

10 years on...

BLACK FALCON

From the brink

A shunt during Free Practice suggests Abu Dhabi Racing by Black Falcon, the 2012 winner of the 24H DUBAI, may already be out of the 2013 race before it's even begun. It's just the start of an incredible recovery drive, one that the UAE's own Khaled Al Qubaisi relives with CREVENTIC.

Just 17 laps into Wednesday's first Free Practice sessions, Khaled Al Qubaisi has hit the wall at turn five. Though visibly shaken, the Emirati driver fortunately emerges unhurt from the shunt. But as he turns to look at the severely bent Mercedes SLS AMG GT3 nestled in the Dubai Autodrome barriers, relief quickly turns to horror.

There's still two days to go before the green flag flies for the 24H DUBAI in 2013. And incredibly, reigning 2012 winner Abu Dhabi Racing by Black Falcon already looks to be out.

"I think we went into the event as favourites, and that put the pressure on us right from the first practice sessions," Khaled explains to CREVENTIC. "So we were already going hard in testing – maybe being a bit overconfident – and the track didn't have that much grip yet. And it just happened.

"Under straight-line braking, one side gripped more than the other, and the car just veered to the left. And you don't have much room to the barrier at those speeds. I think it was maybe two, three seconds before I hit the wall. And that felt like a long, long time!

"After the crash, it was like a nightmare. I couldn't comprehend what had just happened. I didn't know what to think. I was just overwhelmed."

The 'race,' metaphorically at least, is now on for Abu Dhabi Racing by Black Falcon to find a replacement SLS for the now-crestfallen Khaled, fellow 2012 event winners Sean Edwards and Jeroen Bleekemolen, and DTM legend Bernd Schneider. Ironically, the German team already has a second SLS on the ground in Dubai, albeit as an official second entry for Khaled, Sergei Afanasiev, Simon Knap, Steve Jans, and FIA GT Series champion-elect Andreas Simonsen. So that's a no-go. Discussions are had with the Yas Marina Circuit – an hour down the road – about leasing one of the race school's track cars, and Black Falcon even weighs up the possibility of flying a replacement SLS in from Germany overnight.

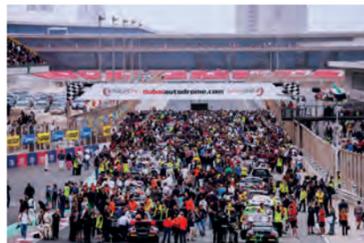
Salvation is eventually found just three pit garages down. To help prepare for its upcoming British GT Championship campaign, Preci-Spark, though only planning to race one SLS AMG in Dubai, has brought a second – #300 – to act as a testing mule for Jones brothers David, Godfrey, Morgan, Philip and Gareth on their collective debuts. In true #ThisIsEndurance spirit of competition, a deal is struck. →



STARTGRID 24H DUBAI 2013

TOP 3 POSITIONS

1. #1 Abu Dhabi by Black Falcon 1
2. #26 Attempto Racing 1
3. #15 Craft Racing AMR



So, now it's just a case of bolting a driver into the re-numbered #300 bucket seat and swapping over a few sponsor stickers... right...?

"No!" Khaled laughs. "We had to strip everything from the car we got from [Preci-Spark]. It was actually one of the first Mercedes SLS racecars produced in 2011, so we really had to work hard to upgrade it with all the bits and pieces that the team had brought for our original car: we fitted our engine; our gearbox; our suspension; our endurance-spec fuel tank. And we had to get all of that done before we could qualify."

Against seemingly insurmountable odds, Black Falcon's mechanics get the new silver-and-barely-stickered '#1' prepared and fired up in-time for Thursday afternoon's qualifying session. And that's not all: after a few sighter laps from Bernd Schneider, the #1 Mercedes is handed over to Jeroen Bleekemolen, who, on only his third flying lap (mercifully one without traffic), sets pole position. Even more incredibly, the Dutchman does so with a 1m 59.104s, the first pole lap to ever dip below the two-minute mark for the 24H DUBAI.

"We didn't even take part in the practice sessions. Then Jeroen goes out in qualifying, and gets pole position! It was a wonderful moment. Really uplifting for the whole team."

Even after the mechanics' herculean efforts though, Black Falcon is far from out of the woods. Impressive as it is, Jeroen's pole time is just three-tenths

quicker than that posted by fellow front row starter Attempto Racing (#26), and the top seven on the grid are split by less than one second, suggesting the Mercedes' superiority of one-year prior has dwindled. On top of that, though the #1 Mercedes is successfully cobbled together in time for qualifying, another sleepless night beckons for Black Falcon as final race prep is completed.

"There was still a lot of work to do on the car after qualifying: the car had to be stickered fully as well before it went out to race. Even if I wanted to go to sleep, I couldn't, because I felt so bad about what had happened. For most of those evenings, I stayed with the team, and then when I did go [for some rest], I probably only slept two or three hours."

The following afternoon, the P1 slot is conspicuously empty as the 82-car grid starts assembling, and the collectively frayed nerves of Khaled, Bleekemolen, Edwards and Schneider are only relieved when the now-liveried-though-still-very-much-silver #1 Mercedes, having skipped morning warm-up altogether, emerges from its garage with only moments to spare.

With limited time to warm his tyres and bed-in the brakes though, Bleekemolen is comfortably beaten into turn one by future two-time LMGTE Pro World Endurance Champion Nicki Thiim in the Attempto Racing Porsche 997 GT3 R. An equally determined Claudia Hürtgen in Saudi Falcon's lead BMW Z4 GT3 (#24) has already jumped from 4th to 3rd and, down the back straight, divests Bleekemolen of 2nd as well.

Three laps later though, the #1 Mercedes now looks to have the legs on the pursuing Craft Racing Aston Martin Vantage (#15) and Saudi Falcon's second Z4 (#12). Few have an answer for the Attempto Porsche at the front however, despite a robust move by Hürtgen 15 minutes in: with Thiim briefly baulked by traffic, the BMW dives down the inside at turn 16 to take the lead, though the sheer power of the Porsche's flat-six means Thiim is already back in front when the pair hit turn one. One lap later, the Dane has added a further 1.5 seconds to his lead.

On lap 17 though, disaster strikes as the Attempto Porsche crawls to a stop on-track. An oil leak has sparked an engine fire, and the damage is terminal. Incredibly, less than one hour into the 2013 24H DUBAI, the early pacesetter is out.

Debris dropped by DUWO Racing's BMW M3 – now sans its rear apron – sparks the event's first Code 60 shortly afterwards, and in a brutal bit of bad luck, the purple flags are brought out just as Claudia Hürtgen rounds the final corner. While the Saudi Falcon BMW is forced to complete a full lap at 60 kph, the pursuing Black Falcon Mercedes and Craft Racing Aston are first into the refuelling area. By the time Hürtgen has made it back to the pits, the #24 BMW has dropped to 3rd, leapfrogged by the #16 Aston and the now-leading #1 Mercedes.

Admittedly, the Code 60s don't all go Black Falcon's way. Second time around (MRS GT-Racing's McLaren brings out the purple flags 25 minutes later, with an off at 'the bowl'), Bleekemolen is forced to queue for one of only 10 pumps in the refuelling area, and has just started his top-up when the race goes green again. In a further blow, Bleekemolen, having missed the first purple flag at turn 16, is handed a time penalty for speeding, dropping the #1 from 1st to 9th as the second hour ticks by.

"The Code 60s played a big role, and there was a bad couple in a row for us. The second or third dropped us, I think, three laps back, and after that we were pushing hard all the way."

With both Saudi Falcons also held up in the refuelling area, Stadler Motorsport (#20) emerges as the unlikely frontrunner – from 19th on the grid no less – having opted for 'hypermiling' over raw pace. It's a strategy that keeps the Porsche 997 GT3 R at the head of the field until the end of hour eight, and, one year later, secures the Swiss team victory at the 2014 24H DUBAI.

With the #1 Mercedes still recovering from its earlier pit delay (with, ironically, the sister #2 Black Falcon now its closest rival on-track), Stadler's main opposition from the third hour onwards is the Saudi Falcons. Operated by 2011 event winner Schubert Motorsport, the blisteringly quick #24 BMW Z4 GT3, in the hands of Hürtgen, Abdulaziz AlFaisal and Jörg Müller keeps the Stadler Porsche honest, the Falcons' relentless pursuit aided further by the #24 'works' chassis testing development aero components at the event.

"Well, we went into that race knowing the Saudi Falcons were our main contenders. And I think, at that time, it was great for the 24H DUBAI! Black Falcon vs. Saudi Falcons. Both regional teams going for an overall win, and both put in a really good effort with strong teams and driver line-ups. That really raised the competition because we were really well-matched: they had two cars and we had two cars. Our second car wasn't quite as strong as the first car, but was a very good back-up in case something went wrong. But Saudi Falcons had two strong cars with two strong line-ups. And, here and there, we were up or they were up. It was very competitive between us."

Admittedly, by the sixth hour, the Saudi Falcons is starting to hit problems. Quite literally in Dominik Baumann's case.

In a bizarre incident just after the event's fifth Code 60, the then-reigning FIA GT3 European champion, at the wheel of the Saudi Falcons' #12 BMW, is struck by RAM Racing's Johnny Mowlem when the latter, having seen a green flag on the back straight, started accelerating just as the former, still seeing purple flags, was busy warming his tyres. Replacing the BMW's front left steering arm costs the Falcons half an hour in the pits, and drops the #12 from 7th to 39th. A punctured exhaust header eventually leads to the BMW's retirement one hour later. ➔

I can't remember another race where I went through all of these challenges in 24 hours.



Up front, the Saudi Falcons' sole-remaining #24 BMW finally moves past the Stadler Porsche into the lead during the ninth hour. The #1 Mercedes meanwhile, now just one lap adrift, is up to 4th behind surprise podium contender, Dragon Racing (#88), the UAE team making full use of the Ferrari 488 GT3's strong fuel efficiency to work around a loss of power steering. In contrast, Black Falcon's rise through the field is down the team's 'secret weapon'...

"I remember Bernd from 2012 when he was competing against us in two cars" – Heico Motorsport's two Mercedes SLS AMG GT3s – "and every time he was in the car, the lap times were so fast, and he was just catching, catching, catching. Especially during the night. We used to call him 'the night monster!'"

"But whether it's the day, whether it's the night, or in traffic, his laps were always the same. They just didn't change! So I was very happy to have him as part of our team [in 2013] because he was easily one of the biggest threats we had! And he's a legend, with so many DTM wins, and his endurance wins since then. He just came in, did an amazing job, and delivered great lap times as fast as any 'Pro' driver, if not faster. He was really key to us winning that race."

So impressive is Schneider's run during the night – a consistency that later secured the endurance racing legend his first 24-hour race wins at the Nürburgring and Spa-Francorchamps later that same year – that by the 10th hour, the #1 Mercedes is up to 2nd behind the Saudi Falcons. The sister #2, with Khaled at the wheel, dutifully follows suit in 3rd.

Sadly, Black Falcon's hopes of a strong result for the #2 came to naught during the night when a puncture causes a surprising amount of damage to the rear bodywork, dropping the #2 SLS back to 7th at the flag.

Issues were also starting to affect the Saudi Falcons too, given the BMW's insatiable appetite for brake discs. So much so in fact that, with Dragon Racing's power steering issues eventually proving terminal, it was Italy's AF Corse that had quietly worked its way into the lead come half-distance with Formula 1 veteran Mika Salo at the helm. Not that this intimidated a determined Claudia Hürtgen of course: during the night, the 2011 24H DUBAI becomes the first of only two drivers to lap below the two-minute mark as she reels the Ferrari back in again. As the 12th hour ticks by, the lead pair are split by only two seconds.

Brutally, neither the BMW nor the Ferrari held the lead as sunlight returns to the Dubai Autodrome. Minor contact and a puncture costs the Ferrari an unscheduled pit stop shortly before dawn, and by two-thirds distance, the BMW had eaten through its brakes once again. A well-deserved podium however was not to be: with just five hours remaining, an oil warning light appears on the dash during Jörg Müller's final stint in the #24 BMW, a precursor to inevitable engine failure. Just like that, a bulldozing run from the Saudi Falcons is over.

With a gearbox gremlin having already dropped Stadler Motorsport out of the top 10 – the Swiss team eventually recovers to 9th – the #1 Mercedes goes into the closing stages of the 2013 24H DUBAI, a race that had appeared all but over before it had even begun, in the lead.



As Khaled Al Qubaisi steps aboard for the final stint in the #1, he is two laps ahead of AF Corse. When he collects the chequered flag 26 laps later, he, like Sean Edwards and Jeroen Bleekemolen, are two-time winners. Only the 3rd, 4th and 5th drivers respectively to do so since 2006. It's an understandably emotional moment for all three.

"It was hard to describe then, and it's even harder to describe now! I actually broke down at the end of the race because I was just so tired, physically and emotionally."

"Winning the 24H DUBAI for the first time was a huge achievement, and a huge moment for me personally as I'd only come into the sport recently at that time. And that second win... it just cemented the fact that the first one wasn't luck! To win the 24H DUBAI back-to-back shows you have a really good team and that you're clearly doing everything right. And, to be honest, that 2013 race really pushed me later on to bigger things like the World Endurance Championship and Le Mans."

"If I look at it overall – emotionally, physically, the stress involved, and so on – I'd say, definitely, yes! I can't remember another race where I went through all of these challenges in 24 hours. So, yeah, definitely, the toughest. And I guess, because, it's the toughest, it's probably my most precious win too." ■



Shane Lewis' first CREVENTIC win

Back in 2013, CP Racing's Shane Lewis made only his second start at the 24H DUBAI, and walked away with his first category win. Almost 10 years on, Shane takes a trip down memory lane with CREVENTIC, Cor Euser Racing, a Nissan-affiliated TV reality show, and an 'old school' Lotus Evora GT4.

Heading into the 2013 24H DUBAI, Shane Lewis already had 14 starts – of 17, to-date – to his name at the Daytona 24 Hours, and three at Le Mans. But just one at the Dubai Autodrome. That had come a year earlier in 2012, when the future 24H SERIES staple had finished a respectable 5th in-class aboard a Hamburg Racing-entered Aston Martin 'N24' Vantage alongside Karl Pflanz, American contemporary Vic Rice, and (future) HRT Performance team boss, Kim Hauschild.

"Outside of Le Mans, and being 'super focused' on doing that race, I really hadn't had that much international racing experience at that point," Shane explains. "In the US, it was kind of tempting to think, 'okay, there's Le Mans, there's Daytona and there's Sebring, and that's about it.' So I really didn't know what to expect from the Middle East. That 2012 race really opened my eyes to all different parts of the world going racing."

Never one to make life easy for himself, Shane's return to Dubai in 2013 would be as part of a four-driver line-up for Dutch motorsport pillar Cor Euser Racing, a team with which he'd never competed, aboard a Lotus Evora GT4, a car he'd never raced. Of course, given Shane's experience on the American grassroots stage, this was nothing new...

"Working with a new team wasn't that uncommon for me," Shane continues. "I really like the team atmosphere a 24-hour race creates. For me, it's not about, 'did Shane Lewis win a race?' It's about, 'how did the team do?' And I think that's why I'm still racing today and why the 'old' teams, if you will, like having me on-board. I'm focused on everyone being successful."

Though already three years old, the #148 Lotus, set to be piloted by Shane, Rice, The Netherlands' Henk Thijssen and Britain's Trevor Knight, nevertheless remained among SP3's frontrunners heading into the event. Indeed, 3rd on the grid, just seven-tenths shy of category pole position and ahead even of fellow category heavyweights Barwell Motorsport and Optimum Motorsport, marked the Lotus' cards early.



Few could deny though that the GT Academy Team RJN Nissans were the SP3 team to beat in Dubai in 2013. As well as fielding the latest edition Nissan 370Z GT4 – a 410 bhp weapon, built by Nissan specialist RJN Motorsport – Team RJN was also the latest development step for Nissan's 'GT Academy,' a reality TV program that gave the best Gran Turismo video game players from around the world the chance to race in the real world. Competitively too, as it turns out: the Academy's 2009, 2010 and 2011 winners had already finished 3rd in-class on their event debuts in 2012. As competition went, it was a tough ask for the underpowered Lotus...

"WAY underpowered! I remember, clearly thinking, 'not only do we have one car, we're up against two cars with super talented guys that are ready to go!' If you're competing against one car per team, the chances of them making a mistake are good. When you have two cars on a team, and they use one as the 'rabbit,' maybe the other will be smart enough to learn from the other's mistakes. And generally, when you have two of that kind of talent, and the cars are that fast, you don't stand a chance. So we knew this was going to be tough."

Shots were dutifully fired across the Evora's flanks when GT Academy Team RJN qualified 1st and 2nd in SP3, and held its advantage across the opening hour. It didn't take long though for Nissan's strong start to unravel. 2011 GT4-class Blancpain Endurance Champion Alex Buncombe, having been forced to queue for fuel during the first round of stops, soon

dropped to 10th in the #147, five laps adrift, while a heavy accident for the late Sabine Schmitz, arguably the most celebrated racing driver to ever lap the Nürburgring, caused significant damage to the 370Z's rear end. Across in the #127 meanwhile, future Bathurst 12 Hour winner Wolfgang Reip suffered a bizarre incident during the fourth hour when the Nissan hit a detached wheel at-speed, puncturing its radiator in the process.

The Lotus meanwhile, despite lacking grunt down the Autodrome's near-kilometre-long back straight, had the legs on its rivals across the intricate

infield, and by the third hour, Shane, Rice, Thijssen and Knight had moved into the lead. A position it would hold for all but two of the remaining 21 hours.

"I think the reason we were successful over [RJN] is because they didn't work together as a team. What they worked on was, 'which one of their drivers could outrun the next one?'" – While speaking with radiolemans.com at the time, Buncombe freely admitted the two Nissans were "racing each other" during the opening hour. – "Whereas one of the reasons we did so well is that our drivers were fast, but still took care of the equipment."

"I actually think one of the reasons we did so well in 2013 is because Cor [Euser] was super smart, prepared the Lotus really well, and knew that all the drivers he put in his car, including myself, would bring the 'endurance' part of racing to Dubai."

Not that Shane had long to celebrate his maiden class win in the 24H SERIES, however. Just two days later, the Florida native was already back in the US preparing for his 15th start at the Daytona 24 Hours, having already contested Daytona's 'Roar Before' qualifying session on January 6th before jetting off to the Middle East. Staggeringly, despite his efforts in Dubai and the extensive travel in-between leaving him both physically and mentally drained, Shane went on to take his first Daytona class win on January 27th, his second 24-hour win in 15 days.

"A start to your season doesn't get much better than that!"

