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Sunshine Spoils Rainy Day for SunTrust

Angelelli, Taylor Bank on Wet Race, Have to Settle for Fourth in Dry Finish at VIR

Date: May 14, 2011

Event: Bosch Engineering 250 (Round 4 of 12)

Series: Daytona Prototype division of the GRAND-AM Rolex Sports Car Series

Location: Virginia International Raceway in Alton (3.27-mile, 17-turn road course)

Start/Finish: 3rd/4th (Running, completed 62 of 62 laps)

Winners: Joao Barbosa, Terry Borcheller and J.C. France of Action Express Racing (Porsche)

With a \$25,000 bounty riding on the outcome of Saturday's Bosch Engineering 250 GRAND-AM Rolex Series race at Virginia International Raceway (VIR) in Alton, the SunTrust Racing team took a bit of a gamble on the weather and decided to play to its strength in an effort to bring an end to the six-race winning streak of the Chip Ganassi Racing with Felix Sabates team.

Unfortunately, the rainy weather the SunTrust team and co-drivers Max Angelelli and Ricky Taylor were counting on lasted for two-thirds of today's 2-hour, 45-minute race around the scenic 3.27-mile, 17-turn road circuit, and they had to settle for a fourth-place finish.

It hasn't had the luxury of many rainy track days in recent years, but when it has run in the wet, the No. 10 SunTrust Chevrolet Dallara of Wayne Taylor Racing has proven to be particularly fast. Lightning fast.

So, as rain clouds were gathering up above just prior to race time, and a huge mass of yellow and green appeared on the local Doppler radar, the SunTrust team dialed a hefty amount of front and rear downforce into the Dallara's set-up and sent it on its way, anticipating wet weather for most, if not all, of today's late-afternoon affair.

As expected, it was absolutely great while the wet weather lasted. But as the precipitation came to an end a little before the race's midpoint and track conditions began to get drier and drier, prospects for a race victory started going away. And, ultimately, so did a seemingly inevitable podium finish for the SunTrust team, which evaporated just three-quarters of a lap from the checkered flag.

"We made the set-up changes we could during the race when the rain stopped, but it still was not the perfect car for the way the conditions ended up," said Angelelli, who moved into the top-three with 20 laps remaining in today's 62-lap race, but found himself desperately trying to hang onto the final podium spot before Darren Law in the No. 5 Action Express Racing Porsche took it away early during the white-flag lap. "We had time to change the bodywork in the front but not the rear spoiler, so that made the car very unbalanced as the conditions became more dry. I struggled with that, so where we ended up was the maximum that I could do. We bet on something that did not happen. We bet on a wet race and it did not happen all the way to the end. So, we did everything around that – we put all of our eggs in the rain basket. With the rain, the car was so much faster. It was so easy, I was just taking my time, and as soon as I saw a gap – within two corners, I could get by people with ease."

Such was also the case for the 21-year-old Taylor at the outset under rainy conditions. From his third starting spot, he immediately jumped into second place by turn one and was in hot pursuit of the polesitting Paul Edwards in the No. 90 Spirit of Daytona Chevrolet Coyote. By the time the field arrived back at the start-finish line to complete lap one, Taylor had the SunTrust car in the lead.

"It felt like the longest lap I've ever had," said Taylor, who scored his first career Rolex Series podium finish of third at VIR last year alongside Angelelli. "If it would have been wet like that for the whole race, we would've had the perfect car. But it dried out and that's what let us down. We gambled and it didn't quite work, I guess. On that first lap, it's so hard to see when you're behind a car, so my goal was to get around (Edwards) as quickly as possible so I could have better visibility. I figured if I got into the lead as quickly as possible, it would be easy from there."

Just a matter of seconds after Taylor completed the opening lap, the caution flag flew as the skies opened up and standing water quickly began building all around the track. Taylor and the rest of the field followed the pace car for an excruciatingly slow series of laps around the track in the monsoon conditions. By lap eight, the race was already past the 30-minute mark – the minimum seat time drivers need to log in order to score championship points for an event. Several teams, including the SunTrust team, opted to pit for a driver change. Angelelli, who like the Dallara chassis thrives in wet-weather conditions, replaced Taylor and resumed in fifth place, still under caution for another eight laps before the race went back to green on lap 16 with an hour and 48 minutes to go.

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Angelelli found his way around the track with relative ease under still wet conditions, grabbing fourth place on lap 19, and third place on lap 20. He momentarily took second place away from Pruett on lap 23, but then was held up by race-leader David Donohue in the No. 5 Porsche just as Donohue ventured off-course, and Pruett shot past and into the lead with Angelelli still in second.

With the race back under yellow for a GT-class car that also ventured off course, Angelelli dove into the pits to allow the SunTrust team to replace the front bodywork with a lower-downforce, dry-weather-oriented piece. But the only change to the rear of the car that the team had time for was a new, lower-downforce wicker on the rear wing.

Angelelli fell from second to sixth with that stop, but on the lap-29 restart, still on rain tires, he quickly grabbed two positions to get back up to fourth. He then got Joao Barbosa in the No. 9 Action Express Racing Porsche Riley for third on lap 30. He stayed in the top-three until he pitted on lap 37 for slicks as conditions continued to dry quickly.

He rejoined the race in fifth, was up to fourth by lap 39, and by lap 43 was back in the top-three, where he stayed until that fateful final lap. Angelelli took the checkered flag fourth behind Barbosa, who rebounded for the race win in the No. 90 Porsche and the \$25,000 bounty posted by GRAND-AM for the first team to beat the No. 01 of Pruett and Memo Rojas. Pruett did finish second, .27 of a second behind Barbosa, while Law took the final podium position another five seconds behind Pruett in the No. 5 Porsche.

“You make decisions and you live by your decisions and, as it turned out, we just didn’t have the car we needed at the end of the race,” said team owner Wayne Taylor, whose younger son, 20-year-old Jordan Taylor, took first place in the GT class today in the No. 88 Chevrolet Camaro. “There wasn’t anything else we could do, really. We didn’t have a car we could win with once it went dry. Once we made the aero change, we couldn’t balance the front end with the rear. Max had a car that was understeering like a dog, and then it was slow in the straightaways with so much rear downforce. Ricky did great on his ‘one-lap wonder.’ It was really good. I was impressed. That’s what he had to do.”

The 2011 GRAND-AM Rolex Sports Car Series next heads to Lime Rock Park in Lakeville, Conn., for the May 30 Memorial Day Classic, where Taylor and Angelelli scored a dominating victory a year ago. The race begins at 2 p.m. EDT with live television coverage on SPEED, as well as live radio on the Motor Racing Network and Sirius Channel 94 beginning with pre-race activities at 1:45 p.m.

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