

My first **24H SERIES** race

Rob Huff

Dubai, 2014



In January 2014, 2012 World Touring Car Champion Rob Huff lined up for a 24-hour race at which he'd never competed (the 24H DUBAI) in a car he'd never raced (the Mercedes SLS) in a division (GT3) in which he'd made only one previous start. And nearly won!

Nine years on, 'Huffy' looks back on a "fairy-tale" weekend in Dubai with CREVENTIC.

Images - Eric Teeken

Just over 18 months removed from his 2012 World Championship win with Chevrolet and RML, Rob Huff, after a year as a privateer, was preparing for his first season with WTCC newcomer, Lada. Though his title defence with ALL-INKL.COM Münnich Motorsport had been steady rather than spectacular, the outgoing champion had still taken two race wins in the Saxony-based outfit's first touring car season, and finished a respectable 4th in the standings. This was far from an ignominious jumping of touring car ships.

Indeed, before pre-season testing with Lada got underway, Rob was looking forward to one last challenge with ALL-INKL, one more than a year in the making...

"So, yeah, 2012. I was at the FIA awards in Istanbul, and I bumped into Marc Basseng and René Münnich," Rob explains to CREVENTIC.

"Honestly, I had no idea who they were, because the touring car world and the GT racing world are very far removed from each other! But, of course, they were there to collect their GT1 championships." - René, as team founder and owner, collected the Teams' title, while Marc was crowned GT1 World Drivers' Champion alongside teammate Markus Winkelhock. - "I got chatting with Marc and he was telling me that [Münnich Motorsport] had just bought three SEAT Leóns and were planning on doing world touring cars in 2013. He was asking a lot of questions about the WTCC, and I was more than happy to speak with them, because, obviously, Chevrolet had just stopped their works program.

"A couple of weeks later, the phone rings, and it was Marc, saying 'René and I would really like you to come and drive the SEAT with us.' That all happened in the February before the season

started, so it all came together very quickly. I went to René's 'museum,' shall we call it, and their workshop. I saw the touring cars and the GTs they had. And I fell in love! It was a proper kids dream being in that workshop!

"Now, René loves Dubai - he's got a place there - and at some point, the wonderful idea came up that the three of us should do [the 24H DUBAI] together in the team's SLS. To go up against the [2012] GT1 World Champion, in the same car he was driving? I figured, 'yeah, that could be fun!'"

A few years down the line, Rob made the full-time move from his native Cambridgeshire to Dubai - "my sister was living there at the time, and I'd had quite a few holidays there, so I loved the place" - but with neither the WTCC nor his British Touring Car Championship program taking him to the Dubai Autodrome before that,

Rob was going into the 2014 24H DUBAI blind.

Competing in only his second-ever GT3 race - "I'd done Bathurst in 2013 in an Audi R8, and that was my first ever time in a GT3" - as part of a 77-car grid could, understandably, give any 24H DUBAI newcomer the willies. And yet...

"It was a huge grid that year, with I think the best part of 30 GT cars. And I was pretty much star struck standing on the grid with all these huge driver names that I'd never raced against but always wanted to. It couldn't have worked out much better really."

That's not faux modesty from Rob either. The boy loves his motorsport, as his many outings at the Goodwood Revival will attest. And in 2014, the 2012 WTCC champion was sharing the grid with four outright 24H DUBAI winners (Khaled Al Qubaisi, Jeroen Bleekemolen, Bernd Schneider, and Dirk Werner); four former Formula 1 drivers (Schneider again, Jan Magnussen, Karun Chandhok and Gianmaria Bruni); reigning and/or future FIA World Endurance LMGTE Champions (Bruni again, Stuart Hall, Toni Vilander and Paul Dalla Lana); American Le Mans Series champions; Bathurst 12 Hours winners; British GT winners →



FIA GT race winners, and Matthias, son-of-three-time-F1-World-Champion-Niki, Lauda.

To angle an already steep learning curve yet further, Rob was entering his first 24H DUBAI in a car he'd never raced before: Mercedes' SLS AMG GT3. Of course, Mercedes' then flagship GT had already won the two previous editions of the 24H DUBAI, had locked out the event's 2012 podium, and won both the Spa 24 Hours and the Nürburgring 24 Hours in 2013. Plus, this same SLS AMG GT3 had taken ALL-INKL.COM Münnich Motorsport to the FIA GT1 World Championship teams' title in 2012. Safe to say Rob had every reason to be confident.

"I just gelled with the car. Just enormously enjoyed driving that car!

"You're coming into one of the best cars, with one of the best teams. And ALL-INKL, they've got everything absolutely locked down. They're just amazing! They know exactly what they're doing – mechanics, engineers, the whole setup runs seamlessly – and that weekend couldn't have gone much better for us."

Progress was... steady for Rob, Marc Basseng and René Münnich during Free Practice 1, though things improved rapidly when Marc posted the 7th fastest time during Free Practice 2 and dipped below the two-minute mark for the first time during qualifying. The #38 Mercedes even topped the timesheets during Friday's morning warm-up, albeit by a scant 0.031s.

"We qualified I think... 16th, or 14th..."

Actually, you were 12th!

"12th! There you go, I knew we did pretty well!"

Just after 2pm on race day, polesitter V8 Racing was jumped at the green flag by fellow front row starter, and reigning event winner, Team Abu Dhabi by Black Falcon on the run down to turn one (a little too enthusiastically as it turns out, as the Mercedes was later pinged with a 10-second jump-start penalty). After just three laps, both the Mercedes and the Corvette had checked out and were already among the backmarkers.

Further back, 2012 GT1 World Champion Basseng, unsurprisingly, was making steady progress: 15 minutes into the race, the #38 Mercedes had already moved from 12th to 8th overall and was now in a five-car scrap for 5th.

"Marc did the most amazing first two stints. By the time he gave me the car, I think we were already in the top five."

After the first hour had elapsed, Basseng was 10th overall, though crucially, none of the nine cars ahead had made their first pit stops.

Impressively, the 24H DUBAI newcomers had been reading the Code 60s well, and from the second hour onwards, were rarely out of the overall top 10. Ironically though, this early Code 60 telepathy would come back to bite them...

Shortly after 4pm local time, Rob took the wheel for his first stint at the 24H DUBAI. When he handed the car over to Münnich two hours later, Rob was 3rd overall behind only the hyper-miling BMW Z4 GT3 of Team Schubert – winner of the event in 2011 – and the Team Abu Dhabi by Black Falcon Mercedes SLS, the latter still owing at least one pit stop.

Further back, and after starting 3rd, FACH AUTO TECH's Porsche 997 GT3 R was 4th ahead of the Craft Racing AMR Aston Martin Vantage GT3, though the latter dropped out of the top 10 altogether a few hours later when a Dunlop tyre delaminated and blew off the rim. Caught out by two early Code 60s, Ram Racing had made steady progress back up to 10th, while



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just behind the British team's Ferrari 458, Stadler Motorsport's Porsche 997 GT3 R, which had started one place behind ALL-INKL in 13th, was staying out of trouble and enjoying a quiet run on the fringes of the top 10.

Impressively, when not in traffic, Rob was consistently running 2m 01s laptimes, on par with 2012 GT1 World champion Basseng and much to the surprise (perhaps unfairly) to onlookers in the paddock. Turns out Rob's formative motor racing years had a lot to do with that...

"Not many people know this, but I grew up endurance go-karting. I had 10 years, pretty much, of six-hour, 12-hour and 24-hour go-kart racing, in pro-kart championships, all over the UK and Europe. And there's no doubt that that immediately came back to me.

"I've done some other endurance bits and bobs too. I've done the Britcar 24 Hours at Silverstone in a Dodge Viper [in 2007, and

again in 2010 in an Aquila CR1], and I've done the 25 Hours of Thunderhill [in 2013 in an Audi TTRS]. But Dubai really took me back to those Le Mans, 24-hour go-kart races: scything your way through traffic; staying out of trouble; trying to do consistent laptimes; trying to understand how the tyres worked. I think that caught quite a few people out!"

Keen to secure his team the best possible result, and aware of his championship-winning teammates' superior speed (his best lap was back in the 2m 04s), René Münnich ended up leaving most of the heavy lifting to Rob and Marc during the 13-plus hours of night running. The boss started just two single stints during the night – the first around midnight, the second a little after 5am – and completed his final run of the race with three hours still left on the clock.

Add to that the fact that ALL-INKL was one of the few teams on the grid with only three drivers on its line-up, as opposed to the conventional four or five, and it turns out double stinting during the night on one of the most crowded endurance grids in the world can wipe out even the most dedicated of world champions...

"I think René only drove for about four hours! So Marc and I did around 10 hours each. And... we were dead! I still remember hoiking Marc onto the camel for his trip down the pitlane to the podium: we had to physically lift him on and lift him off!"

"I'm laughing, but it was brutal. Absolutely brutal."

Rob and Marc's herculean efforts nevertheless paid off.

Aided by a multi-car incident that eliminated the Ram Racing Ferrari, and an overheated alternator that dropped long-time leader Team Abu Dhabi by Black Falcon out of contention, ALL-INKL found itself 3rd behind only the FACH AUTO TECH Porsche and Stadler Motorsport heading into the final six hours. Impressively, the former had battled back from a hefty five-minute time penalty to take the lead, while the latter, having been kinder to both its fuel and tyres, had gained 11 places from its grid slot.

Rob also dispatched Team Schubert during the night after a terrific scrap with BMW Motorsport legend Bill Auberlehen, though the BMW eventually dropped back to 10th at the flag after suffering two on-track collisions as well as failed rear suspension.

As the race hit two-thirds distance, 3rd became 2nd for the #38 ALL-INKL Mercedes SLS when FACH AUTO TECH, with a three-lap lead in its pocket, was grounded by gearbox

failure. Heading into the final three hours, and despite new leader Stadler Motorsport's three-lap lead, Rob, with a three-pointed rocket ship beneath him, still believed that an overall win, on debut, was still possible.

Sadly, a mix of track limit infringement and Code 60 'adjustment' penalties – a short-lived experiment to prevent teams building unassailable leads through blind luck under the purple flags – made that difficult...

"I think, with probably three or four hours to go, we genuinely thought we were going to win. And then we had some huge, seven-minute penalty to serve with an hour or two hours to go, which just let the Porsche get too far ahead of us. I think it was [Christian] Engelhart in the car for those last stints, and he was a proper, switched-on, GT3 kid! There was just no way we were going to catch him, which was a real shame."

At 2pm on Saturday, after 24 hectic hours, and from 13th on the grid, the Engelhart-driven Stadler Motorsport Porsche crossed the line to win the 24H DUBAI for the first time. It was the Swiss team's first win at a 24-hour race since 1996.

Though disappointed by the near-miss, ALL-INKL.COM Münnich Motorsport, from 12th on the grid, was just a few beats behind and came through to finish 2nd overall on its GT3 debut. Impressively, on its first 24-hour race outing, the #38 SLS suffered no mechanical gremlins at all, and even finished three laps clear of reigning winner, Team Black Falcon.

"It was just amazing, almost like a fairy-tale really. I'd literally driven one GT3 car before that, and ALL-INKL hadn't done a GT3 endurance race before. But we rocked up, with one of the best cars and one of the best outfits, and we just went at it. Everything ran like clockwork. It was brilliant. I absolutely loved it!"

Credit where it's due, 2nd first time out was an astonishing accomplishment, one many felt Lada WTCC-bound Rob Huff, FIA World Rallycross-bound René Münnich, and Blancpain Pro-Am champion-elect Marc Basseng could replicate, if not beat, in 2015. Ironically though, factory world touring car commitments meant it would be another eight years before Rob finally made his Hankook 24H DUBAI return.

"Opportunities... I won't say they didn't come around, because a few of them did. But they always clashed with the WTCC: in January, we'd be well into testing, or in the simulators. Also, when you sign with a manufacturer, understandably they're not overly keen on you doing events with other manufacturers. So if I'd done [the 24H DUBAI] again, it would have to have been with a private team.

"I would for sure have done the race with René and Marc again if they'd asked me, but after that, their focus very much went to touring cars, and it still is. Actually, when I lived in Dubai, I used to see René a lot, and we used to joke about getting the old SLS back out for the race. Because, honestly, if it was possible, I think the SLS could be a race-winning car and would still be very competitive today." ■



Could Rob make his GT3 return at the Hankook 24H DUBAI?

"I'd love to! I'd absolutely love to. I've obviously formed a great relationship with Wolf-Power Racing, and Marcus and Marlon [Menden] – with whom Rob returned to the Hankook 24H DUBAI in 2022 – "so the immediate future is to help them as much as possible.



Despite not turning a wheel in anger at the event in eight years, Rob Huff, unsurprisingly, was on scintillating form when he made his long-awaited return to the Hankook 24H DUBAI in 2022, now at the other end of the grid in a TCR-entered Audi RS 3 LMS. One blip in qualifying aside – somehow Rob and fellow TCE front row starter Pierre Couasnon managed to collide on the cool down lap – all was going well as the #116 Audi secured TCE pole position and stayed at the TCR sharp end for much of the opening stages.

Sadly for Wolf-Power Racing, its shot at victory evaporated when the German team's new Audi RS 3 suffered gearbox issues during the night. A potential TCR podium, if not a win, ultimately became 6th in-class at the flag.

Not that this setback seemed to bother Marcus Menden, who was keen to get the 2012 WTCC champion, now the 2020 TCR Scandinavian Touring Car Champion as well, back in the mix for 2023...

"It was supposed to be a one-off event in 2022, simply because the team couldn't find a fourth driver for the seat. Of course, I lived just across the road in Dubai at the time, and I've got good contacts with Audi, so it made a lot of sense. Two weeks after the [2022 race], Marcus called me and said, 'can we do it again next year?!' We did the [Hankook] 24H BARCELONA together as well in 2022, so I would love the opportunity to race with them again."

Eight years is a long time, of course: in motorsport terms, it's a whole other era! So it's not surprising to learn that, categories aside, Rob's second and third runs at the event in 2022 and 2023 proved quite different to his first in 2014. Indeed, that much sought-after GT3 return may prove more difficult to come by nowadays...

"I think the event has changed so much in the last 10 years since I did it. So many young, hot-gun 18, 19, 20-year old GT3 and works drivers come and partner the amateur drivers, so there's very limited opportunities for me to do it. Plus, I've made a career out of touring cars, and I think you very much get stuck with a 'stigma' of what you can and cannot drive. Which is a shame, because I was very quick in GT3. I could have gone the GT3 route, but then I would have had to give up on touring cars. And I love the sprint format.

"I'm pretty pleased I stuck with touring cars though. I got a 20-year career out of it, so I didn't do too badly!" ■