

NEWS from TEAM

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Andrés Méndez brought Team GDT's No. 53 home in one piece in his first oval-track race ever Saturday night at Lucas Oil Raceway.

(Star Mazda photo by Eric McCombs)

Team GDT's Méndez Finishes 12th In His First Oval-Track Race Ever

INDIANAPOLIS, May 26 — Team GDT's Andrés Méndez, 19, of Bogotá, Columbia, finished 12th in his first oval-track race ever in the Star Mazda Championship presented by Goodyear portion of the traditional "TourHendricksCounty.com Night Before the 500" show at Lucas Oil Raceway at Indianapolis (LORI) Saturday night.

Méndez, a rookie who drives the No. 53 sponsored by DataFile International S.A. and Grupo Kriterion,

gained both experience and confidence as he brought his car home in one piece despite the steep learning curve.

He qualified 13th with a lap of 21.520 seconds (114.758 miles per hour) for the 0.686-mile semi-banked oval on Saturday afternoon, but he actually got to start 12th in the 100-lap/45-minute race after Bruno Palli's car went to the rear of the 16-car field.

Méndez let Zack Meyer around him on the first lap and Palli got by him on the second lap, but then Méndez ran comfortably in 14th place from laps two through 30. He set his fastest lap of the race in that position when he was timed in 21.534 on lap seven.

He moved up one spot on lap 31 after Meyer hit the outside wall on the backstretch off Turn 2 while running 12th to bring out the first yellow flag. Meyer was narrowly

For more info: Linda Mansfield, Restart Communications
Cell: (317) 201-0729; E-mail: LKMRestart@gmail.com

Photos may be downloaded off Team GDT's Facebook page.



missed by two other drivers but Méndez applied his brakes in plenty of time and wasn't involved.

When the race restarted on lap 37 Méndez was 13th, running between Carlos Linares and Ashley Freiberg, since Meyer had passed Linares for 12th on lap 20.

That restart was tricky because he had four rows of cars that were two abreast right ahead of him, but there was no contact and the field soon spread out again.

Méndez stayed in 13th position through lap 79, chasing Linares. Behind him Camilo Schmidt had passed Freiberg for 14th on the restart, but he never threatened Méndez's position.

With only 11 minutes remaining in the 45-minute race Freiberg and Palli crashed between Turns 1 and 2. Palli was 11th at the time so that moved Méndez up to 12th. The restart with 13 laps/6 minutes to go went well and Méndez was even more comfortable when Schmidt was forced to make a late-race pit stop. He took the checkered flag 0.681 of a second after Linares did, and he was more than a lap ahead of Schmidt.

One of the things Méndez is learning this year is how to make adjustments inside the cockpit to make his car handle better as its fuel load gets lighter and its Goodyear tires begin to wear.



Left to right: driver coach Chuck West, Andrés Méndez and engineer Eric Purcell.

"At first my car was neutral in the middle and pushing at the exit of the turns, so I moved the bar and it got a lot better," he said. "The Goodyear tires were good. But there is a huge difference between racing on road courses and racing on oval tracks. Once I had to take a very high line in Turns 1 and 2 for three or four laps when the leaders were passing me. On the last restart there was one car on the outside of me and one on the inside of me and I was the meat in the sandwich, but I braked and we had no trouble.

"I am more confident now that I have this race finished," he concluded. "I learned a lot. We go to Iowa Speedway next, and I think the line there is not so close to the wall."

Connor De Philippi won the race for the second time in two years. Sage

Karam and Zach Veach finished second and third.

After the race Méndez and other members of Team GDT celebrated Méndez's sister Paula's birthday. Tomorrow he'll attend his first Indianapolis 500, where he'll cheer for fellow Colombian Sebastián Saavedra.

The next Star Mazda race is June 22-23 at Iowa Speedway in Newton, Iowa. More information can be found on the series' Web site at StarMazda.com. The Night Before the 500 Star Mazda race will be broadcast at noon on Saturday, June 23 on the Mazda Motorsports Hour on the Velocity Network.

Fans can learn more about Team GDT on its Facebook page or through Twitter @TeamGDT.