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Rookie review: first point marks start of title quest for Sonka

LAUSITZ, GERMANY – Taking his first point in the Red Bull Air Race World Championship in New York back in June marked the start of rookie pilot Martin Sonka's quest for a future title. The ambitious team is already planning for 2012 after it was announced that the championship will take a one-year development break in 2011.

With a lengthy list of modifications planned for his Edge 540 race plane during the next year, Sonka says he has achieved his first-year strategy to learn the ropes. Taking the single point for his 11th place finish in the USA round was an incentive to continue building towards greater things.

"The whole season so far has been a very important lesson for us," says Sonka, as he prepares for a last push at Germany's Lausitz EuroSpeedway final on 7/8 August. "Just being able to see how everything works and the race set-up is hugely valuable to us as a rookie team. Now we have that experience, we are fully ready for future seasons."

Magic moment for the whole team

Securing the team's first point has definitely been the highlight of the year for many reasons according to Sonka, who has already built a strong fan base due to his likeable nature. "New York has absolutely been my favourite race so far, it is an amazing location and we had a lot of fans there," he says. "We also got our first point there and I liked the tight track as well. The most exciting moment for me was when we got our first point – that was a great moment for the whole team. Hopefully we will have many more moments like this in the future."

Despite a string of bottom table results in his inaugural season the analytical fighter pilot is satisfied that he has met his goals. Receiving praise from race officials as well as his fellow pilots, the young Czech has taken a steady route through his first season to ensure he remains safe in the track. Flying with a slow and unmodified plane – bought from former two-times world champion Mike Mangold – the word on the street is that with more power to hand this newcomer has the potential to shake things up in 2012.

"I am really happy that I have made progress from race to race. I feel really good in the track and each race is very important for me because I am becoming more and more experienced and can now start to play around in the track a bit more to find better lines," Sonka explains. "Our strategy for this season has been to build up a clean style of flying and then to start





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racing harder once this has been achieved. I am happy we are following this strategy and it's working."

Closing the performance gap

Among the list of 'must-do' mods for the extended off-season is a new canopy, shorter and lighter landing gear as well as a complete aerodynamic overhaul of the aircraft's fuselage. There is also a plan in hand to tune the engine which, in conjunction with a slicker airframe, could vastly improve his overall performance in the track.

"There is a lot of work to be done on our race plane to make it as fast as the others," admits Sonka, who is under no illusions that to meet the high performance standards of Hannes Arch and potential double title winner Paul Bonhomme it will be a costly process. "The goal is to improve our race plane but we need sponsors for that. We'll see if we can find some during the year break in 2011."

Rookie no more

Sonka has certainly made the right impression during his debut season with clean and consistent flying but he knows the top three teams will be hard to beat even with a faster plane in the future. "The sport is tighter and tighter and we have to fight for each tenth of a second," he says. "Nigel Lamb, for example, he is really fast this season. Bonhomme and Arch are doing a great job to stay at the top when there are so many fast pilots in the championship. But all the pilots have taken big steps forward this year and there are no big differences between us."

After the final race in Germany, where Sonka will be looking to end his rookie season on a high with a further points haul, there will be little time wasted as the team prepares to come back stronger in 2012. For Sonka, executing a long-term plan is the priority and the humble man from the Czech Republic has wrangled long enough with the frustration of being at the bottom of the table. It's time for the rookie to take the next step in his race journey and come back fighting fit with an improved race plane and the right experience to realise his full potential in the track.

"A very important thing for progression during the break is to fly in the track lots so we will need a lot of training next year to get as much experience as possible," adds Sonka, who now has the bit well and truly between his teeth after his taste of success in New York. "I plan to





04 August 2010

be fully ready with a competitive aeroplane for the 2012 season.”



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