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Salman Owega and Finn Wiebelhaus – Interview with the Champions

- First pole position at the Nürburgring a milestone for Finn Wiebelhaus
- Salman Owega: “I was 90 percent confident after the Red Bull Ring.”

Munich. A few weeks have passed since Salman Owega (20/Cologne) and Finn Wiebelhaus (19/Obertshausen) were crowned ADAC GT Masters champions in Hockenheim. The Haupt Racing Team drivers put the icing on the cake with victory in the final race on the Sunday, having already wrapped up the title with one race still to come. In an interview, the champions look back on an eventful year and offer a few insights into the debut season for the Ford Mustang GT3.

You clinched the title a month ago. How does it feel to be a champion?

Finn Wiebelhaus: “The more time has passed, the more it has dawned on me what we have done. I am proud of what we drivers and the team have achieved over the course of the season. It was actually a bit different after winning the title – it was a bit surreal. We finished down in ninth place and my feelings were rather mixed: despite the joy, I still felt disappointed with the poor performance on that day. Looking back now, I can obviously see that it was an awesome season.”

Salman Owega: “It has obviously sunk in now and I can really enjoy my second title. The moment we won the title itself was rather odd. I arrived in Parc Fermé and thought that the big presentation ceremony for winning the championship would take place. Instead, I had to look for my team and could not find anyone at first. We then celebrated and partied later.”

Salman, you are the fifth two-time champion in the ADAC GT Masters, and the youngest in the history of the series. What do these records mean to you?

Salman Owega: “An awful lot, actually. We tried to win the title with Mercedes and David Schumacher last year. It is nice to have done it in our first year with Ford, and to have won the first championship in Europe for the Mustang GT3. That was my goal from the word go, and I am happy to have achieved it.”

Who were the first to congratulate you, and did you have any special well-wishers?

Finn Wiebelhaus: “I mainly received private messages from close friends and family. I would like to mention that Leyton Fourie wrote to us both and congratulated us. That was the most surprising message, and I found it cool that he showed what a great guy he is immediately after the race.”

Did your former team-mate Elias Seppänen, who was the youngest two-time winner up to that point, congratulate you?

Salman Owega: “Yes, he did. He was in Asia that weekend and wrote to me from there. I still get on very well with Elias and was really pleased to hear from him.”

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When did you first realise that you had a real chance of winning the title?

Finn Wiebelhaus: “For me, it was at the Nürburgring, when we moved to the top of the table. I knew then that the remaining circuits ought to suit me and the car, and that the package was good enough. Only in the Saturday race at the Hockenheimring was it really clear to me. When I saw that our rivals’ BMW was slowing down, I knew that all we had to do was bring the car home in one piece.”

Salman Owega: “I was 90 percent confident after the Red Bull Ring. Until then, there was still a lot that could happen – particularly with a new car like the Mustang. However, after our win there and the big lead, I knew that we were going to win the championship, unless anything extraordinary were to happen.”

You put a lot of work into developing the Ford Mustang GT3. Where do you feel the biggest progress was made between the season opener at the Lausitzring and the season finale?

Finn Wiebelhaus: “We found out a lot about the set-up, which allowed us to keep the tyres alive for longer. As drivers, we are also always adapting and constantly receive more detailed feedback from our engineers. The car itself has obviously also made progress. The start of the season at the Lausitzring – particularly the pre-season tests – was tough. We struggled with the bumps, but soon found a few damper-related things, which really helped.”

Salman Owega: “The biggest difference could definitely be seen on the long runs. At the start of the season, we struggled with overheating tyres, particularly at the Lausitzring. We are now able to manage that very well and to keep the tyres in a window, in which they are good to drive on.”

You took a chance and switched to a new car with HRT and Ford. Did you at any time think that it would have been easier to line up with a more established manufacturer?

Salman Owega: “I like it when something is not so easy, or if it is something that not everyone is doing. In the end, we were rewarded all the more. If, for example, we had won with an established car, it would not have been so special, as countless drivers have already proven that these cars are fast. We have now shown that we can do it with a really new and unfamiliar car.”

Finn Wiebelhaus: “When HRT decided to switch to Ford, it was clear to me very quickly that I wanted to remain with the team. I spent my first year in GT3 there, knew the environment, and felt at home there. The car may have been more predictable in a different team, but I would have started from scratch again in all areas. Ford has always really helped us, and included us in its youth development programme. I had always been interested in that from the outset, so I never even considered switching team.”

You were rewarded for your bold decision with the first victory in Europe for the Ford Mustang GT3 at the Nürburgring. What did that milestone mean to you?

Finn Wiebelhaus: “For me personally, it was very important that I secured my first pole position in the ADAC GT Masters there. The race was a very close affair between us Fords, but we had a good strategy

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and were able to push again at the end of the race. It was a special win and nice that it was also a one-two for the team.”

Salman Owega: “I enjoyed it all the more, because it was a hard-fought win. In the closing stages, when Finn and David were battling for the lead, the atmosphere in the garage was very tense. I am sure it was more pleasant in the car than to be waiting there and unable to do anything but watch. That made it even more of a relief to make it onto the top step of the podium in the end.”

Where have you put your trophies?

Salman Owega: “My trophy is on my desk. I have collected a lot over the years, and have stored some of them away. However, I have put this one – and obviously the trophy from my first title win in the ADAC GT Masters – where they are easy to see.”

Finn Wiebelhaus: “I have a special trophy shelf, but the ADAC GT Masters trophy is too big for it. I have put it on the windowsill with the trophy for winning the ADAC Kart Masters and the one for winning the “Road to DTM”.”

So, a DTM trophy in the future would complete the “Road to DTM” on your windowsill...

Finn Wiebelhaus: “That would obviously be very nice. However, it took me a few years after winning the ADAC Kart Masters before I was crowned champion in the ADAC GT Masters. It would be great to win the DTM in three years – but I am happy for it to happen even sooner (laughs). However, I must first actually race in the DTM. For now, I am focussing on working hard over the winter, then I will see what the future has in store.”

Salman, what are your plans for the future?

Salman Owega: “I cannot answer that question at the moment. I have not ruled out spending another year in the ADAC GT Masters, because I really like this series. However, nothing definite has been confirmed yet.”

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