**SO, WHO IS GLOBAL TOURING CAR CHAMPION?**

*Variawa, Wolk must wait for decision after GTC day of drama*

Global Touring Cars failed to crown its champion 2023 following a dramatic Extreme Festival finale at the Zwartkops Raceway in Pretoria on Saturday. Saood Variawa and Robert Wolk must now wait to learn which of them is champion, as officials work to get to the bottom of a litany of issues that included those two drivers clashing in Saturday’s opening race

The drama already was already high on the eve of the races, when an MSA court of enquiry overturned title contender Saood Variawa’s previous protest of rival Robert Wolk’s at the East London races in July. Wolk’s three place penalty there was overturned as a result, to see him arrive at Zwartkops with a slightly increased nine-point championship lead.

It was tight in qualifying as Wolk put his Chemical Logistics BMW M128 ti GTC on pole position by all of a tenth of a second over archrival Variawa’s Toyota Gazoo Racing Corolla Hatch GTC. Toyota Corolla GTC duo Julian van der Watt’s Chemical Logistics Sedan and Michael van Rooyen’s Gazoo Racing Hatchback shared row 2 from Andrew Rackstraw’s Sparco RDSA LTR Volkswagen Golf GTC, Nathi Msimanga Toyota Gazoo Racing Corolla Sedan GTC, but Josh le Roux was forced to park his Vitro Frameless Master Stairs Audi S3 GTC.

Variawa however got the drop on Wolk as he out-braked him into turn 2, before it appeared that Variawa closed the door on an eager Wolk into turn 4, urging the BMW onto the infield grass, which turned Wolk back into Variawa. That had both of them and Michael van Rooyen off the track. All three re-joined, leaving a surprised Nathi Msimanga leading from Julian van der Watt and Andrew Rackstraw, with Wolk and Variawa scything back through the pack.

The drama was still not over as Wolk made contact with a SupaCup car involved in its own fight for that class lead, but Robert was soon up to fourth, with Variawa following him up to fifth. Then leader Msimanga went off at the final turn of the penultimate lap, as Julian van der Watt grabbed the lead and went on to take the flag from Rackstraw, Wolk and Variawa, while van Rooyen picked up sixth from the hapless Msimanga.

Wolk, Variawa and van Rooyen, and then van der Watt and Msimanga were all summoned to the stewards to present their cases. Wolk was judged to be at fault in his contact with Variawa and demoted to fifth. And van der Watt was penalised for his part in Msimanga’s demise. The upshot which saw Andrew Rackstraw declared winner from Variawa, van der Watt, van Rooyen and Wolk.

With the wrangling going on behind the scenes, the reverse grid sprint race 2 presented another daunting prospect. Nathi Msimanga was on pole from Michael van Rooyen and their championship contending teammate Variawa alongside archrival Robert Wolk on row 2. Andrew Rackstraw and Julian van der Watt next up, with the scene was set for another thriller.

The second race, however nail biting, proved a far more sensible affair. The Gazoo trio quickly rearranged itself as Variawa went to the front from Msimanga, with wily van Rooyen playing the rear guard from Wolk, with van der Watt and Rackstraw in chase. And that’s how it ended.

So who is the 2023 South African Global Touring Car Champion? Well there isn’t one. Yet. With administrative issues outstanding from rounds, and Saturday’s result still under official discussion as we wrote, it was decided not to declare a champion. That will be announced once all the red tape is tied up.

Provisionally, however, Andrew Rackstraw was declared overall winner for the day from Saood Variawa, Julian van der Watt, Michael van Rooyen, Robert Wolk and Nathi Msimanga.