

LANCE WOOLRIDGE AND ELVÉNE VONK EARLY LEADERS IN PRODUCTION VEHICLE CHAMPIONSHIP AFTER MAIDEN VICTORY AT MPUMALANGA 400

History was made at the recent Mpumalanga 400, the season opener of the 2021 South African National Cross Country Series (SACCS) that took place in the Dullstroom area of Mpumalanga, when Lance Woolridge and Elvéne Vonk not only took their very first overall Production Vehicle victory when they won the Mpumalanga 400. The pair also clinched the FIA Class laurels and produced a maiden victory for the brand-new Ford Castrol Cross Country Team Ranger.

With the first points in the overall Production Vehicle Championship as well as the FIA and T Class Championships in the bag for some, others however, now face the uphill battle of fighting back to make up for lost ground.

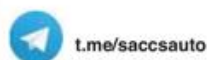
Looking at the overall rankings, Woolridge/Vonk (30 points) have taken the lead and are followed by the defending Class T champions and class winners of the 2020 and 2021 Mpumalanga 400, Johan and Werner Horn (Malalane Toyota Hilux) who scored 23 points with their overall runner-up result. SACCS newcomer and multiple SA National Rally Champion Guy Botterill, deputising for reigning Overall and FIA champion Henk Lategan, who is still recovering from a shoulder operation after a crash at the Dakar Rally, and reigning navigators' champion Brett Cummings (Toyota Gazoo Racing SA Hilux) round off the overall podium and trail the Class T team by five points while they are 12 points behind the overall leaders.

The younger of the two Woolridge brothers, Gareth and Boyd Dreyer in the second new Ford Castrol Cross Country Team Ranger fill the fourth spot (15 points) and are followed by Ernest Roberts/Henry Köhne (Red-Lined Motorsport VK56) who are a mere three points further back. Giniel de Villiers/Dennis Murphy (Toyota Gazoo Racing SA Hilux) bagged 10 points finishing sixth overall after a problematic first day of the Mpumalanga 400.

De Villiers/Murphy find themselves only one point ahead of Mark Corbett/Rodney Burke (Century Racing CR6) with the rest of the top 10 consisting of two father and son teams, Johan and Sean van Staden (Moto-Netix KEC Racing Renault Duster) in eighth place with eight points and Malcom and Frans Kock (Neil Woolridge Motorsport Ford Ranger) in ninth (seven points) while newcomer Eben Basson earned his first national points in his debut SACCS event scoring six points alongside experienced navigator Gerhard Schutte (Red-Lined Motorsport VK56).

In the various class championships, competitors are awarded five points when starting an event and this results in the gaps between competitors being slightly different. The fight for the titles in the championship for drivers and navigators is serious and evolves in nail-biting challenges as the season progresses.

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In the FIA Class championship, Woolridge/Vonk (35 points) enjoy a gap of seven points over Botterill/Cummings (28 points) with Gareth Woolridge/Dreyer (23 points) rounding off this podium, five points behind the Toyota Gazoo Racing Hilux team. Roberts/Köhne (20 points) are a further seven points behind the Ford Ranger crew with De Villiers/Murphy (17 points) not too far back in fifth place with only three points separating them from the team in fourth position. There is, however, a gap of 18 points between De Villiers/Murphy in fifth place and the leaders and they will keep a close eye on this situation in their title challenge.

There is only one point difference between the teams from sixth to 10th place in the FIA Class with Corbett/Burke (15 points) finding themselves just outside the top five while the Van Staden father and son pair are seventh (14 points); Basson/Schutte (13 points) fill eighth spot; Dewald van Breda and Johann du Toit (Century Racing CR5) are ninth and the promising Philip Botha/Roelof Janse van Vuren (Red-Lined Motorsport VK50) 10th in the FIA Class Championship.

The battle for the titles will be tougher for those teams who could not score more than the allotted five starting points. These teams include the likes of Brian Baragwanath/Taye Perry (Century Racing CR6) who were leading the Mpumalanga 400 after the first day, but were halted by a broken gearbox on day two. Joining them are Shameer Variawa/Danie Stassen (Toyota Gazoo Racing SA Hilux); Conrad Rautenbach/Riaan Greyling (Red-Lined Motorsport VK56) and Thilo Himmel/Armand du Toit (Schalk Burger Motorsport King Price Xtreme).

There might be a bigger points' difference in the overall standings between the Class T teams, but the gaps are much smaller in the class championship. Here the Horn brothers (35 points) have a small margin of only seven points over the Kock father and son team (28 points) with the newcomers to the Production Vehicle category, Christo Rose/Arno Olivier (Neil Woolridge Motorsport Ford Ranger) a mere five points further back in third place from where they trail the leaders by 12 points.

Two more Ford Ranger teams from the Neil Woolridge Motorsport stable, Wors Prinsloo/André Vermeulen (20 points) and the Johnstone couple, Bernard and Minette (17 points) are fourth and fifth respectively and as less than 20 points separate them from the frontrunners, they can keep their eye on the title. Schalk Burger/Henk Janse van Vuuren (Schalk Burger Motorsport King Price Xtreme) as well as Hennie de Klerk/Werner Weiss (TreasuryOne BMW X3) will have to go back to the drawing board to start making up for lost points.

Ford (61 points) has started the season on a high by taking the lead in the coveted Manufacturer's Championship with Toyota (51 points) second; Nissan (19 points) third; Century Racing (13 points) fourth and Renault (eight points) in fifth place.

The second round of the 2021 SACCS championship, the Sugarbelt 400, is scheduled to take place on 21 and 22 May in KwaZulu-Natal and teams have seven weeks to prepare for this event.

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