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A Bittersweet Third in the Championship for SunTrust

Early Tire Issues and Two Late Cautions Derail Rolex Series Title Shot For Angelelli, Frisselle at Season-Ending Grand Prix of Miami

Date: Oct. 10, 2009
Event: Grand Prix of Miami (Round 12 of 12)
Series: Daytona Prototype division of the Grand-Am Rolex Sports Car Series
Location: Homestead-Miami Speedway (2.3-mile, 11-turn road course)
Start/Finish: 2nd / 7th (Status, completed 100 of 100 laps)
Winners: Alex Gurney and Jon Fogarty of the No. 99 Gainsco/Bob Stallings Racing Pontiac Riley

It only figures that a roller coaster ride of a 2009 Grand-Am Rolex Sports Car Series season for co-drivers Max Angelelli and Brian Frisselle and the No. 10 SunTrust Ford Dallara team of Wayne Taylor Racing came to an end Saturday with a Grand Prix of Miami filled with what seemed like a season's worth of ups and downs over a scheduled two hours and 30 minutes of racing.

The day started with Angelelli and Frisselle locked in a three-team battle for the Rolex Series championship, just eight points out of the lead. It almost immediately took a turn for the worse thanks to major tire issues that started five laps in, suddenly looked promising when Angelelli drove his way into the lead and stayed there for 16 laps over the latter half of the race, and looked really good when Frisselle was the only car on the track with fresh tires and hopes of a storybook sprint to the finish in the closing minutes.

But a pair of late caution periods, the second of which lasted no less than eight tours of the 2.3-mile, 11-turn Homestead-Miami Speedway road course to end the race and the season under caution, left the SunTrust team with a seventh-place finish in the race, third place in the championship, and only wondering what might have been.

Despite the disappointment, the SunTrust team was able to close the books on the 2009 season with yet another top-three finish in the championship, its fifth since joining the series in 2004 on an impressive run that includes the 2005 series title and a runner-up finish in 2004. The No. 99 Gainsco/Bob Stallings Racing Pontiac Riley team of Alex Gurney and Jon Fogarty, which held the eight-point advantage over the SunTrust team entering the weekend, clinched its second title since 2007 by finishing fourth today. The No. 01 Chip Ganassi Racing with Felix Sabates Lexus Riley team of Scott Pruett and Memo Rojas, which started the weekend 10 points out of the lead, leapfrogged the SunTrust team to take second place in the championship with a runner-up finish today.

"We lost tons of points during the season – that's what cost us the championship, really, not just what happened today," said Angelelli, who co-drove with team owner Wayne Taylor to the 2005 series title for SunTrust. "That's what put us in the situation we were in today, where we had to win and had to hope that the other guys had problems. I feel bad, sad for the team, because they did a really great job this year. I think I have the best guys in the series. I enjoyed having Brian on board all year and I've been nothing but happy with him. All I can say is I'm ready to go again."

Frisselle, who qualified second on Friday afternoon and got off to a strong start over the initial laps today, radioed just five laps into the race that his rear grip was already going away. Soon after, he reported that both front and rear grip was gone, turning his opening stint turned into a fierce struggle just to keep the SunTrust car in the top-five before he was called into the pits during the day's first caution just 29 minutes into the race for tires and fuel. And even though he had yet to drive the 30 minutes required for each drive to qualify for championship points, Frisselle was called upon to turn the car over to Angelelli, as well.

With Friday's qualifying set of tires now on the car, Angelelli's fortunes turned out to be not much better as the Italian driving ace restarted fourth and fell back to sixth over the next 25 laps.

"I'm not sure what was going on there," said Frisselle, who scored his third and fourth career victories alongside Angelelli this season at Daytona (Fla.) International Speedway in July and Montreal's Circuit Gilles Villeneuve in August. "Both Max and I, with our first sets of tires, we struggled. The tires fell off massively and we just couldn't keep pace. Initially, at the start, I thought the car was really good. And then Max had the same problem with his first set, but didn't struggle with his second set and worked his way to the front and kept it there."

Finally, an hour and 10 minutes into the race and working lap 49, the team decided to give up what track position it could hold onto, hoping a new set of tires could change its fortunes, and called Angelelli into the pits for a green-flag pit stop. That dropped Angelelli all the way back to 14th place, but the new set of tires enabled him to work his way into the lead by the 64th lap with a just under an hour remaining.

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“My first stint I had our qualifying tires from yesterday,” Angelelli said. “I guess that turned out to be the problem. My second set was much better. I was surprised by my first set because I thought it was a new set.”

Angelelli stayed in the lead for the next 15 laps before, on lap 81 with 32 minutes left in the race, he reported a strong vibration from the right rear tire as Scott Pruett in the No. 01 Lexus and Joao Barbosa in the No. 59 Brumos Racing Porsche Riley were able to sneak by him.

On lap 84, the team decided to gamble and call Angelelli into the pits for its final set of fresh tires and, in an effort to ensure Frisselle scored championship points, put the 25-year-old American back in the SunTrust Racing machine for a final sprint to the finish. The caution came out just as Frisselle left the pit lane in 13th place, enabling him to pack in tightly behind the field. With the only fresh set of tires on the entire track, Frisselle’s mission was to pick off as many cars as humanly possible over the final 20 minutes of the race.

After the lap-88 restart, Frisselle was able to pass five cars over the next four laps to move into eighth place, and it appeared the seven positions in front of him were his for the taking with 15 minutes to go. But a caution on lap 92 briefly stopped Frisselle’s progress toward the lead, and then a final, fateful caution on a lap-96 restart – after which he passed one more car for seventh – ate up the final seven minutes left in the race, leaving Frisselle in the final finishing position of seventh.

“At the end, we had a good advantage on tires,” Frisselle said. “We were quick, but the yellows just killed us. We just weren’t able to work our way up any closer to the front because of the yellows. It was unfortunate, but it was out of our control. Looking back at the year, it was a really strong year. Of course we want the championship. But the positive we take away is that it was still a strong year. And I just can’t thank the team enough for putting me back in the car so I can get the points today.”

“Looking back, an eight-point deficit was going to be a difficult one to overcome today,” Taylor said. “Of course, anything is possible. But we knew we had to take some calculated risks, and I still believe what we did was the right move. What we didn’t expect were those two yellows at the end because, before those two yellows, we had a car that was two seconds a lap better than everybody else because of tires. Unfortunately, the yellows came out and all I can say is congratulations to Bob Stallings and Gainsco, to Jon Fogarty and Alex Gurney, to Tim Keene and the Ganassi team and, of course, Scott Pruett and Memo Rojas. I’m incredibly proud of my team and I’m more sad and upset and emotional for them than I am for myself because I know they want to do it for me and for SunTrust, and I want to do it for them. It was a tire issue that hurt us early today. It was the same tire issue the other teams were experiencing all through the weekend, too. I just can’t understand how it can be possible for us to have the same problem with both of our first two sets of tires in the race. That’s what cost us the race today, regardless of whether it cost us the championship or not.”

The 2010 Rolex Series season gets underway Jan. 30-31 at Daytona (Fla.) International Speedway with the annual Rolex 24 At Daytona. It’ll start a 12-race campaign that concludes in early September at Miller Motorsports Park in Tooele, Utah, and includes a brand new stop on Memorial Day weekend at Lime Rock Park in Lakeville, Conn.

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