

CLOSE BATTLES, TOUGH RACING AND A SECOND WIN FOR WOOLRIDGE/VONK

A tough and challenging 4x4 Mega World 400, the fifth round of the 2021 South African National Cross Country Series (SACCS) that took place on Saturday, 2 October from Nampo Park outside Bothaville in the Free State, produced extremely close battles and in the end, it was Lance Woolridge and Elvéne Vonk (Ford Castrol Cross Country Ranger) who claimed their second victory of the season.

Round five started with a short 15km Pirelli Qualifying Sprint at 07h30 on Saturday morning that determined the starting order for the main race at 09:30. This consisted of a 180km loop teams had to complete twice to score points as finishers.

Woolridge/Vonk were third fastest after the qualifying race and started behind the winners of the fourth round the previous day, Henk Lategan/Brett Cummings (Toyota Gazoo Racing SA Hilux) who opened the road while their Ford Castrol Cross Country Ranger team-mates, Gareth Woolridge/Boyd Dreyer, were the second team to take on the first of the two loops.

Like the change in the weather from wet and windy the previous day to hot and dusty on Saturday, a totally different route was also on the menu and competitors had to navigate their way through tricky rocky sections and lots of loose rocks in places. At the front, the lead changed a few times with Lategan/Cummings experiencing communication difficulty while they lost time with two flat tyres. Brian Baragwanath/Leonard Cremer (Century Racing CR6) were also leading at one stage, but a broken front shock put a halt to their efforts and they lost loads of time being field mechanics before they got going again.

Giniel de Villiers/Dennis Murphy were again out testing their all-new Toyota Gazoo Racing DKR Hilux T1+ prototype and posted the fastest time of the day. Their result does, however, not count towards the SACCS championships and they also do not score points.

It was eventually Lategan/Cummings who finished first, but a two-minute lateness out of DSP adjustment saw them dropping to third place overall as well as in the FIA Class. Woolridge/Vonk claimed the victory in a time of 04:40:01 with a mere 55 seconds separating them from second-placed Chris Visser/Albertus Venter (Toyota Hilux) who had a relatively uneventful race. A mere minute and 48 seconds covered the first three teams.

A mechanical issue cost Gareth Woolridge/Boyd Dreyer, who were again the first team to take on the short qualification race early in the morning. They lost time on the first lap, but were on the pace and finished fourth with 45 seconds the difference between them and Lategan/Cummings. Ernest Roberts/Henry Köhne (Century Racing CR6) got to grips with their new vehicle and they rounded off the top five (04:49:36) despite a puncture.

It was a good day out for Gary Bertholdt/Siegfried Rousseau (Toyota Hilux) and a clean run in spite of a puncture 15 kilometres before the finish, was just what the doctor ordered to boost their confidence. They were sixth with a total time of 04:52:36 that was four minutes and six seconds faster than Baragwanath/Cremer who had to settle for seventh place overall and in the FIA Class.

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Jason Venter/Jaco van Aardt (4x4 Mega World ARB Toyota Hilux) made the event sponsors proud by finishing eighth (04:58:49) after they also lost time due to a puncture. It was a good day out for the race sponsors with Jason's brother, Dylan and navigator Vince van Allemann, who could not finish the previous day, completing the race as the fourth team in Class T. They were 19th overall.

Two father and son crews rounded off the overall top 10. Johan and Sean van Staden (Moto-Netix KEC Racing Renault Duster) overcame their difficulties of the previous day and were happy to finish ninth overall and in the FIA Class (05:02:22) while Malcolm and Frans Kock (Neil Woolridge Motorsport Ford Ranger) also compensated for not receiving the chequered flag at the event the day before by winning Class T and finishing 10th overall.

Team Kock were the second Class T team to take on the main race with the defending champions, Werner and Johan Horn (Malalane Toyota Hilux) leading the class after the qualifying race. The Horn brothers fixed a fuel leak just before the start of the short sprint race, but a similar problem just over 100kms into the first loop forced them to retire.

Like the fourth round of the SACCS the previous day, it was an all Ford Ranger Class T podium with two more teams racing under the Neil Woolridge Motorsport umbrella, claiming the silverware. The Development Team of Baphumza Rubuluza/Fanifani Meyiwa were elated to step onto the podium for the first time and were second (05:19:32) in the class and 13th overall after starting way down the field while Christo Rose/Arno Olivier (05:19:55) finished a mere 23 seconds behind them in 14th place.

Also in the top 15 overall were Dewald van Breda/Johann du Toit in their debut outing in the new Century Racing CR6 who finished 11th (05:05:37) – the same position just outside the top 10 they completed the race the previous day – while the international team of Thomas Bell/Bruno Jacomy (Red-Lined Motorsport VK56) posted the team's best results by finishing 12th overall (11th in the FIA Class behind Van Breda/Du Toit). Their team-mates, Philip Botha/Roelof Janse van Vuren kept their unblemished scorecard clean and were 16th overall behind the two Class T teams. They were 12th in the FIA Class.

Mark Corbett/Rodney Burke also in a brand new Century Racing CR6 were 16th overall after being hampered by a puncture.

Among the teams who had to go home empty handed, were the Class T winners of the previous round, Wors Prinsloo/André Vermeulen and their Neil Woolridge Motorsport Ranger team-mates, Bernard Johnstone/Jan Harm Hugo as well as Shameer Variawa/Danie Stassen (Toyota Gazoo Racing SA Hilux) and two Red-Lined Motorsport teams of Conrad Rautenbach/Riaan Greyling in the new REVO and Eben Basson/Gerhard Schutte (EVK56 Evo2) in their first DNF's of the season.

Schalk Burger/Henk Janse van Vuuren (King Price Xtreme Mercedes Benz X Class) could not complete either round four or five as a result of mechanical issues.

With the championships now delicately poised on a knife's edge, the teams will take on the Vryburg 400 in the North West province on 29 and 30 October. This will be the penultimate event on the 2021 SACCS calendar.

End