

Arduous Ardennes outing for Ilott

Frustrating weekend yields few points in championship chase

F3 front-runner Callum Ilott endured a challenging weekend at the Belgian rounds of the FIA European F3 Championship. Ilott entered the Spa event looking to further close the gap to the championship leaders but the weekend turned out to be anything but straightforward at a venue that the 17-year-old rates as one of his favourite tracks.

A malfunctioning sensor on Ilott's engine right at the start of the first qualifying session on Thursday left him stranded in the pits and only able to complete three laps before the chequered flag fell. The lack of running meant the Van Amersfoort Racing driver was now languishing in 20th position on the grid after running 2nd in both practice sessions in similar track conditions.

Race one at Spa on Friday was a further and equally frustrating affair for Ilott. With a wet track dictating the field would start and continue to run behind the safety car for another 14 minutes of the 33 minutes planned, Ilott had little opportunity to make any ground from 20th. With five minutes to go Ilott had edged into 17th before a further safety car period precluded any chance of making more substantial progress, ultimately coming home 16th and out of the points. "Visibility was really bad back in the pack," says Ilott. "It was a struggle to see and coupled with the multiple safety car periods that prevented us racing, I just couldn't get any further up the order."

Friday's second outing, held in dry conditions, was marginally better for Ilott. His sixth on the grid position suddenly became fifth when Ben Barnicoat's car failed to start on the green flag lap. With the sole aim of gaining points, Ilott was careful at the start but moved to fourth by the end of the opening tour. Visibly uncomfortable with the balance of his car, Ilott wrestled with the handling around the 7km circuit but had to yield to French team mate Anthoine Hubert before the 16 lap encounter was over, and finished fifth. "We simply didn't have the pace of the drivers around me," adds Ilott. "The car was unsettled in the quick sections and it just didn't have the consistency I needed. Spa is a good circuit for overtaking but I didn't have the speed on the crucial Kemmel Straight to get onto the back of my rivals and slipstream. It's something for us to look at after the weekend. I want to sit down with my engineers and interrogate the data to see what we were missing."

Saturday's race was again a dry affair and with a stellar start Ilott leapt from fourth on the grid to be in second by the first corner. As the leading pack battled frantically along the Kemmel Straight Ilott was right in the mix and held the inside line for the first time into Les Combes. "Joel Eriksson was leading, and Ben Barnicoat followed on the outside of me for the turn. As we were going into the corner, two into one wasn't going to work and we collided," explains Ilott. This led to a puncture for Barnicoat's car and Ilott dropping to 20th place following a spin. With damage incurred to the sidepod and floor, Ilott's Dallara was hobbled but with the faint possibility of points, he persevered. Unfortunately, the damage was more than cosmetic and shortly after, Ilott retired.

"No question, it was a disappointing weekend and we missed our opportunity to close the gap to the rivals at a circuit that I really enjoy," concludes Ilott. "You get those weekends in motorsport and from this season I've come to learn you just have to put them behind you and bounce back. We've got Nürburgring next, the track where I scored my first podium in 2015 so it's a venue that has been kind to me. The weather is very changeable there and those sort of conditions suit my style. I've got a short break and then I'm going to spend some time with the engineers to minimise the chances of another weekend like this."

The FIA European F3 Championship resumes on the 9th-11th September at the Nürburgring in Germany.

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About Callum Ilott

Based in the UK and still in full-time education at Haileybury, Hertford, 17-year-old Callum Ilott is one of Britain's upcoming young driving talents. At 12, he secured his first British national karting championship and just one year later dominated the international under 15s KFJ category with multiple championship wins and was nominated as the youngest ever WSK Driver of the Year in 2012. Aged 15, he won the CIK-FIA European Karting Championship, the WSK Super Master Series and finished fourth in the CIK-FIA World Championship. Aged 16, Callum was Red Bull's first ever driver to progress from karts to F3 to race in the FIA F3 European Championship securing a podium at the Nürburgring. In 2016 he will return to the championship with experienced Dutch team VAR.