



Sebastian Wheldon sets outright pace on opening day at Paul Ricard

MP Motorsport driver struck first in Free Practice 2

Le Castellet, 17 July 2026

Sebastian Wheldon emerged as the fastest driver overall across the two Free Practice sessions that opened the sixth round of the FIA Formula Regional European Championship at Paul Ricard. The MP Motorsport driver set the quickest lap of the day in the afternoon session with a 1:58.588, improving on the morning's benchmark of 1:59.187 posted by PREMA Racing's Kean Nakamura-Berta.

Maksimilian Popov ended the second session just 0.079s adrift of Wheldon, securing second place for Trident Motorsport. Championship leader Rashid Al Dhaheri completed the top three, a little over one tenth off the pace, ahead of his R-ace GP team-mate Emanuele Olivieri, who was the fastest Rookie. MP Motorsport duo Zhenrui Chi and Alexander Abkhazava finished fifth and sixth respectively, while CL Motorsport's Reno Francot once again featured among the frontrunners in seventh.

Nakamura-Berta, who had topped the opening session ahead of PREMA Racing team-mate Salim Hanna, was eighth in FP2. Rodin Motorsport's Gabriel Gomez claimed ninth, while home favourites Jules Roussel (CL Motorsport) and Alexandre Munoz (ART Grand Prix) rounded out the top 11 on French soil.

The opening stages of the afternoon session saw the R-ace GP pair of Olivieri and Al Dhaheri establish themselves at the top of the order. With exactly 30 minutes remaining, the Italian set the provisional benchmark of 1:59.432, having been quickest in both the first and third sectors, finishing more than two tenths clear of his team-mate. Francot was also among the early pace-setters, while he and Popov became the first drivers to break the two-minute barrier.

As the session entered its closing stages, Popov moved to the top with a 1:59.338. Olivieri then reclaimed first place with a 1:59.040 before MP Motorsport's Alexander Abkhazava delivered a 1:58.922 to take over at the top. Al Dhaheri responded with a 1:58.711, but Popov closed to within 0.032s of the Emirati thanks to an impressive final sector. Wheldon also moved into contention, climbing to third only 0.013s behind Popov and less than one tenth ahead of Olivieri. The American driver then produced the fastest lap of the day, a 1:58.588, to secure the top spot, with Popov ultimately finishing second, 0.079s adrift.

The opening Free Practice session saw Al Dhaheri become the first driver to dip below the two-minute barrier, posting a 1:59.995 with just under 30 minutes remaining to edge Rodin Motorsport's Gabriel Gomez by 0.074s. His benchmark was soon eclipsed by Van Amersfoort Racing's Francisco Macedo, who recorded a 1:59.843 to move to the top of the timesheets. Wheldon then climbed to second with a 1:59.925 before improving to a 1:59.767 on his next attempt to briefly take over at the summit.

With seven minutes left on the clock, Nakamura-Berta delivered a 1:59.353 to move back into first place. PREMA Racing team-mates Hanna and Tomass Stolcermanis also made strong progress, with Hanna moving into second, just 0.160s off the pace, while Stolcermanis secured third with a 1:59.592.

In the closing minutes, Nakamura-Berta found even more pace, lowering the benchmark to a session-best 1:59.187. Wheldon, who had already crossed the finish line, eventually dropped to tenth, while a late improvement from Rodin Motorsport's Alex Ninovic elevated him to third, relegating Stolcermanis to fourth by the chequered flag.

Track action continues tomorrow with the first Qualifying session scheduled for 09:00 CEST, followed by Race 1 at 12:55 CEST. On Sunday, Qualifying 2 will

get underway at 09:05 CEST before the second race of the weekend, which is set to start at 16:20 CEST.

Both qualifying sessions and races will be streamed live on the championship's official YouTube channel, [@fiaformulareregionaleu](#).

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