

# TOUGH MONKEYS

## **Buckmore Park Team of Steel Summer Round 6: 02/08/08**

I was really up for this race. Still riding the crest of the wave that began at Le Mans and saw me take victory in the previous round, I headed back to Buckmore for round six eager to close the gap still further to Cool and Flash at the head of the Team of Steel championship. Despite my confidence as I arrived at the circuit I was troubled by a niggling headache from the drive down, picked up from the constantly changing weather and lighting conditions. Being quite sensitive to light and preferring to dwell in darkened rooms doesn't mix well with bright sunshine, as proved towards the end of the last round when the setting sun over Buckmore resulted in a stonking migraine for the last twenty minutes of the race.

Nevertheless, I remained confident, sitting in the clubhouse behind a pair of sunglasses with Mig and Barry who would be piloting GP07. I drew kart 77 for the race, and Mig said that he'd had that in the Man of Steel and it had incredibly heavy steering. A few others made mention that it was also a quick kart so I dismissed the steering issues and decided to focus on the speed of it. Heading out into qualifying I led the field out for the second time in as many months. I like doing this as it's usually quite easy to gauge the performance of the kart from the front as you have a clear track to attack and set some good lap times, and if people are catching you easily you know you've got issues.

I noticed as I approached Garda for the first time that there was a kart well ahead of me heading towards Café turn and signalling to pull off into the pits. I wondered at the time how he'd got there as I was the first kart out, but thought nothing more of it. I stayed out for several laps, receiving a pit board at one stage to tell me I was 2<sup>nd</sup>. Sadly, this gave me a sense of false security as on returning to the pits midway through the session I discovered that I'd been bumped down out of the top 5. I'll be honest that I was struggling to understand why as the kart was quick in a straight line, and while was a pig to turn into corners still felt okay. At that point I was well over a second off of the pace of both Cool & Flash and BAR Humbug. Yes, I know both of these teams are "superlights" but hell, I beat them both comfortably last month in a kart that wasn't much quicker than this one.

Slightly bemused by this I went back out onto the track for the final few minutes and could only shave a fraction off of my best time, leaving me 7<sup>th</sup> on the grid and one place behind my GP stablemate Miguel. Typically, as I struggled all of my main rivals were having a good day. BAR took pole from Cool & Flash, while HWB who lie 4<sup>th</sup> in the championship were also ahead of me on the grid. Rob Clifford, or Jigsaw as he's otherwise known as and the other solo driver in the race would also be ahead of me.

The race began and just as I've been able to do more often than not I had a strong start. Being on the inside of the circuit I was able to ride the tail of the kart ahead

leaving Mig no line into turn one and I was immediately up to 6<sup>th</sup>, and quickly moved into 5<sup>th</sup>. Jack Harding for Cool & Flash and Dave Waters for BAR were gone within a handful of laps, disappearing off into the distance at a pace no one behind could match. I was all over Spot On who lay 4<sup>th</sup>, with HWB just ahead. For this early stage of the race my kart felt competitive, but as I've often found this can be misleading as karts trip over each other and slow the pace. As HWB began to edge clear and the pace settled I began to struggle to match their speed, however I was still able to sneak into 4<sup>th</sup> place ahead of Spot On.

Over the next few laps I was beginning to be concerned by noises coming from my kart whenever I turned left at high speed, most noticeably at the Esses and Pullmans. The kart was really becoming an utter dog to turn and I was using much more effort than I would normally expect to in a bid to take my normal lines. Being the analysing sort I was more than aware that I was losing a lot of time. Having to turn the wheel more than I would normally was scrubbing speed at almost every corner, most notably turn 1, HP2 and Garda, but also I was unable to take my optimum line through Symes and into Pullmans which comprised my speed out of Paddock and up to Garda. I still had a lot of grunt down the main straight but as the old Pirelli advert goes, power is nothing without control.

You remember the kart that was ahead of me in qualifying and headed off into the pits? That was BAR Humbug. Jack had mentioned something to me when I came into the pits during qualifying but it hadn't registered until a little later what he'd meant. There are a couple of karts in the fleet that are known to be faster than the others, and one of them was sitting idle in the pit lane prior to qualifying. You're not allowed to just say "I want that kart there" and climb in. You must have a reason for swapping your kart, so what people tend to do is go out for a lap and come straight in and swap in the hope of securing a better kart. Seeing that such a kart was sitting there in the pit lane had caused a bit of a buzz, and anticipating this clamour for kart 78 BAR had pulled a bit of a sly one. They'd been a couple of karts behind me as I took to the circuit, but darted through the cut-through at HP1 and jumped in front of everyone. This let them get to the pits first and swap for the better kart. A little underhand I must say, but I gather that a number of people had their eye on that kart and as BAR aren't title contenders I was willing to let this one slide.

However, it still made me chuckle when 15 kart 78 ground to a halt at the bottom of the hill. This promoted me to 3<sup>rd</sup> and I received the pit board to confirm this. However, this wasn't to remain the case. Normally in the event of a breakdown it's hard cheese old chap. You'll receive a fresh kart but you'll still lose the time it takes to get you going again. But, the kart that was sent out as a replacement apparently broke down en-route which extended the delay. Accepting this as not being BAR's fault they were awarded all of the laps back that they'd lost. I don't normally grumble about things, but I did think that a little annoying as I'd past their stricken kart long before the replacement kart had even left the pit lane (I followed it for a little while) so for them to be promoted back ahead of all the karts that got ahead was a trifle unfair. In this case I thought it a little poetic that the kart that they had specifically sought had kicked the bucket.

Never mind, the show must go on. My race was starting to become a bit of a test of endurance by now. My lap times were becoming erratic and Mig was now right behind me. I knew that after my win last month GP07 was better placed in the championship so was happy to concede the place to Mig, but didn't realise that Rob Clifford was so close and he nipped through as well. There then followed a long

battle for 4<sup>th</sup> as the three of us traded places repeatedly, including one of the most satisfying duels I've ever been part of. I began a pass on Rob at HP1, remaining alongside through HP2, the Esses, Symes, and eventually making it stick between Pullmans and Paddock. Both of us left each other a gentleman's amount of room....which baffled me then why I received a contact warning the next lap around. For very painful reasons Rob knows all too well that that kind of pass can end in tears but this was perfectly clean.

This dynamic continued until at some point Rob must have pitted and I began to pull away from Mig prior to diving into the pit for my own fuel stop. I immediately returned to the pit for my "run-around" stop and returned to the race with an hour and a quarter still to go.

I was becoming increasingly aware at this point of my thumping headache and my growing fatigue in my arms and neck. The effort required to wrestle the kart into the corners was beginning to overtake even my reserves of endurance, which over the last month have been proven to be up there with the best of them. Sat here now I'm struggling to recall much that happened in the final hour, save for seeing the clock count down at an alarmingly slow rate. Even with an hour still to go I was running on empty. I could no longer summon the strength to hook the kart up on the kerbs, and frankly I didn't want to as my head was pounding. At some point during all the pit stops Mig and Barry had put in some quality laps to jump ahead of me and after Mig came out to do the final stint I could see him about five seconds ahead of me. Normally I'd be refreshed at having a target to aim for, hunker down behind the wheel and home in on my prey. Tonight though, I had nothing left to give.

It was the first time I'd ever considered pulling the kart out of a race, and I was really struggling long before the half hour to go mark. If there was no championship at stake then maybe I would have done, but I was in 5<sup>th</sup> place and those were solid points considering how the kart was behaving. I'd pulled a decent gap out on Rob, who with twenty minutes to go was perhaps 20 seconds behind me, so I began to ease off as much as I dared. A look at the lap times will show that I was up to 3 seconds off of the leader's pace during the closing stages of the race, but I was only interested in keeping enough in hand to stay ahead of Rob. By the time the chequered flag fell I was only four seconds ahead of him, and the warm down lap back to the pits was the single hardest lap I've ever had in a kart. As the adrenaline seeped away and I crawled slowly back it took my last drops of energy to turn the wheel. I basically collapsed into a chair in the café for a few moments, before taking the decision for the first time not to attend the post race briefing and instead headed straight for my car.

I didn't go very far though. I rumbled up the road in the Scooby and swung into the park and ride at the top of the circuit and having dived into the back of the car was asleep in seconds. I won't go into graphic detail as to how ill I felt, but it wasn't pleasant. The Scooby made a very comfortable home for the night, again, enough so that I was refreshed and raring to go once more in the morning. History will show that I finished 5<sup>th</sup>, but I'll remember it as the hardest race I've ever competed in, Le Mans included.