

Hockenheim – Germany First round of the 2008 F3 Euro Series Championship



Basil Shaaban Shows World-Class Potential in the Opening Round Despite Being Hit by Bad Luck

Sounding off his 2008 campaign with a warning to his rivals, Shell-sponsored Arab F3 driver Basil Shaaban bounced back from bad circumstance during the season-opener held at Germany's Hockenheim Grand Prix circuit to show that he and his team, Austria's HBR Motorsport, have the pace to compete with the quickest cars and will be a threat in the upcoming rounds of the championship.

Beginning with a cold and wet Saturday morning for qualifying, postponed from its regular Friday afternoon timeslot due to heavy rain and its associated safety concerns, the European championship's first and only Arab competitor went out onto the circuit which had barely 4 degrees Celsius track temperature and an air temperature of 7 degrees Celsius. Though the rain had subsided overnight, the circuit was still wet and initially necessitated the use of wet tires. However, taking a gamble that the racing-line on the circuit would dry sufficiently by the end of the 25 minute session to favor the use of dry-weather slick tires, Shaaban's team opted to keep the car on a dry-weather setup.

The young Arab F1-hopeful took his time building up to the limit in the difficult conditions, and was clearly having to fight his car's nervous and tail-happy handling characteristics that were ill-suited for the wet conditions. He

improved his lap-times with every round of the circuit, but the moment to switch to slick tires never came since the ambient temperatures failed to rise enough and dry the racing-line as hoped by his team. In the end Shaaban was mired in 26th position of the 29 starters, belying the 13th quickest laptime he had posted in dry weather conditions earlier in the weekend.

“I was trying everything at the end of the qualifying session to lap as quickly as possible with the car I had underneath me, and though I was competitive in the high-speed corners, and quicker than my teammate Daniel there, I was struggling with lots of wheelspin and oversteer on the exits of all the slower corners. I ended up qualifying 3.7 seconds off of the pole-position time, a car that for sure was on a wet-weather setup,” said the motivated Arab, adding: “But I learned a lot from the experience since I was trying to use lower gears in places which hurt my exit speeds, and which was the cause for the 1 second gap in laptime to my teammate who qualified further up in 18th position. It was a learning experience that I needed to go through.”

Shaaban began the first race of the season that Saturday afternoon with the best race-start of his F3 career, launching from 0-100 km/h in 3.1 seconds and gaining several positions before the first corner. However, midway through the turn-four hairpin a competitor spun ahead of the Arab racer and forced him almost to a halt in avoidance of a full collision. Luckily Shaaban only suffered light damage to his front wing, but he still lost several positions as a consequence. Even though afterwards Shaaban’s car behaved slightly differently between right-hand and left-hand corners, the determined Arab pushed on and entered into several battles for track position with the cars ahead of him.

A few laps later the safety car came out for a heavy end-over-end accident in the field, and several cars ahead of the Arab competitor almost collided with each other in avoidance of the slow-moving medical car that had entered the circuit. To avoid the chaos ahead Shaaban had to make another split-second avoidance maneuver that brought his car to a complete stop and stalled his engine. He lost 20 seconds at stand-still trying to fire-up his engine, and was demoted back to 19th place as a consequence.

After the safety car left the circuit and the race was resumed, Shaaban’s car began to suffer from a rear-brake overheating problem that was causing his rear wheels to lock at various braking points on the circuit. On two concurrent laps the young Arab bounced back from his rear-brake problem to boldly defend his position from 2007 British F3 star, Irishman Niall Breen. But on the third lock-up Shaaban’s car wriggled too far wide of the race-line and Breen took the position from the Arab racer. Shaaban soldiered on and nursed his ill-braking car to the finish-line in 20th position.

In the aftermath of the first race of the 2008 F3 Euro Series, the Arab athlete commented: “What an eventful race with so many challenges that were thrown at me! But I think I did good job with the circumstances and in avoiding accidents due to other drivers’ mistakes. I’m happy that even with a strange-handling car I was able to lap within 1 second of the fastest race lap,

which is a significant improvement over the 1.5 second difference that was my best at Hockenheim last season.”

In opposition to his start for the first race, Shaaban’s take-off at the start for the second race on Sunday was marred by excessive wheelspin. While avoiding an accident caused by a car that had stalled on the grid, this resulted in the Arab racer losing two positions into the first corner. The safety car was called out immediately due to the incident on the start, and proceeded to lead the field down the pit-lane the first lap around to enable the recovery crew to clear any debris from the straight.

When the safety car left the circuit two laps later, the Arab racer had a strong restart. Soon after however, Shaaban began to come under pressure from behind by title-favorite and Williams F1 test driver, Germany’s Nico Hulkenberg. Defending his position cleanly several times, when Shaaban closed the door again on Hulkenberg into the turn-six “Mercedes Arena” the German forced his way through at the last second, necessitating the Arab to leave the racing line to avoid a collision with his overzealous competitor.

In the following laps the Abu Dhabi-raised competitor maintained a strong pace, consolidating his position in the pack surrounding him. Then Shaaban made a small error, leaving his braking for the hairpin a fraction late and went wide mid-corner, a mistake he paid for by losing two positions. The Arab fighter kept his head down and bounced back immediately, setting a string of competitive lap times on his way to crossing the finish line in 18th position. Shaaban’s fastest lap was just six tenths of a second away from the fastest lap of the race, and the Arab racer underlined his potential by recording the 3rd quickest time in the first sector, and the 13th quickest time in the final sector of the challenging F1 circuit.

After a potent display of ability and an improvement in relative speed to his quickest competition by over 30% compared with his best from the 2007 season, Shaaban said: “Luck, circumstance and miscalculation didn’t allow us to get the result we deserved this weekend, but we showed that I have the potential to be one of the quickest guys on the circuit and we have to focus on extracting this speed at every point of the weekend in the coming races.” The Arab talent went on to finish: “It was also great after the race to see the team’s joy at the speed we proved, as we have been working very hard to improve the car’s behavior since the beginning of pre-season testing. Especially as I’m still learning so much every day in the world’s pinnacle F3 series, we feel quite confident ahead of the next round in three weeks at Italy’s beautiful Mugello circuit.”

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