



ROTAX MAX CHALLENGE GRAND FINALS 2007 Monday, November 26 2007

STORY

For many racers around the world, November is part of their winter break. A time to repair and replace equipment for next year's racing season. But for a selected few, those that had proven to be their country's best ROTAX MAX drivers, November is the time for the ROTAX MAX Grand Finals. This year, their chance for glory would be at the Al Ain Raceway in the United Arab Emirates.

Al Ain is in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, which is fast becoming a motorsports center and will, in fact, host a Formula One race in 2009 at a new circuit on Yas Island. Those that follow Formula One know that all the great drivers have a karting background. With the level of competition at the Grand Finals, it's just possible one of the competitors at this year's Finals could end up someday in Formula One.

Junior MAX

Every year the Junior MAX class promises great action, and this year was no exception. Setting the early pace in the first timed practice session was New Zealand's William Bamber who was the only Junior to break the one-minute barrier with a 59.917. By the time qualifying came around it was Japan's Takamoto Katsuta laying down the fast time with a lap of 59.336.

After all the qualifying heat races had been run, it was still Katsuta, who's father and grandfather are champion rally drivers, at the top of the order. Directly behind him going into the pre-final were Mats Van Der Brand (Netherlands), Kevin Korjus (Estonia), and New Zealand's William Bamber who was celebrating his 14th birthday at the Grand Finals.

After leading the first laps of the pre-final, early favorite Katsuta was passed going into turn one by Daniel Rochford (Australia) who had stormed up from fifth, and Kevin Korjus. By the end of the 11-lap pre-final, Korjus had gotten around Rochford for the lead. Jack Swinkels (Netherlands), William Bamber and Caleb Williams (South Africa) rounded out the top five while Katsuta fell to seventh.

At the start of the final, it was Korjus and Rochford leading the way while Caleb Williams was making his way up from fifth. On lap four, Williams was in the lead and it looked like we may yet see another win for South Africa.

Meanwhile, back in the pack, un-noticed by those watching the lead battle, Japan's Ryuya Fujie and Kazuki Hiramine were slashing through the pack after starting 17th and 27th respectively. On lap 11 Kevin Korjus re-took the lead, this time to stay, leaving Williams in second with a decent sized gap over now third place Ryuya Fujie. As the laps would down, Fujie caught Williams and, with a very forceful move, demoted the South African to third place on the last lap.

After 18 laps of racing it was Korjus, Fujie and Williams who would stand on the podium. Jack Swinkels, Kazuki Hiramine and Luke Varley (UK) rounding out the top six. Early favorite and pole sitter Takamoto Katsuta ended the day in seventh.

MAX

The MAX class is the original ROTAX classification and is still thought by many to be the top-level in ROTAX competition. In the first four Grand Finals, drivers from South Africa had dominated the MAX class. However, the last two years have seen victories by drivers from Holland. With David Perel (South Africa) and defending MAX World Champion Ricardo Romkema (Holland) starting the pre-final on the second row, there was a very strong chance that the class would continue to be dominated by these two countries. However, sharing the front row were Mike Simpson and Ben Cooper of the United Kingdom. If anyone was going to win the MAX class this year, they would have to take it from the UK.

Indeed it was pole-sitter Mike Simpson who dominated the pre-final. However his country-mate Cooper suffered a mechanical on lap six and ended the pre-final 34th and last. The star of the MAX pre-final was Hungary's Imre Birizdo who moved from eight all the way up to second. Romkema and Perel finished third and fourth respectively, and the UK's Benjy Russell ran a cool, conservative race to come home fifth.

For Simpson, it was now time to make his run at the title. After leading the pre-final from flag-to-flag he was the early favorite to take the title. In fact, going into turn one-lap one, Mike did indeed take the lead. But, Ricardo Romkema was hounding him and it wasn't long before the defending champion was again out front at the Grand Finals. Making matters worse for Simpson, Imre Birizdo and Benjy Russell also got past the pole-sitter and the top three set sail on the field.

As the laps clicked off towards the final total of 21, Ricardo Romkema looked like a sure bet to repeat for Holland and become only the second ROTAX two-time champion. At one stage he had a couple seconds in hand over Benjy Russell. However, towards the end of the race, Russell started coming on and was right on Romkema's bumper going into the final section of the track. As the top two rounded the last corner, a huge roar went up from the grandstands as Russell had made a very aggressive inside move on Romkema that saw the Dutch driver go off onto the dirt in order to avoid the Brit. This slowed Ricardo down a bit and allowed Benjy Russell to take the checkered flag.

Reactions to the move after the race were understandable split. However, most agreed that even though it was a very forceful move, perhaps bordering on one that should earn a penalty, it was a fair move. And in the end, Benjy Russell and the United Kingdom had their first Grand Finals World Championship

Russell's move slowed Romkema down enough that third through sixth caught him in the run to the checkered flag. At the line the five drivers crossed within two-tenths of a second of each other with Romkema in second, Mike Simpson in third, Imre Birizdo fourth, Austria's Kevin Reichard came home fifth and David Perel rounded out the top six

DD2

The two-speed DD2 class is the fastest class in ROTAX competition. As such it never fails to put on a good show. In fact, some of the most legendary battles in Grand Finals history occurred between former champions Cristiano Morgado and Wesleigh Orr in DD2 RM1 karts. This year, however, it looked as though all the great battles would be somewhere other than the front of the grid. This is because Quebec, Canada's Pier-Luc Ouellette was hands-down the class of the field from the moment the karts took to the track for practice Tuesday morning.

There were, however, other drivers that were running very well. South African Kyle Lawrence had a near-perfect record in the heat races with two wins and a second place behind Ouellette. Tom Williamson (Australia), Makoto Kubo (Japan) and Morgan Riche (France) also looked strong and consistent going into the pre-final.

At the start of the pre-final, the question on everyone's lips was, "would anyone try to take Ouellette out in turn one?" Thankfully, this did not happen. This is in part due to a slight dogleg just before turn one that helps protect the leader. We'd also like to think that fair play among the competitors also played a great deal in the fact that there was no contact in turn one in the DD2 pre-final. And, for that matter, turn one saw very little "barging" this year as it had in year's past.

At the end of the DD2 pre-final, Pier-Luc Ouellette led over Morgan Riche by almost 5 seconds. Behind Riche, Tom Williamson, Denis Thum (Germany), defending champion Ben George of Australia and Makoto Kubo completed the top six and would make up the first three rows in the final.

The DD2 final, as expected was all Ouellette's from start to finish as he built up a comfortable lead over Riche and then sealed the deal by bringing the kart home safely in first place. In fact, Ouellette made it look easy with a super-smooth driving style that belied the actual pace he was running. Behind Pier-Luc, Morgan Riche took second just as he did in the pre-final.

Giving the Japanese supporters something to cheer for in the final was Makoto Kubo who put in a great run to give Japan two podium appearances this year. Rounding out the top six were Tom Williamson, defending DD2 champion Ben George and Joey Collins, the latter giving the team from America it's best finish this year.

After all the podium appearances and all of the karts and support gear had been given back to the race organizers, the last item on the schedule was the always-popular "Driver's Party", this year held in the courtyard at the Intercontinental Hotel. As always, BPR-Rotax goes all-out to make sure every competitor, supporter and those responsible for making the race happen are treated to a good time. This year was no exception and many stayed well past midnight while others left to go dance the night away at Luce, a popular dance club in the hotel.

In year's past, the location for next year's Grand Finals was announced at the driver's party. For the third consecutive year, there was no announcement this year and that led to much speculation and anticipation as to where the Grand Finals would be held next year. Wherever that will be, we know there are drivers and teams already planning their run at ROTAX MAX Grand Finals glory.