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Chatting with the champions: What Niederhauser and van der Linde had to say about winning the title

- The joint ADAC GT Masters champions, Kelvin van der Linde and Patric Niederhauser, talk about their secret of success

Munich: Kelvin van der Linde (23, ZA) and Patric Niederhauser (27, CH, both HCB-Rutronik Racing) had a peach of a season on the way to taking the ADAC GT Masters championship title with three pole positions, three wins and ten finishes in the Top Four in 14 races. In interview with the ‘grand masters’, the two Audi drivers talk about the secret of their success, the highs and lows and tell us whether they will defend the title together in 2020.

What were the days like following your title win?

Kelvin van der Linde: “Long! We celebrated in style. The team really enjoyed the moment, but that’s how it should be, because every one of us thoroughly deserved it. I partied even more than when I won my first title. I was a young guy from South Africa in 2014 and didn’t realise just how important the ADAC GT Masters is. After six years in Germany, I now know what an honour it is to win this series and that you don’t do it every year.”

Patric Niederhauser: “Of course, winning the title at Hockenheim felt incredible, especially with a victory from pole position. It could not have gone any better. During the days that followed, I couldn’t really comprehend that we’d actually done it. I realised eventually after three or four days, but we were still too focused on fighting for the team championship in the grand finale at the Sachsenring for me to fully take in our title win.”

How did people react to your title win?

Niederhauser: “I’ve never had such amazing feedback before. I was still in the news even a week after winning the title before the season had ended, which all goes to show what a high profile the ADAC GT Masters has in the racing scene and how many people follow it, and that includes in Switzerland too. I was very surprised by how the press reported my title win, as motor racing is not usually a hot topic in Switzerland, and yet suddenly, all the big Swiss newspapers were carrying half-page reports about me with photos. That really meant a lot to me.”

Van der Linde: “Many people that I come across in motor racing live in Germany. Some were there at the track to wish me luck while others contacted me in the days after Hockenheim, which was really great. South Africa is only a small country, but many people there like to watch me race. I’m the first driver to have had the balls to move back into Europe in recent years, which is why there’s so much interest back home – and fans are not just interested in me but in my brother Sheldon as well and in Jordan Pepper, who came to Europe after me. Of course, it’s never easy to answer every single message when you receive so many, but fortunately, you can reach out to a great many people in one go thanks to social media.”

Mister van der Linde, you won your first title with René Rast in 2014. You won the ADAC GT Masters and he secured the DTM title on the very same day this year. Did you contact each other afterwards?

Van der Linde: “Yeah, for sure! We’re still the best of friends. We won our respective titles within about a quarter of an hour of each other this year. I rang him immediately afterwards. It was a really great moment.”

You are the first driver in the ADAC GT Masters ever to have won the title before the end of the season. What's the secret of your success?

Van der Linde: "The fact that we were consistently among the front-runners and scored points regularly. We may only have won three races but finished in the Top Five almost every time, which the opposition did not manage to do."

You set many highlights during the season, but which one stands out most in your mind?

Van der Linde: "That has to be our first podium of the season in Oschersleben as far as I'm concerned. It felt incredible, as nobody had expected it."

Niederhauser: "Yeah, for me too. When Kelvin crossed the finish line, it was almost like a bomb had gone off in the garage. Normally, you like to be the one to drive across the finish line, but the cheering in the pits was amazing. Our Team Principal almost bust my ribs when he thumped me in the chest, whooping for joy..."

Van der Linde: "And the qualifying sessions were highlights too. Patric always delivered on Saturdays, and I even got two poles towards the end of the season. Being able to string things together in qualifying shows you've done a good job. Drivers and car, everything was dead right. Those were also special moments that we will not forget in a hurry."

And then at the Sachsenring, you also took the team title for HCB-Rutronik Racing with a win as you had done previously at Hockenheim on Sunday.

Niederhauser: "It was great to finish the season with a win and secure the team championship into the bargain. The whole team was leaping for joy. Everyone had tears in their eyes. It was another very emotional moment."

When did it first occur to you that you could win the drivers' title?

Niederhauser: "Well, not until the Red Bull Ring weekend, quite late on, actually. The season opener at Oschersleben with a podium finish was sensational but maybe a bit unexpected. The weekend at Autodrom Most with pole position and victory confirmed for us that the opener had not been a fluke. When we took a podium at the Red Bull Ring which is actually the most difficult track around for the Audi, we became more confident, because we knew that tracks which suited us better would be coming our way."

Did you ever have any doubts?

Niederhauser: "No, not really. It was only at Zandvoort that things didn't go so well. That was probably our weakest weekend. We arrived there as championship leaders after the long summer break, and then suddenly, we were struggling. It was tough, and we were a little bit sceptical in the run-up to the Nürburgring, but we always worked closely together and supported one another. That was one of the keys to success."

Van der Linde: "Saturday's race at Hockenheim is a good example of the way the team stuck together. We received a time penalty retrospectively and dropped down the field from second to ninth place, but nobody blamed me. Everyone just said, 'It doesn't matter, Kelvin. You're a racing driver, just like us. Luck wasn't on our side this time, but tomorrow, you'll be on pole and win the race.' And that's exactly what happened. It just goes to show how well the team supports its drivers. The team gives us confidence."

What was the biggest challenge you faced this season?

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Van der Linde: “We were almost always the ones being hunted, as we took the lead at such an early stage. We always had something to lose, so deciding how much risk to take was often tricky.”

So far, no one in the ADAC GT Masters has managed to defend the title. If you’re up for the challenge, then we’ll be seeing you race together in car #1 next year, will we?

Van der Linde: “That would, of course, be a dream scenario. We’ll most probably both continue driving for HCB-Rutronik Racing but will have to wait and see what the driver pairings will look like – that’s out of our hands.”

Race calendar for the 2020 ADAC GT Masters (provisional)

24/04/20 - 26/04/20	Motorsport Arena Oschersleben
15/05/20 - 17/05/20	Autodrom Most (CZ)
05/06/20 - 07/06/20	Red Bull Ring (AUT)
14/08/20 - 16/08/20	Nürburgring*
21/08/20 - 23/08/20	Circuit Zandvoort (NL)
18/09/20 - 20/09/20	TBA
02/10/20 - 04/10/20	Sachsenring*

* = subject to agreement with the organisers

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