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Welcome to the Ardennes Rollercoaster

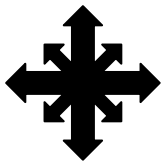
Hey! Over the weekend of June 20-21, the rollercoaster that is the **Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps** hosted rounds three and four of the **GT2 European Series Powered by Pirelli** and took the **SR Motorsports by SchnitzelAlm** team on an emotional rollercoaster ride. **Jay Mo Härtling** and I recovered from a poor qualifying effort on Saturday to finish second in the Pro-Am class in our **Mercedes-AMG GT2**. On Sunday, an overall podium finish and second place in Pro-Am were spoiled when the stewards applied a post-race penalty that dropped us to ninth overall and fifth in class.



The weekend began with two free practice sessions on Friday. In 2021, I did a track day at Spa in a Honda Civic, so the track layout was not unfamiliar. However, driving around the track with 700+ horsepower proved to be quite a different experience. On my first lap through the daunting Eau Rouge corner, my exact words were, “Holy sh*t!” The first sector of the lap from the La Source hairpin through Eau Rouge and Raidillon and up the Kemmel straight to Les Combes and the third sector through Blanchimont were made for the **AMG GT2** with high-speed flowing corners. The second sector featuring tighter corners proved to be a struggle the entire weekend. I made good progress in the first free practice getting familiar with the track on old tires, but definitely needed work finding braking points and maximizing exit speeds in the third sector.

I was hoping for a clean second free practice, but the Mother Nature had

other plans with scattered rain showers around the track. The time waiting for the track to clear was not completely wasted because I learned some German from my engineer, **Günni Aberer**. “Eifel scheiße” is a quite useful phrase when referring to the constantly changing weather while racing at Spa or the Nürburgring! I managed a few laps at the end of the session on a mostly dry track. Traffic prevented me from making any real progress, but I did get a chance to measure the strengths of the **AMG GT2** relative to competitors in the Lamborghini and Maserati.



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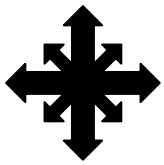
Given the lack of running in the practice, I did not feel overly confident going into qualifying on Saturday morning. Jay Mo however, was very much on pace in the **SR Motorsports by SchnitzelAlm AMG GT2**, topping the timesheet in the second session. It is great to have such a wonderful reference, so we analyzed video and data to pinpoint areas for improvement.

In my qualifying session to determine the starting grid for the first race, I improved by four seconds. Normally, improving by that margin would be cause for celebration, but when the checkered flag flew to end the session, I found myself in 16th and significantly off the pace of the front running Ginetta and Maserati. I lost a lap early in the session due to a track limit violation and on my last lap I caught my teammate, **Willi Kühne**, in an inopportune location exiting Blanchimont killing my momentum. I could probably come up with additional excuses, but in the end, I just did not put together a good lap. Jay Mo was able to show considerably better pace in his qualifying session lining us up fourth overall for the second race behind the two Ginettas and a KTM.

My poor qualifying meant we had our work cut out for us in the race on Saturday afternoon, but on the grid, I was fairly confident we could put the **SR Motorsports by SchnitzelAlm AMG GT2** on the podium. The first corner, the La Source hairpin, has historically been a site of numerous first lap incidents. My goal was to get through La Source cleanly when the lights went green to start the race and then use the superior top speed of the **AMG GT2** on the run up the long Kemmel straight to move forward.

I got a decent start, accelerated past the #27 Lamborghini and found a good gap entering La Source. The exit of La Source was complete chaos. Multiple cars were either spinning to the inside or driving through the gravel trap on the outside. I found myself four-wide and was bumped in the right door, but by the time the field reached Eau Rouge for the first time I had moved from 16th to ninth overall and second in Pro-





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Am. That was a good start! I defended my position into Les Combes and set my sights on the #294 **AMG GT2** and #89 KTM. A good run out of Blanchimont on the first lap enabled me to out-brake the #294 entering the Chicane to move up to eighth. Seventh was mine on the run down the Kimmell straight using the superior straight-line speed of the **AMG GT2**. Over the next few laps, I consolidated my position and moved up to sixth when the #88 Audi slowed with a mechanical issue.



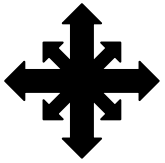
With 28 minutes left in the race, I was fending off the recovering #88 when Günni called me in for fuel and driver change. The #88 made an ill-advised divebomb pass attempt into the Chicane, launching his car over the apex curb in the process. I saw the Audi in my peripheral vision, opened up my hands slightly to avoid contact and fortunately still beat the #88 into the pitlane. #88 then ground to a halt

blocking the pitlane. This proved fortuitous for my teammates in the #110 **AMG GT2** allowing them to leapfrog numerous cars onto the Pro-Am podium in third place.

After a flawless pitstop by the **SR Motorsports by SchnitzelAlm** team and serving our ten seconds of additional compensation time, Jay Mo returned to the track behind the class leading #62 Ginetta. Jay Mo laid down consistently quick laps, closing the gap to the #62 before taking the checkered flag fifth overall and second in Pro-Am.



Sunday dawned cooler and Jay Mo took the start fourth overall. The #111 **SR Motorsports by SchnitzelAlm AMG GT2** held position into La Source and Eau Rouge. At the end of the first lap, the race leading #3 Ginetta headed to the pit lane with a flat tire promoting Jay Mo to third behind the #10 KTM and #116 **AMG GT2**. The #116 was clearly slower, taking a defensive line into La Source and on the Kimmell straight which allowed Jay Mo to make a lunge down the inside on the exit of Les Combes. It was a late move and when the #116 turned in, Jay Mo backed out to avoid contact. The #116



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went off into the gravel and continued while Jay Mo moved into second. Moments later the #8 Maserati had a massive accident in Eau Rouge bringing out the safety car. Fortunately, the driver of the #8 Maserati was able to walk away.

After a lengthy period behind the safety car, the #10 and #111 gapped the field when racing resumed. A lap later Jay Mo used the 700+ horsepower of the **AMG GT2** to pass the #10 on the Kemmel straight and into the overall lead. The long safety car period



limited the amount of time Jay Mo had to extend his lead over the #10 to overcome the additional seven seconds of pit stop compensation time we earned for our second-place finish on Saturday.

With 20 minutes left in the race, the #111 headed to the pit lane where I took over the driving duties. I returned to the track second overall and in Pro-Am, five seconds behind the #10 and just over one

second ahead of the #115 **AMG GT2**. I did not have the pace to chase down the #10, but successfully held off the #115 before the Silver class cars, the #6 Maserati and #116 **AMG GT2**, caught me. Gunni let me know there was no need to fight the #6 or the #116 which had a time penalty to be added after the race. I duly crossed the finish line third overall and second in Pro-Am.

Hours after the trophies had been handed out and the champagne had been sprayed, Jay Mo was summoned by the race stewards to answer for the incident with the #116. After watching the video, I honestly feel it was a racing incident. The stewards had a different opinion and assigned a penalty dropping us to ninth overall and fifth in Pro-Am.

I certainly do not agree with the stewards' decision, but in the end, it does not change our goals or our approach to the **GT2 European Series Powered by Pirelli** season. The **SR Motorsports by SchnitzelAlm AMG GT2** is still here. We are still leading the **Pro-Am Cup Drivers' Championship**. Jay Mo is still leading the **SRO GT Academy Drivers' Championship**. We will be pushing to win every weekend for ourselves, our teammates at **SR Motorsports by SchnitzelAlm** and **Mercedes-AMG**.

About THILENIUS GROUP

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