

The Southwest Star

COVERING YOUR CARS & YOUR EVENTS

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In this issue – the all-new 2022 C-Class, the new GT3, the GLB, Rolex 24 coverage, the history of AMG North America, and more

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Cinderella Parties Pass to Take Home the L



On the last weekend in January, Cinderella didn't meekly attend the ball in a horse-drawn carriage. She punched her Mercedes AMG through the front door at Daytona with power from several hundred horses, dared everyone to match her moves on the dance floor all night long, drank the Champagne, and wrapped her wrist with new jewelry before leaving the next day.

at Midnight at Daytona Rolex Glass Slipper



by Kevin Ehrlich & Mary Fischer | Photos MBUSA/Brian Cleary

Winward Racing's brand-new Mercedes AMG GT3 Evo out dueled and outlasted 18 other entries in the GTD class to win the 2021 Daytona 24 hours. Pre-race chatter focused on other entries including a factory-backed Lexus duo, Porsches with experienced factory drivers, Aston Martins, Lamborghinis, and Ferraris. A scattering of Acura NSX, BMW and

Audi R8 entries added spice to the mix. Two other customer Mercedes AMG entries rounded out the trio of cars with three pointed stars.

The twice-round-the-clock Daytona classic was Winward Racing's maiden outing in top-tier US sportscar racing known as IMSA – International Motor Sports Association. A Mercedes had never before found victory lane at Daytona. None of the four Winward drivers had ever won before in the IMSA series or the Daytona 24 hours. Winward didn't even have a race car before December. Winward brought in additional crew and engineers for the race to augment their small team. Despite those undercurrents, Cinderella did not win in a fluke. She earned her place at the ball.

The 24 Hour Party at Daytona

The Rolex 24 at Daytona is a chilly January ritual that kicks off the US racing calendar each year. Some call it putting the Super Bowl at the beginning of the season rather than the end.

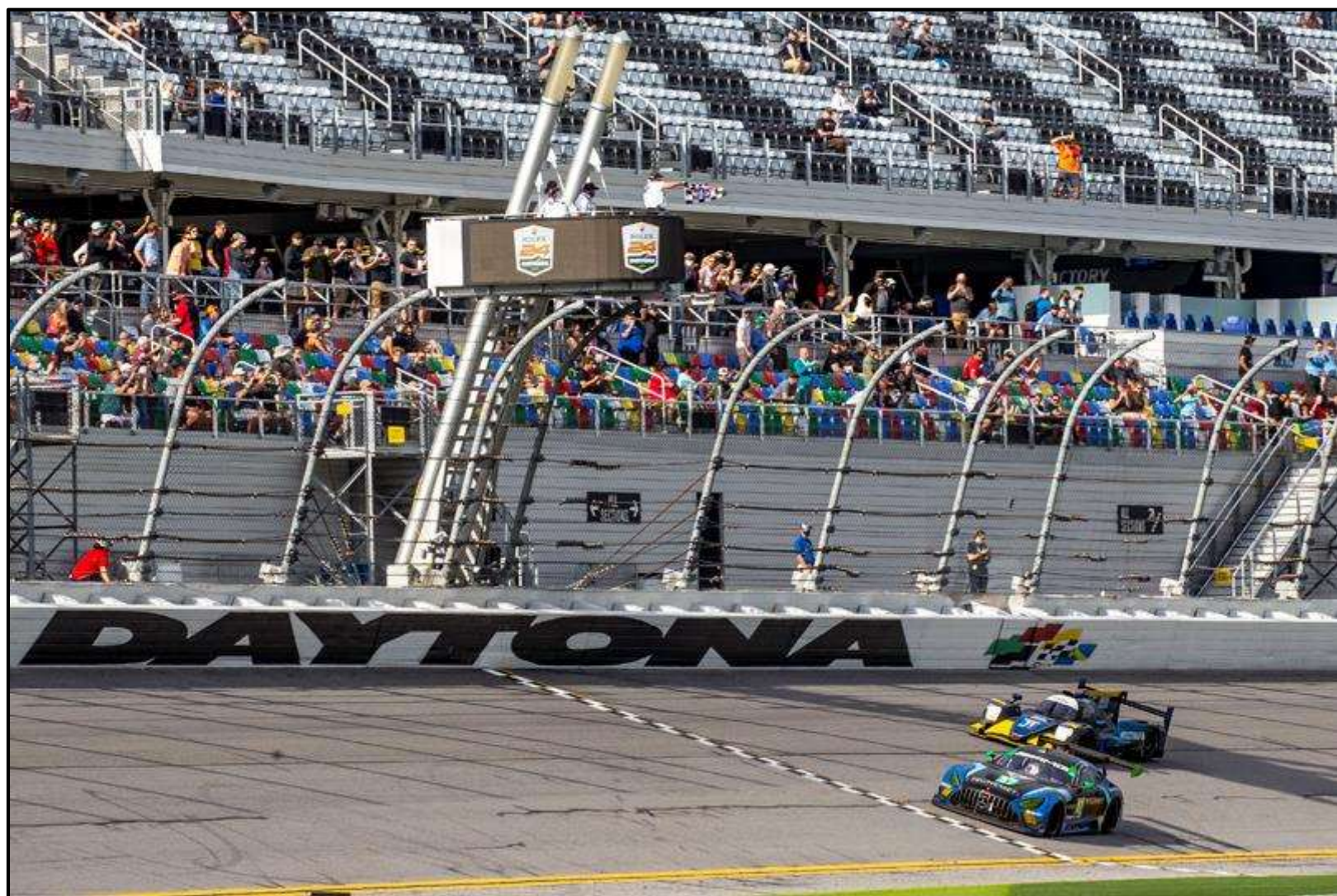
The 3.56-mile course combines outright top speeds around parts of the Daytona International Speedway high banked oval, with twisty infield road course sections, and a brief chicane on the backstretch. Each endurance race has its own personality and Daytona is no different.

Daytona can be a shock for road course ringers from Europe who are familiar with tracks that wind through forests and require overnight stints where darkness is the rule rather than the exception. Daytona is bounded by an enormous oval that favors top speeds and heavy braking. Rather than running under the cover of darkness, cars sparkle under bright lights during the overnight hours. Running in January means longer and colder nights than the French LeMans classic typically run in June. Daytona strips away nuance and excuses and many other variables and pushes racers to compete on raw pace.

The 24 hour race at Daytona is formally known as the Rolex 24. Winners take home both a trophy and a Rolex watch. Some put their watches away and preserve them. Others wear them on special occasions. Some wear them daily. Multiple-time winners compare their watches from different races. The jewelry has become a tangible sign of success. "Winning a Rolex" is more difficult and more valuable than merely buying one.

Winward Racing's GTD class focuses on sportscars that visually look similar to road-going counterparts. The class includes a mix of amateur and professional drivers and is mostly populated by private teams. A separate and smaller GTLM class pits full factory entries from Corvette, Porsche, BMW and Ferrari against each other. Other classes in the field feature full prototypes with low-slung bodywork crafted in wind tunnels and wings sprouting in every direction. Mix them all together and what happens? Five classes spread across 49 entries all run their own race at the same time in the same event on the same track. Competitors learn to live with others in different classes while running their own race. Easier said than done...

Multi-class racing is part of what makes endurance racing special. Plots and sub-plots emerge quickly. Drivers need to contend with traffic from slower cars ahead and faster cars coming from behind. Competition is tight. Patience can yield to the fear for losing ground that is difficult to reclaim. 24 hours may seem like a long race, but the ebb and flow of the clock confers more gravity to some ticks of the clock than others.





Cinderella Makes a Splash at her First Ball

The starter waved the green flag under clear and sunny skies on a 65-degree Saturday afternoon, typical for January in Florida, and the field roared toward the tight turn one promptly at 3:40pm. Amateur Russell Ward started the Winward Mercedes AMG fifth in class and 27th overall. Ward did a triple stint (each stint between pit stops typically stretched between 53 and 57 minutes under green flag conditions) and then handed off to Indy Dontje who did a double.

For the first 116 laps and several hours, the GTD lead bounced between both Lexus entries, a BMW, an Aston Martin, a Lamborghini, a Porsche and another Mercedes AMG run by Alegria Motorsports. The racing was tight and margins were thin between the runners. At 7:40pm, the Winward Mercedes AMG got its first taste of the lead with Indy Dontje at the controls. The lead would last 22 laps (with a brief 5 lap interlude from a Lexus) and a marker had been set.

Aston Martin, Ferrari, Porsche and Lamborghini traded the lead for the next 90 laps until Philip Ellis took the Winward Mercedes back to the lead at 11:20pm toward the end of his first stint in the car. He held it for only two laps before pitting to put Ward back in the car. The #21 AF Corse Ferrari took and held the point for another 88 laps. Like magnets, the Winward Mercedes AMG and AF Corse Ferrari were being gradually drawn together for a torrid battle that would climax on Sunday morning of the race.

Ward had taken the bulk of the driving load early in the race and finished his duties just after 1am. Conversely, Mercedes factory ace Maro Engel had been waiting to drive and took over from Ward for his first turn at the wheel. Ward had done his job of keeping the Mercedes on the lead lap and avoiding incidents.





Engel re-joined the fight in 7th place in class. As temperatures dipped below 60 degrees, Engel drove for just under three hours and Cinderella began to stamp her authority on the race.

It took Engel a little over an hour to put the Mercedes back in the lead. He crossed the race's half-way point before Dontje climbed aboard and did a double stint, keeping the car at the front of the field. By 4:20am, Dontje had built a lead of over 20 seconds to the second place car, and over 56 seconds to third place car. When Dontje pitted at 5:53am, handing off to Ellis, the Winward Mercedes was at the top of board for the prior three and a half hours, leading 110 laps with only two brief one-lap pauses from pit stop sequences interrupting their dominance.

Twenty-four hour endurance races are often won and lost in the early morning hours when spectators and media slip off for a snooze. Yet when few beyond pit lane are keeping vigil, crews keep their drivers focused and drivers respond accordingly. Strong drives in these hours often escape attention but Engel and Dontje put the rest of the field on notice. Anyone with an eye on the win would need to contend with the Winward Mercedes.

When Ellis took over for Dontje in the pre-dawn darkness, the #21 AF Corse Ferrari had another look at the lead and decided it liked the view. For the next five and a half hours, the Winward Mercedes and AF Corse Ferrari dueled together. The pair separated themselves from most of the rest of the GTD field and swapped the lead back and forth. The battle raged for about 170 laps. The Ferrari was fast – three of its four drivers set fast lap times faster than any of the Winward Racing drivers.

Endurance races are tests of longevity, but often turn on a split second that changes fortunes. That moment arrived at 11:25am for the GTD contest. Ferrari driver Matteo Cressoni, the fastest of the driving line-up, ran second behind Ellis but wanted the lead. The pair danced and dove in close quarters.

Cressoni built momentum across the start/finish line and moved to the outside of Ellis into turn one. The Ferrari pinched the Mercedes deep into the braking zone. The right front of the Mercedes and the left rear of the Ferrari battled over scarce real estate and touched. Ellis was able to hold the road and continued, while the Ferrari spun into the tires and endured a long and slow return to pit lane with a flat left rear tire.

Cinderella had outlasted the Ferrari in a fight that consumed almost a quarter of the full race distance and was a highlight of the race across all classes. The AF Corse Ferrari was the strongest of all GTD challengers. After the incident, the Ferrari no longer threatened for the win and ultimately finished the race two laps off the lead in 8th place in class.





While the Ferrari faded, action on the dance floor wasn't done. A sister Mercedes rose to challenge Cinderella – the #75 Sun Energy 1 Mercedes AMG. Raffaele Marciello and Luca Stolz, both supremely talented and experienced Mercedes factory drivers, led the way along with Mikaël Grenier and Kenny Habul. The pair of Mercedes AMG customer entries set out to decide the event between them.

Engel battled Stolz and then Marciello for the last three and a half hours to the checkered flag. The gaps ebbed and flowed, but always remained tight. The Winward Mercedes led the last 161 of the last 166 laps – including the critical last lap.

At the end, fuel economy and pit strategy added an extra margin. Engel saved fuel and extended his lead as the laps wound down. The fuel savings paid handsome dividends. Winward strategists pitted Engel 10 minutes later than Marciello which made for a shorter



final stop and additional margin for the lead. Engel in the Winward Racing Mercedes took the checkered flag with a 16 second gap to Marciello in his Sun Energy 1 Mercedes AMG.

Cinderella won in its maiden IMSA race and Rolex 24 entry. The 1-2 victory gave Mercedes AMG its first Rolex 24 triumph in history, only four short years after the Mercedes AMG GT3 itself made a Daytona debut in 2017. While Engel had run the event previously, Ward, Ellis and Dontje won in their Rolex 24 debut. Winning on debut is highly unusual, but perhaps shouldn't have been as much of a surprise after considering Cinderella's credentials.

Looking Back - Cinderella Learns to Dance

Winward Racing is based a few miles away from NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston. Since 2017, the Ward family and their Winward Racing outfit have raced in the IMSA support series that slots in just below the top-tier IMSA racing. Currently known as the IMSA Michelin Pilot Challenge, the series features multi-class sportscar racing at the same tracks on the same weekends as the top-tier races in their own events. Racing is never cheap, but the shorter races and absence of factory involvement is attractive to privateers that can race without requiring enormous budgets.

Bryce Ward, team principal, and son Russell Ward plunged into racing in 2016 together by running a season of Porsche cup racing. Prior to January 2016, Russell had never driven a race car, but progressed quickly. In 2017, Russell teamed up with veteran and co-driver Damien Faulkner in a Porsche Cayman GT4 Clubsport with CJ Wilson Racing for the 10 race IMSA support series.

2017 went well and encouraged the Wards to team up with HTP Motorsport in Germany and race as Winward/HTP Motorsport. They remained in the same IMSA support series but moved to the recently unveiled Mercedes AMG GT4. Before embarking on the 2018 season, the new team first tested themselves and the new Mercedes AMG GT4 at the 2017 24 Hours of COTA (Circuit of the Americas). Russell Ward and Faulkner joined HTP stalwarts, German Maximilian Götz and Dutchman Indy Dontje and the quartet finished their first enduro. The result was credible but the team encountered issues and prioritized seat time for Russell, the least experienced of the drivers.

HTP may not be familiar to US fans, but is known to those who haunt the race tracks of Europe. Based in Germany, HTP Motorsport races sportscars in endurance and sprint



formats, including at iconic events such as the 24 hours of Nürburgring. HTP Motorsport also is well-known for racing mostly Mercedes equipment since it began GT3 racing in 2011.

Winward/HTP Motorsport tasted success, including a win at Laguna Seca in September 2019. The team typically runs a pair of entries. Driver line-ups varied depending on schedules, but Russell Ward and Dontje often shared the same car. Bryce Ward shared seats with several drivers, one of which was experienced Mercedes racer Christian Hohenadel. Hohenadel also assumed a management role with Winward and HTP Motorsport when the two formalized their partnership and merged operations in November 2019.

After running the support race at Daytona in 2020 and landing two cars on the podium, the group started to wonder whether Winward/HTP Motorsport could take a shot at the 24

hour headline event. After all, HTP Motorsport had extensive experience running Mercedes AMG hardware in endurance races. Challenging at Daytona would be a natural extension. A Rolex 24 entry was submitted under the "Winward Racing" name, branding known to IMSA and the fans.

Cinderella's AMG Carriage

If you want to race a Mercedes AMG GT3 Evo, the team at HWA in the small German town of Affalterbach is your first call. HWA spearheads the Mercedes AMG customer racing program, including building cars and providing ongoing support. Winward and HTP's extensive prior relationship with AMG and HWA gave that first call credibility.

AMG provides muscle for Mercedes. Until the SLS and GT, AMG took Mercedes road cars and injected them with bigger engines, aero bits and other performance tweaks. The SLS road car was the first project that AMG owned from the start and set the stage for the GT.

HWA is the preferred motorsport coordinator for Mercedes in most cases beyond Formula One. A staff of 360 is evidence of a serious operation. HWA was formally founded in 1998, named after founder Hans Werner Aufrecht. While HWA is technically independent from Mercedes and AMG, the DNA of all three are inextricably linked.

Herr Aufrecht is synonymous with Mercedes performance and motorsport. He and Erhard Melcher founded AMG in 1967 in a garage at Aufrecht's home. AMG takes its name from the pair - Aufrecht is the "A", Melcher is the "M" and Grossapach, Aufrecht's birthplace where the pair first started tinkering with engines, is the "G". (An extensive history of AMG celebrating its 50th anniversary is available in the Third Quarter 2017 issue of The Southwest Star, as well as the history of AMG North America later in this edition.)

Affalterbach is located in Baden-Württemberg, about a half an hour drive north from the Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart, and is the home to both HWA and AMG. AMG set up shop in Affalterbach in 1976 and now spreads across a campus of industrial buildings. The proximity makes the partnership work. The team at HWA build racecars in their pristine shop. AMG technicians assemble engines by hand with its famous one-person-one-engine philosophy literally across the street from HWA. A brief five minute walk is all that separates the two. The GT3 bodyshell is made in the Mercedes Sindelfingen factory

(the same place where the road cars are manufactured) and shipped to HWA to be assembled into a fire-breathing race car.

After behind-the-scenes heroics, a brand new Mercedes AMG GT3 Evo was delivered to the Winward/HTP shop in Houston on December 1, 2020. Delivery was just the start – the team needed to learn the new car’s nuances. While the Mercedes AMG GT3 visually looks similar to its GT4 cousin, there are key differences. For starters, the two have different engines. The GT4 features a twin-turbo V-8 compared to the GT3 car which has a 6.3 liter normally aspirated V-8 powerplant. The GT3 also has more aerodynamic treatments to produce more downforce in the corners.

With a Daytona test looming on January 22, the team ripped into the new car to learn its nuances, tearing it down and rebuilding it. They also practiced pit stops that ended up making a difference during the race with every spot the team picked up on pit road. Significantly, the team incurred zero pit stop penalties during the event. Others suffered issues ranging from exceeding the pit lane speed limit to equipment issues to other technical nuances. Clean pit stops may not get the headlines, but they are crucial to success.

The usual Winward US-based crew was augmented with help from Germany for the Rolex 24 effort. In addition to several HTP-based joiners, AMG and HWA sent engineers to help Winward/HTP and the two other Mercedes AMG customer teams. In addition, AKKA-ASP racing in France sent two mechanics and an engineer to help the Sun Energy 1 team.

The Friday before the 2021 Rolex 24 hours, Russel Ward and Dontje raced in the IMSA Pilot Challenge, finishing 8th in the four hour race as the top Mercedes. While they didn’t win, they had the benefit of track time and practice on the same track used for the main event on Saturday and Sunday.

The Four Who Drove Cinderella to the Ball – and Took Over the Dance Floor

Regulations governing sportscar racing are notoriously tight. To prevent costs from spiraling out of control, offerings from different manufacturers are kept within a narrow

performance window. Throwing money at the car will not make it go faster - and going faster would be counterproductive if the balance of performance regulations are changed to bring your car's performance back to the rest of the field.

Two key consequences of this modern-day way of racing are the emphasis on preparation and execution before the race and in pit lane, and the difference that individual drivers can make on the track. There are times when pushing hard for track position is the best move and there are other times when merely avoiding mistakes is the best move.

Cinderella might have been new to this 24 hour ball, but she brought a lot of muscle with her. Thirty-one year old Russell Ward was the least experienced of the driving line-up. Prepared with several years of IMSA support series racing, coaching from experienced hands such as Faulkner and Dontje, AMG GT4 seat time and several outings in AMG GT3 cars at Zolder, Dubai, Spa and Portimao, he has quickly climbed the learning curve. He put in a strong effort at Daytona. In addition to preserving the car and logging almost five hours of drive time, he had good pace. His fastest lap was only half a second off of



Dontje's fastest lap time, and his average lap time for his fastest 50 laps was just under nine tenths per lap off the same measure for Dontje and Ellis.

Philip Ellis is only 28 years old, but has many racing miles to his credit. He started with open wheel racing and then won the 2017 Audi TT Cup in dominant fashion before moving to sportscars in various series across Europe. He has finishes in marquis events like the Nürburgring 24 hours and 24 hours of Spa, so he is well acquainted with running GT3 machinery in competitive endurance racing.



Ellis may have been the ultimate secret weapon. The Rolex 24 was his first top-tier IMSA race and first 24 hour race at Daytona, so he was largely unknown in the IMSA paddock. By 18 thousandths of a second, he set the fastest single lap time during the race of the four Winward/HTP drivers. He also logged just under five hours of seat time.

Indy Dontje may not be known to most Americans, but he is an experienced sportscar racer and has deep Mercedes experience. In fact, the 28-year old's development work

with the Mercedes AMG GT4 and HTP in 2017 led to his introduction to the Ward family and racing at the 24 Hour race at Circuit of the Americas. Dontje has raced in the Nürburgring 24 hours many times and won in class at the 24 Hours of Dubai. He regularly competes in top-tier sportscar races in Europe, mostly in Mercedes AMG GT3 machinery. Dontje put in over five hours of drive time in the winning effort. Like Ward and Ellis, the 2021 Rolex 24 was his first career start in the Daytona enduro.

The veteran and ace of the squad was Maro Engel. The 35 year old has been a long-time member of the factory Mercedes motorsport family. He has raced AMG GT3 sportscars around the world and in all the big events. He has raised trophies on the top steps of the podium at events like the Nürburgring 24 hours. He has raced in the ultra-competitive DTM (German touring car) series, which has been a high-tech playground for German marques to fight with each other.

Engel is typically deployed by Mercedes AMG to customer teams with the sole objective of making the difference. The customer teams, cars or driving line-ups may not always be capable of winning, but Engel provides leadership. The 2021 Rolex 24 was the German's fourth attempt and the third at the wheel of a customer Mercedes AMG GTD entry. Ironically, the Sun Energy 1 Mercedes AMG that chased Engel the hardest in the closing hours of the race was the same that he drove in two previous occasions.

Why did Maro Engel spend over eight and a half hours in the car during a 24 hour race? He was not only quick, but consistently quick. Race data often tells the tale and the Rolex 24 was no different. Looking at the average time of each driver's fastest 50 laps is an arbitrary number, but it is large enough for a good sample size and small enough to avoid outliers like pit stops, yellow flags and aberrant lap times hobbled by traffic.

Engel's average lap time over his fastest 50 laps was third best of all GTD drivers. The first, second and fourth? All drivers in the #21 AF Corse Ferrari that had pushed the Winward Mercedes AMG hard until the turn one incident took it out of contention. Average lap times over their respective fastest 50 laps for Ellis and Dontje both were a mere two tenths behind Engel, proving why the trio was formidable.

Another remarkable comparison is the difference between average lap times and fastest race lap. The gap between Engel's 50-lap average lap time and his fastest single race lap time was smaller than the respective gaps for any of the other top GTD runners. If you're not following the statistics, the take-away is that Engel found his optimal lap and ran laps very close to that ideal. He was able to get the most out of what the car had to offer across many laps and hours.

Dontje was able to do something similar. Engel had slightly more outright speed and a slightly smaller gap between his average lap time and fastest lap time, but the duo both showed consistency. Other drivers might have shown flashes of speed, but could not maintain their pace lap after lap after lap. As another indicator, times from Engel's top 50 laps only varied by about half a second - which is remarkable considering that each lap lasted over 106 seconds in duration.

The data doesn't lie. That type of performance is why the team held Engel out of the car until after midnight and saved him to close out the event for the win. It is also why Engel is a Mercedes AMG factory driver. When Engel wears his new Rolex watch or looks at his trophy case at home, he will know that he played a major role in the victory.

In the finally tally, the four Winward Racing drivers ticked off 745 trips around the Daytona course en route to victory. At 3.56 miles per lap, the Winward Racing Mercedes AMG GT3 Evo covered 2,652.2 miles (not including pace laps before the green flag). For perspective, that's 133 miles farther than a trip from Daytona International Speedway to Los Angeles International Airport.

The run to the checkered flag was not untroubled for the quartet. A big challenge in endurance sportscar racing is fitting each of the drivers, taking into account different heights. Unlike in a typical passenger car, the Mercedes AMG GT3 seat does not move. The pedals are mounted in a box that moves back and forth to give more or less legroom. This solution is ideal until the pedal box mechanism breaks and the pedals are stuck in position - even less ideal when this happens early in a 24 hour race. Engel had to stretch a bit while the taller Dontje scrunched a bit to make it work.

To make matters worse, Engel's drink system failed with two and a half hours to go and he broke an air vent trying to get it open and get more air to compensate. Teams and drivers go through these types of challenges during a race. They may not be immediately obvious to those from the outside watching cars go around in circles but they add richness in appreciating what went into the ultimate triumph.

Cinderella's Future Plans

Cinderella's dancing days may be on hold for now. The 2021 Rolex 24 was always envisioned as a one-off "why not?" type of effort. At the time of the Rolex 24, Winward/HTP had no plans to run more top-tier IMSA races. Winning can always change perspective, but the winning AMG GT3 Evo car may also be destined for immediate retirement and museum duty as a time capsule. After all, it presently stands as the only Mercedes ever to prevail against all others in its class after 24 hours at Daytona.

Glory at Daytona in the 24 hour race is often told through the lens of veterans with hundreds of laps and marques with trophy cases full of hardware. Cinderella reminds us that there is always the possibility for someone new to crash the party, dominate the dance floor, drink the Champagne, and take home some new jewelry.

