

ACADEMY MUSTANGS: TOP OF THE CLASS

Academy Motorsport opened the season with a hard fought 1-2 finish to lead the GT4 team points table

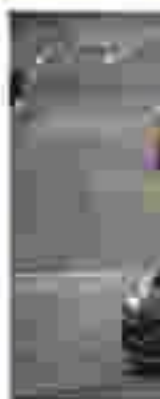
Words by Simon Jones and Oliver Jones

The opening round of the British GT Championship was an Oulton Park wet-and-dry classic. That presented an opportunity for the Academy Motorsport GT4 Mustang team to demonstrate their experience at the track and their finely honed race execution skills.

Initially, the weekend started badly with some worryingly low race qualifying grid positions. Starting from 7th, the number 61 car of Erik Evans and Matt Cowley was 5 positions ahead of Will Moore and Matt Moores' number 62 Mustang. This was an uncomfortable position for Matt James, 2008 inaugural GT4 Champion and Academy Team Principal, to be starting his return to race driving duties. The new grid-topping Arborea are the latest GT4 racers from McLaren and it's not unusual to see new model entries taking an initial advantage before the Balance of Performance for 2014 is fine-tuned to match the car's capabilities. Moody saw some adjustments to weight, ride height and engine airflow, based on a better understanding of relative performance characteristics as demonstrated during Saturday's qualifying

Prior to the start of the first race, Matt Nicol-Jones and Team Manager Andrew Dean were seen deep in private discussions on the pitwall. They were playing through wet race strategy scenarios based on their many combined years of racing experience. As the grid formed up for the first race of the season, Academy Motorsport was conspicuously absent as the Pershore squad opted to keep both its Mustangs in the pits as long as possible to make a call on whether to fit wet or dry-compound Pirellis. Both Will Moore and Matt Cowley started from the pitlane after switching slick tyres.

Slicks ultimately won out, allowing both Mustangs to make their way to the front before the regulation pitstop began. It was around quarter distance that things began to change as those who had taken the gamble to start on slicks began to find the heat and grip needed on the drying track. That was when the Mustangs made their move. Moore and Cowley ran in formation as they slided their way up the order to eventually run one-two just as the GT4 pit window closed after 28 minutes.





Safety Car periods which usually punch up the field aren't always helpful to race on class leaders. But this time the car favoured Moore and Nicol-Jones who benefited from fortuitous timing that helped them finish a lap clear of the number 11 Mustang shared by Erik Evans and Matt Cowley.

Unlike the wet-shod runners, Academy kept its Mustangs out until the end of the pit stop window, with Moore in number 52 being last to stop – an inspired decision, as it turned out, thanks to the timing of the second Safety Car period. That spared a race against time for Academy to get the car serviced and back out before the pack came around behind the Safety Car and closed the pit exit. Nicol-Jones got the leading car back on track just before the pit exit light turned red, and in doing so gained a lap on everybody to put the result all but beyond doubt.

Erik Evans in the #1 Mustang was less fortunate with the timing of his stop, but still in second regardless of the pressure from a pair of McLarens right on his tail. Once again, Championship number one Evans showed his cool under pressure and gave nothing away while the McLarens collected penalties for pit infringements or slid off track and down the order. The Mustang 1-2 was a popular outcome for many, with other competitors and spectators visiting the team garage to offer praise and congratulations.

The second race, in the afternoon, was

much more predictable following a wet start and even more so half through the hour making for tricky conditions. Unlike Race 1, there was little question of what type of tyres the grid would opt for, with almost all runners fitting wet Pirells as rain descended right before the start. Despite a 14th place grid position, Matt Cowley and Erik Evans' Mustang came home in a creditable 7th even after serving an additional seven-second compensation time handicap for finishing second in Race 1. Similarly, Moore and Nicol-Jones had to serve an extra ten seconds of stationary pit time for their rooming win. Combined with a 15th place grid spot this meant they ultimately had to settle for a 12th place finish.

Academy Motorsport lead the Team's championship standings heading into the next round at Silverstone.

