

# Rolex 24 At DAYTONA

Sunday, January 28, 2024

Daytona, Florida, USA

**Christian Rasmussen**

**Ryan Dalziel**

**Dwight Merriman**

**Connor Zilisch**

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We have the co-drivers of the No. 18 Era Motorsport Oreca LMP2 O7, Christian Rasmussen, Dwight Merriman, Ryan Dalziel, Connor Zilisch. For Ryan, this is his third win in the Rolex 24 at Daytona. He won in 2010 overall in the LMP2 class in 2021. For Dwight, this is his second Rolex 24 win. He and Ryan were part of that same victory in 2021 in LMP2. For Christian and Connor, first win in the Rolex 24 for both and the second Rolex 24 win for Era Motorsport.

**Q. Christian, it came down to what I'm going to call a Danish duo in the end between yourself and Malthe. It was very close and you were able to pull a gap. If I could get your perspective on your battle with Malthe for the class win there at the end.**

CHRISTIAN RASMUSSEN: Yeah, they were definitely the car to beat for us. They were definitely the closest all race long really. We knew we had I think a slight advantage over them, so it was really about whenever we still had four or five hours left, it was just about keeping our noses clean and being there at the end.

Then the last stint, it came down to a caution, and I had a huge gap from I think like 15 seconds, and then obviously all of that disappeared. But I felt fairly confident. I was just slowly pulling away right before, so I kind of knew that we had the pace to do it.

It was just about getting away from the start, which I did well, and then pulled out a two-second gap and just kind of managed it from there.

**Q. For Ryan and Dwight, I think you'll agree the first win in 2021 was huge for you guys. Where does this one stack up, also considering the influx of teams and driving talent that LMP2 is enjoying this season?**

DWIGHT MERRIMAN: I'll let Ryan speak mostly. But you've won three times, right? Two times for Era. Two times for me for Era.

RYAN DALZIEL: I felt like in 2021, we were the car to beat. But again, it frustrated me, I heard a few times after that that it was one of the weaker years, and you start maybe getting dismissed, what you've achieved.

No, I think the strength of the P2, 13 cars this year, I was actually -- one of the other engineers from the -- Andrew Yurpole (phonetic) is one of my good friends and engineers from the past who just texted me, and to be honest I think there was probably four cars could have easily had the pace to win at the end, but like Christian said, I think us and the CROWDSTRIKE car seemed to have a little bit better long pace.

I think mainly -- we kind of gambled. We were probably the most high downforce of the P2s, which we were a little bit sitting ducks when we had somebody drafting us, but when we could kind of break that one and a half, two seconds, the draft in the P2 car is almost 10 kilometers an hour. For us, once we were in the front, we could manage a little bit the pace in the infield.

But it's just a good day. I think each one I've won has felt more special, so this one is cool. But these two guys, Christian last year was a stud for us, Connor the same. I feel like today Dwight and I just kind of did our job, and I actually at the end, I gave up my last stint because I felt like these two guys were the strongest guys on the day and wanted to make sure that we put the best feet forward for that last stint.

DWIGHT MERRIMAN: I would say Ryan has been super helpful with testing and optimizing the car and making it good enough to actually win the race. He's great at that and has lots of experience.

It's a big field this year for LMP2. It's deep. There's a lot of testing going on by all the teams. It's been very special. The team did a fantastic job.

**Q. Ryan and the other guys, I spoke extensively with**

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**Connor just after the row and he spoke about you guys as having you guys as role models. How would you assess his performance this weekend?**

RYAN DALZIEL: Clearly he was terrible. I'll say role model is probably strong. There was a few times I had to censor myself this week and realize I was working with a minor. You don't realize how bad jokes are and stuff at the track until you realize you've got 17 year olds' dad who is 6'8 standing behind you grilling you.

I mean, I don't feel as old as I am experience-wise. But yeah, I could be both their dads. We figured that out this week.

I think it comes with -- every year it comes with a different kind of maturity for me. I don't think five years ago that I would have given up my stint to let somebody else, but at the end of the day, there's no egos in a team sport, and I really felt that having those two guys finish the race was the strongest possible option, and it worked out for us.

**Q. Ryan, can you talk about Kyle Tilley and this Era team. It seems like since it was formed there's something about you where big time performances are what you're becoming known for. Talk about the team and what allows you to do that.**

RYAN DALZIEL: Honestly, I think I've said this before, and when I kind of left the Patrón deal, it's not easy to go from one of those kind of big manufacturer teams and you find yourself a little bit kind of floating around the paddock trying to find a new home.

Kyle and I had known each other for a long time, and he came over to the States to create this team, and it was one of those very random, hey, you should come drive for us next year, and I definitely was considering maybe stepping away from racing, wasn't enjoying racing after the Patrón years had kind of fallen apart.

And then been frustrated, and I turn up with these guys and we win here. They're just a very well put together team. A lot of that goes obviously from Dwight putting this whole thing together, but Kyle and Sara Tilley, we had a miserable 2023. It's the first season together we haven't won races.

I think Christian was with us for the endurance races, and when we got done at Petit, I don't think there was a more disappointed team in the paddock of how our season went.

The next day we started preparing for here. We came and tested. We came and did the HSR event with Dwight, you know, at GMC time, and we just never put our heads down.

We instantly picked ourselves back up and we rolled off the truck here. We had a few issues in practice that maybe another set of teams would have not handled as well, but nobody stressed out.

Our engineer has a big old board that he always pulls out, and it's the "don't panic" sign. So we pulled that out a few times today, but they are just a good team, a great team, great engineering, well put together with Kyle, and it's a pleasure to be there. Definitely enjoying racing here.

**Q. About eight hours in, I don't think anybody was going to pick you all to be here now. What made the difference in allowing you to move through the field? Obviously some troubles for others --**

RYAN DALZIEL: Who didn't pick us? You tell us who it was.

CONNOR ZILISCH: I'll step in. Obviously for me, it was my first 24, and yeah, eight hours in when we were running seventh, eighth, it wasn't probably as good, but Scott and the entire team, obviously for me, I'm so used to sprint racing that when you're running seventh or eighth you think, man, I'm out of this. But when it's a 24-hour race, it doesn't really matter where you are until the end.

It was just a pleasure, honestly, coming here and racing with Era Motorsports. A lot of these guys put a lot of blood, sweat, and tears into this program, and it's just a pleasure to be a part of it.

The main thing for me that I enjoyed was the amount of fun that I actually got to have and I got to enjoy the experience thanks to my teammates and everyone at the team who just made it an enjoyable experience.

I didn't really feel like I had that much pressure on me. Obviously I feel like I performed well and did my job, but just having a team that was so supportive and made it so enjoyable I think was what was so good about it.

We never gave up. I had some rookie mistakes. My very first lap I locked up and almost hit the wall in Turn 6. I had to reverse out of it.

I got that out of the way, and, yeah, we came back and never gave up, like I said.

DWIGHT MERRIMAN: I would say at that point in time we probably felt we had as good a chance as anyone. I don't think we would have said we were definitely going to win because there's a lot of good teams here. It's a field of 13, right? So you could be seventh or eighth or you're either

on the lead lap or one lap down.

In my mind, it's a 24-hour race. The first half of the race, a lot of it is about risk management. You don't need to be in the lead after eight hours.

But the last three hours is a knife fight, and you need to be up -- you need to be in the first couple positions at that point, and we were.

I think that's kind of part of the strategy. A bit of what's going on in risk management early on, and I think when a race is this long when I'm driving it -- if it's a shorter race, I'll take more risk.

**Q. Connor, I asked you the other day, you've had a pretty amazing few weeks getting this ride and the other things going on. How does it feel now adding this to it?**

CONNOR ZILISCH: Yeah, I keep trying to make sure I'm awake and not dreaming still. It's surreal. I was sitting in the pit box there, and I couldn't even watch the race it was so nerve-racking. I have complete faith in Christian. He's a badass, honestly.

When he got out of the car, he told me he was completely chill. I was getting into the car and I was shaking. I don't know why, but I never really get like that, but before that last stint when I had the double before Christian at the end, it was nerve-racking.

But once you get in the car, it all goes away. It was a surreal feeling those last 10 minutes when we kind of realized, wow, we are going to win this, and we have a really good chance at this.

It's been a wild last few weeks for me, and that's not going to let my head get big. I've still got to put in the work. I'm only 17. It's not like I've achieved everything --

RYAN DALZIEL: You've made it.

CONNOR ZILISCH: Someone told me I've got to retire. I've got a 100 percent win rate, so I've got to decide on that one. I've got a long career ahead of me hopefully, and this is just the beginning.

**Q. Connor, it's been an exciting two weeks of racing. What's the more intense, two Mazda MX-5 Cup races or the Rolex 24?**

CONNOR ZILISCH: That's a good question. Comparing stints, I'd say the last stint was more -- I don't know what the word for it. I'm just going to go with nerve-racking. At

the MX-5 Cup racing, I don't know if you guys saw the pick I put on the 04 car. I don't know who was driving at that point, but on the banking when we were dooring each other on the banking at 150 miles an hour, someone asked me if that was like MX-5 Cup racing and if that's where I learned it from, and honestly, probably yeah, that's probably true.

That racing is so much fun. Even though I probably can't run for a full championship and go for the prize money, it's just such a blast. I've learned a lot from that series.

**Q. You've mentioned your age. You can drive a race car but you can't get a hire car?**

CONNOR ZILISCH: I can't rent a car. Dad has got to do that for me.

**Q. You mentioned the word "risk management," but unfortunately there are a lot of factors, especially in endurance racing and 24-hour racing which are out of your control of yourself and the team. How can you then put risk management into your favor?**

DWIGHT MERRIMAN: Well, you can't control it perfectly for sure. Somebody could just hit you and take you out. You can make a mistake and take yourself out. But you can think about -- if you think about that, nine tenths, eight tenths, whatever, how hard you're pushing, in qualifying you're definitely pushing a little more.

If you do a fast lap and one other lap, you blow it, maybe that's fine. But in the race, if you break the car, that's bad.

You think about that, and then there's just -- in this endurance sports car racing there's so much traffic management and there's such an art to that. It's both getting it right, and if you get it wrong, then you might take two cars out of the race or at least take them out of being competitive.

And other little nuances like trying to get a read on who's driving that car that I want to pass, and are they going to do what I think they're going to do when I try to go by them.

All of these things are going through your head, and then I think towards the end of the race, position becomes more critical, so you're going to take more risks because you must be at the front; whereas if you've got -- if you're on the lead lap and you've got 13 hours to go, you don't need to worry that much.

Over 24 hours, typically everyone has some small glitches. Maybe you have to fix something in the pits that takes 20 seconds. It's not that big a deal, so you're not going to the garage. But there's going to be chances to make up

positions. It's going to be save the cars, things like that.

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