC since the event's reintroduction for 2011, had just six 'A6' entries on its entry list, half of them – De Lorenzi Racing, Car Collection Motorsport, and Hofor – were silver arrows.

But while De Lorenzi and Car Collection had some race experience with the SLS heading into the event, Hofor Racing – which was fielding Michael with

Roland Eggimann, Kenneth Heyer and Christiaan Frankenhout for the first of what would be, many times to come – did not...

"Barcelona was our first race with the SLS," Michael continues. "Before that, we had a GT1 – a Viper – but due to noise restrictions, we couldn't use that anymore. So we wanted to try GT3. At that time, [the SLS] was the only GT3 car that was feasible for a young, inexperienced team due to the maximum support Mercedes-AMG provided. Plus, it was very easy to use: no 20 people with laptops; just fire it up and off you go. So, for an inexperienced team, at that time, it was the only car that made sense."

To compound matters for a team already on the backfoot, light but persistent rain continued to fall during free practice and qualifying. In the end, a "lottery grid" was decided on a drying track in the final five minutes, as Stefan Mücke – teamed with Richard Abra, Mark Poole and recent Formula 1 alumna →



**“After a stellar job by Hofo’s mechanics to replace the steering rack and refine the chassis overnight, the #4 SLS took its place on the third row of a still-damp grid.**

Bruno Senna in Barwell Motorsport’s Aston Martin Vantage GT3 – completed one final dry(ish) lap to pip De Lorenzi to pole by more than a second.

Despite limited running, an impressive run from Kenneth Heyer put the Hofo Racing Mercedes 6th on the grid for its maiden outing. This, despite the #4 SLS completing just three laps across the full 90-minute session, and having carried suspension and steering gremlins into qualifying.

“Before Barcelona, Kenneth and Christiaan did some testing with the car and Widberg Motorsport at the Nürburgring.” – *Widberg was also on-hand to prepare the SLS at Barcelona.* – “Then, during free practice, Kenneth and Christiaan found a setup that would work for all of us. It wasn’t the fastest setup, but it wasn’t scary either! The car was not on the edge, it wouldn’t spin, and that meant we could all just go for it.

“We were 6th on the grid, which was a good result, but honestly, our intention was not to be at the front. Remember, this was our first time with the SLS. It was a brand-new car, and there were still some glitches that needed to be repaired. It was a trial run, and you don’t necessarily want to be right at the front for that. Our pulse rates were around 180!”

Come race day, and after a stellar job by the Hofo mechanics to replace the steering rack and refine the chassis overnight (work in the garage eventually wrapped at 4am), the #4 SLS took its place on the third row of a still-damp grid. The sister, Kuepperracing-prepared BMW E46 M Coupé meanwhile – driven by Chantal, uncle Martin, Richard Feller, and Bernd Kuepper – lined up 38 places further back, albeit on class pole position.

Ering on the side of caution for its first SLS race, Hofo Racing went with wet tyres, as did half of the grid (the sister BMW took a gamble on slicks). A decision Christiaan seemingly justified when he gained two positions on

the run through turn one after the green flag was flown. Further back, a pirouetting Red Camel Audi R8, which somehow managed to avoid being hit by the pursuing pack, showed how slick the surface truly was.

“Because it was the first race, there was no reason to put slicks on: stick with the rain tyres, go out and see how the conditions are. We weren’t thinking about winning, so why risk anything? Nowadays, with more experience, we probably would have taken the gamble, because we ended up having to pit early anyway. But when it’s the first race with a new car, you don’t take risks. The car is too expensive for that!

Norbert Siedler in the Stadler Motorsport Porsche 997 GT3 R made an electric start to jump De Lorenzi for 2nd, but polesitter Mücke was already leaving the field in his wake. After one lap, the slick-shod Barwell Motorsport Aston Martin was six seconds up on the Stadler Porsche, and with most of his rivals – 4th-placed Christiaan included – pitting for slicks just a few laps later, Mücke was already a lap ahead as the second hour approached.

What looked to be a straightforward win for the British team though came to a juddering halt after just 50 minutes. Exiting turn two, the Aston’s left rear wheel sheered off, leaving a bewildered Mücke stranded on the entry to turn four (cue the first of nearly a dozen Code 60 caution periods that weekend). Shockingly, less than one hour in, the pre-race favourite had already been relegated to the back, 13 laps down.

Into the lead thus stepped De Lorenzi Racing Mercedes ahead of the #7 Stadler Porsche (one of the few teams that opted to switch drivers during the Code 60) and the #2 Car Collection Mercedes. This too would not last long though, team owner-driver Gianluca de Lorenzi losing second gear entirely as the third hour ticked by. The requisite pit stop ended up dropping the #3 SLS out of the top 10 altogether.

Stadler Motorsport now took the lead ahead of Car Collection Motorsport. Despite already being two laps behind after his early pit stop, Christiaan, having quickly pulled the Hofo Mercedes back up the order, was now running 3rd.

21 hours to go though. Far too early to consider a podium finish... right...?

“We are an AM entry, so it’s really difficult for us to get pole position, and that means we usually start 4th, 6th, 8th, or in Dubai, 10th, 12th, 17th, etc. But that does mean we have a slightly bigger fuel allowance and we can run a different strategy. So, things can look bad in the beginning, but after 20 or 30 laps, our position starts to look better. And after the opening few hours, because we were still at the front, yeah, we did start thinking a podium was possible.”

Like Barwell before it, the Stadler Motorsport Porsche looked comfortable out front as the first quarter of the race ticked by. Even Barwell, having also been forced to repair a holed radiator, was recovering ground rapidly, and was already back up to 15th overall. Brutally, De Lorenzi’s hopes of victory were further dashed by yet more gearbox gremlins that dropped the #3 SLS to the very back of the field, 41 laps behind.

Unable to keep pace with either Stadler or 2nd-placed Car Collection, Hofo Racing, now with Kenneth at the wheel after Christiaan and Michael’s first stints, was nevertheless keeping 3rd-placed Ruffier Racing, up from 11th on the grid and now leading the ‘997’ class, honest. A tense dice it was proving too, the Mercedes regularly hacking into the #10 Porsche 997 Cups’ two-lap advantage by more than five seconds per-tour. By hour eight, Kenneth was past and up to 3rd.

As night fell, and the rain began to dissipate, Hofo’s fortunes were given another boost when Car Collection team owner Peter Schmidt was collected on-track by one Nova Race’s two Ginetta G50s. Schmidt himself was uninjured, but the #2 Mercedes’ left rear was toast. Up to 2nd thus moved Hofo Racing at half-distance, 11 laps clear of new podium contender, SP2 leader Clickvers.de.

Barely 12 hours in, and attrition was already playing a decisive role...

“For a 24-hour race, you need to skip everything that could be dangerous. As a team, we’re not as fast as a lot of our rivals. That means we don’t need to run over the kerbs, we don’t have spins, we don’t need to make risky overtakes, and the car is not stressed. The SLS really didn’t know that it was in a race that weekend! But other cars, with really good drivers, will go like hell, and the car will eventually let go on them. The time you spend on repairs, you can’t get that back on-track. That’s why, if we’re at the front, it’s always at the end of the race. Never at the beginning or in the middle.”

Well, as it turns out...

Come the 13th hour, and just one lap after a routine pit stop, the #7 Stadler Motorsport 997, already eight laps ahead, was back in the pits with a massive oil leak. Incredibly, the Porsche’s six-cylinder boxer engine was completely fried, and with ‘just’ half of the race in the bag, a third leader had been eliminated from what had looked to be another insurmountable lead. Hofo Racing, one of only two sole remaining ‘A6’ runners (gearbox failure meant the Bremer Racing Ferrari 430 GT3 Scuderia failed to take the start) was now at the front of the pack, 11 laps clear of early sparring partner, Ruffier Racing.

Sadly, in what was becoming a theme for frontrunners at the 2013 24H BARCELONA, Clickvers’ run in the top three didn’t last long, the #12 Porsche 997 Cup making heavy, high-speed contact with – of all entries – the recovering Barwell Motorsport Aston Martin during the night. Both cars were eliminated on the spot, and early pacesetter Mücke was transported to a local hospital for further checks after taking a heavy knock.

“The Aston Martin driver had one of the biggest accidents I’d ever seen on the start-finish straight. It was unbelievable! And we didn’t know how [Mücke] was. The information about his wellbeing was thin, so, even though our race was going well, we couldn’t really enjoy it.”

By daybreak, the #4 Mercedes SLS, a broken tie-rod and one right rear puncture aside, was still in the lead, albeit now ‘just’ seven laps ahead of the Ruffier Racing 997, the Porsche having enjoyed the night’s cooling temperatures considerably more than the Mercedes. With the SLS capable of lapping a second quicker than the Cup car in its ever-decreasing rooster tails, a win for Hofo Racing was starting to look increasingly likely as Michael stepped aboard the SLS for the final two-hour run to the flag.

All he needed to do was to stay calm, protect the car, and look after the tyres.

“Yes, that’s what I should have done! But I was extremely nervous. It was our first race with the SLS, and we’re at the front, one hour from the finish. Even though I knew we were seven laps ahead, I was asking every 20 seconds how big the gap was, because I just couldn’t remember if I’d seen the other car pass me. It was only 45 minutes I think, but, wow! In that position, if you throw the car away, you have an entire team that is ready to kill you!

“And, honestly, I was also thinking about what we should do on the podium. At the time, we still didn’t know what had happened to [Mücke]. Then, just before the end of the race, the pits informed me that he was okay and didn’t have any serious injuries. After that, I could start to enjoy the last laps.”

Despite his elevated pulse, Michael, running a more ‘considerate’ 1m 57s – 1m 58s compared with Kenneth’s 1m 53.748s best, dutifully kept the SLS off the kerbs, and, crucially, out of the gravel trap. On the other side of the Hofo/Ruffier garage, Chantal was similarly looking to bring the #35 BMW home 3rd in the A3T class after a 24-hour marathon that had included time loss to a defective radio and a broken front splitter.

Alerted to this over the radio, Michael’s pace slowed even more dramatically during the closing laps, his 1m 58s at one stage dropping into the 2m 10s. There was no cause for alarm on the pitwall though: Barcelona had not struck down its fourth ‘A6’ leader of the weekend...

“Towards the end, my main concern was getting a photo finish with our BMW. In the other car was my daughter, Chantal, and because you don’t get many opportunities like that, it seemed like a fun thing to do. Of course, the Mercedes and the BMW couldn’t talk with each other, so the team was having to manage that from the pitwall.”

And so it was that, after 605 nail-biting laps and barely two metres apart, Hofo Racing’s Mercedes SLS AMG GT3 and BMW E46 M Coupé drove across the line in tandem to celebrate an overall win at the 2013 24H BARCELONA, one year on from the team’s A4-class win at the same event. ‘Hofo Racing’ had arrived.

“Later on we achieved a lot of success with the SLS AMG. We won the Overall GT Teams’ title in 2017, as well as the drivers’ championships, and we’ve had a lot of class wins. But, to have our two cars finish at the same time, within two metres of each other, was just an amazing feeling. That final lap, and that win in 2013, is still one of my proudest moments.” ■

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