



## A Litany of Retirements and Penalties: Stéphane Lefebvre Leads Before the Forest Stages

No, the Legend Boucles @ Bastogne is unlike any other event! Hugely popular, the rally organized by the Royal Automobile Club of Spa also presents a formidable challenge for classic cars. The first leg of the 2026 edition proved this once again!

Right from RT1 *Les Éoliennes* 1, a 23.6-kilometer section riddled with traps, the list of incidents began to grow. After accelerating too quickly in a Slow Zone, Jos Verstappen (BMW M3) was handed a 150-point penalty, immediately dropping him well out of contention for the lead! He responded in style in RT2 *Livarchamps*, however, by setting the fastest time.

Triple silver medalist in Bastogne, Guino Kenis was forced to throw in the towel on that same RT2, his BMW 325i suffering from technical problems. Then came a series of speeding penalties that disrupted the hopes of several top contenders: Fred Caprasse (BMW 325i), Ghislain de Mévius (Mazda 323 4WD), Olivier Cartelle (Ford Escort Mk2), and Charles Blerot (BMW 325i)—who had surprised everyone by setting the fastest time on RT1—each received 300 penalty points, effectively relegating them in the overall standings.

Leading for most of Loop 1, 2025 winner Cédric Cherain (Ford Escort) was overtaken by Stéphane Lefebvre (BMW M3) before the return to Bastogne. A setback that seemed minor compared to what followed: a jammed handbrake led to clutch failure on RT5 *Les Éoliennes* 2, forcing Cherain into retirement.

Add to this Dimitri Van Hove's off-road excursion—his magnificent Alfa Romeo GTV6 ending its rally against a tree—and the early retirements of Yannick Neuville's Toyota Starlet (engine failure) and Christophe De Leeuw's Opel Ascona A (off-road following a technical issue), and the result is a leaderboard few could have predicted!

On Saturday evening, Stéphane Lefebvre and Andy Malfoy hold the overall lead with the Team Auto Racing BMW M3. But don't assume it's been smooth sailing for the northern Frenchman, winner in Bastogne in 2022.

“During the second run through *Les Éoliennes*, the engine was running on three

cylinders," Lefebvre explained. "That cost us quite a bit of time. And in the final regularity test in the dark, the light bar was working... intermittently!" "We'll start tomorrow as leaders, but we'll have to keep an eye on Ghislain de Mévius's comeback with the all-wheel-drive Mazda."

Right behind the French crew are the best regional contenders, with Loïc Pirot (Triumph TR7 V8) and Fred François (Ford Escort Mk2) battling throughout the second loop. While the Escort sat second after RT7, the impressive Triumph regained the advantage before the final pass over the Place McAuliffe podium. And in Sunday's forest stages, the British sports car—with its throaty roar—could feel right at home! The provisional top five is completed by Sébastien Incardona's BMW M3 (Lifelive Motorsport) and Grégoire Munster's Porsche 911 (MY Vintage), ahead of Romuald Thirion's Opel Ascona 400, who was satisfied with his day. They are followed by Billy Simoné (BMW 325i), Emile Breitmayer with Stéphane Prévot (BMW M3), Jos Verstappen (BMW M3)—whose comeback is one to watch—and John Wartique (Ford Escort Mk1).

Currently 11th in his Mazda 323 4WD and less than five minutes behind the leader, can Ghislain de Mévius pull off a major upset in the forest stages? Stay tuned... Fred Bouvy (BMW 325i) was forced to stop on Stage 7 due to a water pump pulley issue that damaged the radiator. The Brussels driver is doing everything possible to get back on the road tomorrow.

Throughout the day, Sarah Bovy focused on mastering rally driving. Aside from a minor impact in the final section—and a helping push from spectators to get back on course—the Iron Dames representative impressed observers. She's already looking forward to the next stage with her co-driver for the weekend, Aurélie Van Houdenhove.

### **Jérôme Martiny Leads the Challenger Category**

Leadership changed hands frequently in this category, run at an average speed of 80 km/h! Ultimately, Belgian Dakar Rally star Jérôme Martiny, co-driven by Fred Lejeune, made his mark in the BMW 325i E30. Behind him, pressure was relentless from Guillaume Glaude and Bastien Allard (Volvo 142), who led for a long time. Maxime Jaumin and Pierre-Yves Godfrin (BMW 325i) currently complete the provisional top three.

In Classic 65, the opening day went smoothly for Michael Bartholemy and Patrick Lienne (Ford Escort Mk1), who consistently led the way, though without opening a significant gap over Dave Cuynen and Guy Desmet (BMW 325i), or René Georges and Romain Lahaye (Volkswagen Golf GTI).

Finally, in Classic 50, the battle is as fierce as ever! Mario Varrewaere and Pablo Cracco (Nissan Sunny) held the lead for a long time.