

TOUGH MONKEYS

Buckmore Park Elite Championship Round 3: 03/05/09

It was a bright but breezy day at Buckmore on Sunday for the third round of the Elite championship and the Monkeys arrived each pumped up with motivation to kick start their season. The entourage had swelled even further this month with not only Bianca, TC and Pappa Morland in attendance but Mig's girlfriend Vanessa and Mamma Morland were waving the flag too. Weigh in proved a little surprising as I'd bought a couple of kilos of additional lead expecting to be under the minimum 83kg as a result of my current fitness drive for Le Mans in July. Barry had been giving me a bit of grief about losing too much weight, so it brought a smile to many when it was Barry that came in underweight and I was actually a kilo over. This meant that Barry would have to add an extra kilo to the kart for his stint while I would be carrying a kilo more than necessary, being 84kg kitted up with the 10kg of lead ballast.

Barry had re-thought the strategy for this month and I would be taking to the track first in practice so had the responsibility of testing the kart for performance. I was also keen to see how we got on with starting the kart as that had been our Achilles heel in the first two rounds. It fired up straight away, and even did so a second time when the pit lane became grid locked through other people stalling and leaving me no where to go. Out on track I could tell immediately that the kart had plenty of speed on the straights and once the tyres were up to temperature I was pleased to report back to the team that it was good under braking and cornering. I leapt out of the kart with a broad smile on my face as I knew that for the first time this year we had a competitive vehicle. Barry went out for his practice and came back with exactly the same feedback, using the word "rocketship" which is usually a good sign. Mig went out for his practice which led immediately into qualifying and we hoped for a vast improvement of last months efforts. Well, it was an improvement but the word vast shouldn't be used too vociferously I'm afraid. Mig's best lap put us in 16th on the grid which frankly mystified everyone in the Toughmonkeys camp.

Racing began with Mig still in the kart and the noise of the Club 100s rose from the far side of Buckmore as we waited for 23 of them to come into view for the first time. I was taking photos as the karts swung right into Symes and down the hill towards us. Looking through my viewfinder I snapped away as the lead karts came buzzing past. The pack swept through but I was sure I hadn't seen Mig in amongst it. I quickly flicked through the playback on the camera and there was a definite absence of Miggage. A good half minute after the leader had come past Mig swung into view with a couple of other stragglers in tow. A ripple of confusion trickled through the paddock and we were later to learn that he had been punted up the backside towards a tyre wall in a typical bedlam gathering at HP2, as is so often the case on the opening lap. My early optimism had pretty much vanished already.

There was little else Mig could do except control any rising red mist and get on with the job in hand, and that's precisely what he did as he banged in consistent fast laps to steady the ship and bring Kart No.2 back into the pack. We were assisted only a few laps into the race by mayhem at Pullmans when a spinner collected several others resulting in a large pile up of karts and frustrated waving hands and gesticulations. When Mig finished his stint he handed over to Barry having risen to 4th place. As we entered the pit stop phases the order began to mix up as the different strategies began to play out so that perhaps wasn't exactly our actual position but it was looking better than it had at the start. There were also a lot of mechanical troubles for people this month and we were gaining benefit from this. Along with Barry's

supremely quick driving we had now dragged the kart up to 3rd. His stint was trouble free and we were beginning to feel the confidence growing again.

Barry handed over to me and I was straight into the action, loving the performance of this kart. I'd said when I got out of the kart during practice that it was capable of a low 46 second lap and Barry had posted a 46.25 which was the quickest we'd gone before in this series, and it was the benchmark I was looking to beat. Once I'd bedded myself in the lap times began to tumble, and having let front runner Steve Brown Jnr come past to put a lap on me I settled in behind him to follow his lines and see where I could pinch a few fractions. During the following laps I dipped down to 46.22 and then a 46.21 and I was feeling good. Steve was dragging me round and as the pit stops sorted themselves out we were now in 3rd place. Accelerating out of HP2 midway into my stint though disaster struck with a vengeance as the exhaust blew itself to bits and I lost power. It was fortunate that it went where it did as I was close to the pit entry and was able to come straight in and the mechanics got to work replacing the duff parts. Because it had happened so quickly Barry and Mig had no idea I was even in the pits so I was fortunate that Adrian and Stef of ACS kindly came over to push start the kart and get me under way again. Thanks guys for that, I do appreciate it. I would say I'd buy you a drink at Le Mans in July but I remember how much they cost from last year!

It might be my current happy and mellow state of mind in life that helped temper me but I suffered no irritation from the breakdown and got straight back on the low 46 second pace of before. I didn't know where I was on track anymore, 10th as it turned out to be, so I just set my sights on whoever was next on track and went off after them. No one came past me, and everyone in front of me I closed in on. I had a good scrap with two Le Mans team mates Mark Figes and Lee Hawley along with Dave Hearn of Spot On and despatched them all in order. I was particularly pleased about clearing the Spot On kart since they were to finish 2nd and my pace was a great deal better. Towards the end of my stint I rapidly caught up with another Le Mans veteran in the shape of Justin Dobson, but while catching is one thing passing a talented driver is another entirely. Although I was quicker Justin was in the right places at the right time and I couldn't find a way through before I saw my pit board telling me my time was up. I dived in to the pits and handed back to Barry for his short final stint having regained 8th place prior to the stop.

He wasted no time getting right back on the pace and was flying up until he came up behind Adrian in the ACS kart at Garda. Barry dived up the inside and from everyone watching in the paddock there was a mix of feelings as to whether contact had been made. Barry would later say not but the marshal with the same view as us thought there was and called it in to race control as an Advantage By Contact and the black flag was shown for a stop and go penalty. On this occasion it was me that hadn't realised Barry had come in to the pits as I was sat on the tarmac in the paddock with TC watching the closing laps through the gap in the fence.

As it transpired the penalty didn't effect our track position as we were to finish 8th anyway, equalling the result of the first round. Now, I should be disappointed because we are much better than that and I am determined to see us back in the top five where we belong. I was in fact very pleased with the day's work, as it's now three straight races without putting a single foot wrong. No spins, consistent and fast laps and no pit traumas yet. These karts really suit my style of driving and I've found how to get them to behave just how I'd like them to, which was rarely the case in the old Thunders. This showed up in the final lap times as I was pleased to see me record my quickest ever lap of Buckmore with a 46.04. Only three teams went quicker than that with Buckmore legend Si Rudd for Dogz, Sunniva superstar Andrew Mollison and the winning kart of Jack, Steve and Dan for CFM. Indeed Jack had just posted a new lap record of 45.75 which at three tenths quicker than the lap I'm so pleased with is frankly incredible. My mission from now on is to achieve a sub 46 second lap, but believe me that won't be easy.

The season now takes a two month summer break, during which time I'll continue to improve my fitness at the gym. My next venture in the kart seat will be over in France for the Le Mans 24hr where Mig will also be joining me. I'm very much looking forward to that and hope to put in a performance every bit as strong as last year. Allez Le Toughmonkeys!!