

Road America Race Report

Posted by Sterling Doc - 02 May 2009 22:35

Elkhart Lake, WI â• NASA Midwest 944 officially began its 2009 racing season in the hallowed hills of Road America. Southern Wisconsin in April did not disappoint race fans and drivers with rain, fog, cold, and lightning. Despite this, the weekend was full of close, tight, and fun racing, and no car contact or damage all weekend. Friday started beautifully with temps in the high 70â•s for the season opening 3-hour enduro. Being an ambitious group, 944 Spec cars dominated the enduro grid, fielding over $\frac{1}{4}$ of the total entries. Eric Kuhns drove to an early lead with some of the other teams having some early season teething issues. In the end though, it was Eric in his newly built car who was sidelined by axle bolts working loose, eating one CV joint (and mortally wounding another) at the 2 hour mark, while Rob Sheiring (driving solo!), Billy Newport (also driving solo!), and the teams of Ray Freundt + Roy Lipner, and Anhil Blazquez + Bill Marquart, all motored on to strong finishes, with the latter team winning the E2 class. Settling the pre-race grudge match, all the 944â•s finished ahead of the V8 pony car and Miata entries.

New season Sponsor Nick Miller of Bennington Motorsports helped repair Ericâ•s enduro failure by getting a new axle in his car, readying it for the other races of the weekend. Nick will be available at NASA Midwest events this year providing full support exclusively for 944 Spec Drivers. He will have a stocked 28-foot trailer with everything from random seals & parts, to a complete motor and transmission starting with the next event at Putnam Park. Visit his website for 944 Service and preparation, or to rent a 944 Spec car, at www.BENMS.com.

Early Saturday morning a cold front and lots of rain came through Southern Wisconsin. The Saturday morning warm up was used to feel out the cars, the track, and the wet racing line. Overly ambitious drivers quickly found themselves off the track and into the grass or sand traps, but 944 Spec drivers kept their cars and driving safe and clean. Class newcomer Andy Berberich was able to pick up the wet racing line pretty quickly due to hundreds of laps of experience at Road America. Ben Anderson, new to 944â•s, came up to speed quickly in the Bennington Motorsports/944Raceworks rental car, surprising everyone with his excellent car control, and quick pace in very wet conditions. Anderson credited the 944â•s excellent feedback and friendly handling to his quick rise up the timing charts.

After a wet qualifying session Andy Berberich, driving the Eurosport 944, qualified on the pole with regional class director Eric Kuhns in second. The race started with Berberich, Kuhns, and the rest of the 944 Spec cars leading the field up the hill to the starter. The Eurosport 944 got an excellent start and jumped out to an early lead. It didnâ•t take long before quicker cars further back in the field caught the front starters. Racing in the mist of leading cars created a significant challenge, as did attempts to pass off of the wet line. As the field spread out, it was Berberich and Kuhns in contention for the first place finish. Hard clean racing ensued up and down the field, even some hair-raising side-by side racing through the kink in the pouring rain. In the lead, Berberich would increase the lead coming out of the turns and down the straights. Kuhns would close the gap under braking and in the tighter parts of the course. Ray Freundt finished a strong 3rd, while Rob Sheiring, Anhil Blazquez, and Ben Anderson rounded out the field. Berberich said the relentless pressure from Kuhns and the harsh weather made the win that much more rewarding.

The new NASA schedule for 2009 introduced an additional Saturday race at selected tracks. The schedule results in three total sprint races in two days with the option of a three hour endurance race on Friday at several events this year. For the race time, it is hard to beat NASA for wheel to wheel excitement & value.

The second sprint race on Saturday shaped up to be just as exciting as the first. The starting field was determined by the earlier qualifying session and the rain had let up a little. Berberich and Kuhns were on the front row again approaching the starter. This time, the starter held up starting the race until the first two cars were almost under the starter. The delay in the start caught a few people off guard and it caused the Spec Miata class to already be under acceleration in anticipation of the start. This anticipation resulted in a four wide start in the middle of the front straight. Smart driving prevailed, and all the cars somehow squeezed through turn one using the entire track without incident. Within a few turns, the field had spread out and Kuhns was pressuring Berberich just as he did in the first race. Berberich would build a lead and then Kuhns would close the gap. This went on for several laps until the second CV joint wounded in the enduro gave out, and Kuhns retired from the race. This allowed Berberich and the Eurosport 944 to cruise to another first place finish. Ben Anderson again impressed the class with a classic draft pass at the checker to claim second place from Blazquez by a nose. Freundt rounded out the field in his 944 Raceworks entry.

Sunday started the same way that Saturday ended, wet and cold. The only difference is that a slight increase in ambient temperature resulted in relentless fog. The biggest challenge of the weekend seemed to be keeping the inside of windshields from fogging up. Several different techniques were employed, but it was something that most drivers had to deal with.

Sundayâ€™s qualifying session got off to a slow start after a Spec Miata ran off the track, right in front of Berberich, and deep into the sand trap outside of turn eight. This little episode brought out the full course black flag and all cars pulled into pit lane. By the time the session had resumed, there was just enough time for one flying lap to determine the starting grid. The Eurosport 944 qualified second behind Ben Anderson in the Bennington Motorsports/944 Raceworks rental 944 Spec racer. This weekend was Andersonâ€™s first time behind the wheel of a 944 Spec racecar and his first place qualification was his testament to the ease of driving and predictability of these cars.

The rain had subsided for a couple hours leading up to Sundayâ€™s 40 minute sprint race, with many drivers outside of 944 Spec switching to dry tires. Just as the cars were pulling up to grid, the skies opened up and monsoon conditions ensued. As the cars took their warm up lap, lightning and thunder added to the pouring rain. For safety reasons the race was started when the pace car passed the starter station and all cars took one more pace lap until the black flag came out. Just before the pace car took the green flag, Anderson pulled into pit lane after his windshield wiper quit working. This moved Berberich up to first place in pit lane in the five car field. After about 10 minutes in the pit lane, the pace car took the cars back out on the track for two more pace laps as the lightning moved out of the area. Amazingly, Anderson got his windshield wiper fixed in the pits, and rejoined the field without losing a lap, while the rest of the cars were being held in the grid. Approaching the starter stand, the 944s were at the back of the field with the other classes leading to the starter. This led to some wild racing as the 944â€™s quickly picked their way through the Spec Miata field on the first lap, who were struggling on dry tires.

Inside pole Berberich and outside pole Ray Freundt left a gap between them and the rest of the field while approaching the starter. As they crested the top of the hill leading onto the front straight, the green flag was already flying for the rest of the field. The Eurosport 944 got off to a good start and quickly slipped into first. "I knew we wouldn't have much time to race," Berberich reflected. "Being up front, I also knew that I had nothing to gain by driving aggressively, but everything to lose. So, I set my sights on driving conservatively and defensively." Tight, nose-to-tail racing in blinding conditions ensued among the top 4 cars. Good corner exit speed, and smart racecraft by Berberich held off a hard-charging Freundt, who eventually went off in Canada corner attempting an outside last-lap pass, suffering only a bruised ego, but knowing he had left nothing on the table. This left Kuhns and Anderson bearing down on Berberich for the last few corners. Again displaying savvy racecraft, Berberich checked up Kuhns on the last corner, which Anderson used to his advantage, nipping Kuhns in another last corner pass for second place. The race ended up being a green, white, checkered two-lap race. The overall group win went to Berberich for a clean sweep of the weekend sprint races, and second place went to Anderson who eked Kuhns out by twenty thousandths of a second at the line.

944 Spec continued to demonstrate its trademark clean, close racing this weekend while showcasing some new, seriously quick talent, upping the level of competition in class for this year. Full Toyo bucks were awarded and Hawk Bucks were earned. The Hard Luck Award went to Rob Sheiring, who will get \$75 in parts from "A Part Above" to help fix his clutch issue that sidelined him this weekend, after making it through the enduro, solo!

Be sure to check the schedule for the upcoming events and races at www.NASAmidwest.com.

Article by Co-op racing and Eric Kuhns, 944 Spec Midwest Director.