

# TOUGH MONKEYS

## **Le Mans 24 Hours – Circuit Alan Prost, Le Mans: 04 – 06/07/09**

We turned up, we raced a little bit and then we came home. That was the story of Le Mans 2009. Okay, maybe there was a little bit more to it than that. Instead of just banging on about the racing, which I'll get to in the end, I thought I'd write a summary of the entire trip to Le Mans. This may take a while.

### **01/07/09 - Wednesday**

England was gripped in the middle of a heat wave as I left Derby aboard the Scooby and headed for Maison Dobson in Woking, fighting the rush hour traffic on the M25 and working my way through some particularly meaty Nickleback tracks. Climbing out of a couple of hours worth of air conditioning and into the searing temperature I hoped that it would be a little cooler on the other side of the Channel, but it would turn out to be a vain hope.

Miguel (Morland) joined us via the joys of rail travel and following a take-away from the local Chinese we crammed our entire luggage into Justin's Golf, along with his wife Eliska, and headed off towards Portsmouth for our rendezvous with the rest of the La Harvre posse. As we left Woking we were joined by Dave (Hearne) and his wife Jo in the big black Mercedes pimp-mobile, while Grant (Wright) was waiting for us at the BP station in Portsmouth with the Nissan Navarro beast. After a little bit of impromptu rugby around the back of the filling station and a close call with a brittle looking window Jack and his dad Chris (Harding) were soon with us and we headed on mass around the corner to the ferry port.

Grant evidently wasn't familiar with queuing and decided to start his own line and drove past the 40 or so cars lined up at the LD Lines passport control, realising only when he was right at the front that his new line was going no where so began muscling in, much to the obvious delight of the patiently waiting masses behind. Their delight moved onto orgasmic ecstasy when Justin, Dave and Chris all muscled in too.

Contrary to the events of last year there was only limited drinking in the bar as the ferry left port, and it wasn't long before we all began retiring to our cabins for an early start. I did however beat Jack at Ferrari 355 in the arcades. I wouldn't normally mention something as trivial as that but I don't often get the chance to say I beat him on a race track so woo hoo me!

### **02/07/09 – Thursday**

The morning didn't start well for me at all, waking up with a stonking headache which I put down to a combination of the intense heat of the previous day, the contents of

the aforementioned Chinese meal and a possible previously unknown sea sickness. I spent the trip from La Harvre down to Le Mans curled up asleep in the back of Justin's car and missed the comedic styling's of his SatNav taking him, and therefore the convoy behind, on a mystery tour of Northern France. I hear the graveyard we all visited was particularly delightful.

Several hours later and the convoy rocked up into Arnage, just south of Le Mans, where our hotel was located. As it was lunch time we went straight into the village and stopped at a modest café for our traditional le croque monsieur. By now I was completely recovered from whatever was wrong with me and we decided it would be a nice time to visit the Circuit Alain Prost which we would be calling home for the weekend.



I ought to indicate at this point what the weather was like. The Met Office might refer to it as a warm front or sunny spell with a high UV index. We, however, said it was bloody hot. 32.5 degrees to be absolutely accurate, and stood by the side of the track watching the owner/drivers testing we couldn't bear to hang around too long before scuttling back to our respective climatically controlled wagons

and heading off in the direction of our hotel, the Campanile Arnage, where we also found Graham (Gillham) who had been on the same ferry as the rest of us but had never found his way into the convoy.

Modest would be the best way to describe our accommodation, but since we would be spending at least one night of the trip sleeping in a garage this was consummate luxury in comparison. People began pairing off with their room mates and my buddy for the next few days was my Toughmonkeys team mate Mig, one of this year's three Le Mans virgins.

As the afternoon drew on the Dover crossing contingent arrived at the hotel in the guise of Gerrard (Hubbert), John (Mahoney), Stuart (Jones), Mick (Etheridge)



and the Buckmore team manager Steve (Hall). Thursday is typically regarded as a relaxed day so we gathered in the bar for a few hours of spirited banter, followed by our nightly pilgrimage to the Grill restaurant on the edge of the complex. Considering

we were in France, home of fine cuisine, this place isn't exactly a constellation of Michelin stars. I erred on the side of caution and ordered the three cheese pizza, as did Jack, and as we were to do for the next three visits to the place. As a small aside it amused me to note that the two lightest people in the group were the two eating the unhealthiest food and both have a total aversion to salad. Discuss.

While several broke away to take on a few beverages at the Brit Hotel next door, residence of Stef (Robinson), Adrian and Carl (Matthews) of ACS along with the Equipe Vitesse boys of Joe (Flay), Russell (Crowe), Simon and Phil (Rudd) plus the entire Teeside Karting clan who organise the event, most of the Buckmore clan retired for an early night.

That was the plan anyway, but it didn't quite work out for me as I'd planned. It was so hot that night that it took hours to get to sleep. It wasn't until I'd had enough and wrapped myself in a bath towel that I'd soaked with cold water under the shower and climbed back into bed that I finally drifted off. The maid must have wondered just what the hell I had done in the bed when she was met by a squidgy mattress!

### **03/07/09 – Friday**

I'd convinced many of the group that breakfast at the local supermarket, a ten minute walk away, was much more appealing than in the hotel's own offerings so we were waiting on their doorstep at 9am for it to open. 9am? Come on Pierre, some of us have stuff to do! Anyway, a strong espresso, pain au chocolate, croissant and a to die for chocolate custard éclair and we were ready to hit the track.

First of all we drove around the Le Mans circuit which for the most part is open to the public. Justin was giving it plenty of welly which caused a minor domestic with Eliska. I'm sure he'll consider it worth however as he'll be dining out on his slide through Arnage corner for years to come. Several of the team then went for a wander around the Le Mans museum collection while the rest of us who have seen it before littered the air conditioned foyer as the temperature continued to rise outside.

It was then on to business and we began setting up camp at the kart track. Each driver was then weighed at sign-on and the average of the whole team taken and a handicap system employed so the heavier teams were at less of a disadvantage to the lighter ones. Our team was awarded a five lap advantage, while the sister team was given seven laps. The briefing was held shortly after sign-on in a packed clubhouse, full of the 23 hire kart and 21 owner/driver teams. Although in the same race and using similar machinery they are two different classes as the owner/driver karts are up to four seconds a lap quicker than the hire teams.



After taking possession of our karts we had a couple of hours of tinkering time which basically involved us putting garish stickers all over them to distinguish Buckmore



Thunder from Buckmore Lightning. The Lightning crew also changed the seat and steering wheel to more comfortable alternatives while the early thinking in the Thunder camp was to stick with what we were given as last year the change had caused all kinds of issues. Practice was two hours long and because there were two newbies in the team Justin and I sacrificed some of our time so they could have longer to get to know the

track. Justin went out first and came back in after only a few laps with brake failure. Not a good start for us, and we'd not even begun the 24 hour endurance part of it.

After that all got fixed up he went out again and set a best lap of 61.6 (apologies if I've got any of these times wrong, my memory isn't what it was) which was a little slow. My best lap last year had been a high 59 second but then I am lighter than him. I went out and immediately saw why he was slow. The brakes were new and needed bedding in. On top of that the kart felt sluggish. Not slow, but it took a time to build up speed out of the corners and as the tyres were relatively cold I had to lose a lot of speed to get round them. I set a 60.9 I think which I was far from impressed with and immediately wondering what kind of dog of a kart we'd been handed.

Dave on his first attempt was in the 60.1's, as was John. Mig had a bit of a disaster by running wide at the end of the main straight, hitting a tyre wall and causing a full course yellow while the wall was repaired. His best time was in the 60.2's and the corner was renamed "Miggots" in his honour. We were having difficulties obviously, but the sister team was having an even worse time with their kart simply off the pace totally. It was later diagnosed with a list of problems that eventually got sorted right at the end of the session before any meaningful times were posted. Prior to that most of their team were close to a second slower than where they were last year.

I went out to begin a second round of stints and the kart felt immediately better. The brakes were bedded in and the tyres nicely scrubbed by then and I was able to carry greater speed through corners so didn't feel much of the sluggish acceleration. In so doing I became the only Buckmore driver in either team to post a sub 60 second lap with a 59:9 which I was relatively happy with. Jack posted a 60:0 but that was before their kart was sorted out and we all knew he was capable



of much more. He was at least three or four tenths quicker around here than me last year. He thinks he can achieve a low 59 second lap while I was confident I could nail a 59:5. After my stint the kart went into the mechanics garage for one of their guys to take it out and see if anything was wrong. He was over a second slower than my time so they adjusted the tyre pressures and then Dave, John and Mig all went out again and took off around 0.7 seconds from their previous best times. I was hopeful I could get similar gains when we returned to the track on Saturday. All that said we were all way off Vitesse's times so we weren't getting the bunting out for a street party just yet.

### **04/07/09 – Saturday**

And so the big day arrived. Steve, Mick and Chris had headed off early to the circuit to kit it out fully and make it habitable for our two day tenure there. The remaining contingent arrived at the track for 8.30am which gave us a half hour of final tinkering prior to the circuit opening at 9am for final practice. Having each found the standard steering wheel to be uncomfortable even over a short period we decided it would be prudent to change to something that didn't leave us with mutated claws by the end of the 24 hours. We just managed to get it changed before the session began and it was me that opened proceedings for Thunder. The kart felt immediately crisper and on my first flying lap recorded a 59.7 lap which set me up nicely for the day. In turn all the drivers from both teams had a handful of laps to familiarise themselves with the late tinkering and current track conditions prior to the start of the Qualifying sessions.

We were due out for qualifying at 10.45am with the owner/drivers going out at 10.15. This changed three minutes before the start of their session when for some reason it was decided we were to go out first, so much mayhem ensued as everyone tried to get prepared and out on track in time.

Qualifying was 30 minutes in which Justin did the first 15 minutes before handing over to me. It gave me chance to keep track of the timing screens and see where we needed to be. Steve underlined what I needed to do perfectly when he said that to make the top half I'd have to do better than a 59.5. Oh joy. I geared up and headed out onto track for the last half of the session and joined Jack in pursuit of a good time.

Jack and I were the designated qualifiers as we were the acknowledged lightweights in each team. I enjoy racing against him more than anyone at Buckmore as he is the driver I most compare myself against. As the current Star Pupil there's no doubting



his talents, and despite his speed and his dominance of the Elite championship there is upmost respect for him amongst the rest of the paddock. He's about three to four kilos lighter than me but weighted evenly he'll still be a couple of tenths quicker than me. However, when the kart is right and I'm on a mission I can often get to within a tenth of him. And that for anyone other than perhaps Si and Steve Brown Jnr is an

achievement. In race conditions he's quicker still though as he's much better at dealing with passing people than me, something I must amend.

Well I was certainly on a mission because I put in a lap of 59.344 to secure 6<sup>th</sup> on the grid compared to Jack's 59.303 for 3<sup>rd</sup> place. Three places further back and only 0.041 seconds slower. There were 16 teams under the magic 60 second barrier so the standard was obviously high this year. Si had put Vitesse on pole with a ridiculous 58.681 ahead of a university team with an equally silly lap time. Both clearly had very competent machines under them to complement the quality of the driver.



### **The Le Mans 24 hour**

Midday approached and with it the start of the race. In the run up to it all the drivers gathered on the infield beside the start line for a photo opportunity that will allegedly appear in Autosport magazine, I'm guessing somewhere behind Bernie Ecclestone's latest "Hitler got things done" comments. In a change to previous years the start would not be a rolling formation start, instead the karts were lined up on a stagger along the side of the track in a traditional "Le Mans" style with the drivers running from the opposite side of the track and jumping aboard. I envisaged carnage taking place which was especially concerning for me as I was starting the race for Thunder.

I did nearly manage to miss the start however. There was a lot of confusion going on as to when the engines should be started, Grant being the starter for Lightning and Dave being my wing man on the Thunder kart. While the faffing was going on I was sat on the grass beside my kart crossed legged without my helmet on, keeping calm and cool. When the order to fire the engines came I got up and footed the kart to stop it running away when Dave started it. It was as I was doing this that I realised that all the other drivers were already on the other side of the track poised for the start. My team mates said afterwards that they'd been bellowing at me from the pit wall to shift, but I do like to do things at my own pace!



I got my lid and gloves on with a good 30 seconds or so

to spare and waited for the clock to tick midday and the Tricolour flag to fall.

Two laps of utter mayhem ensued. Watching the video later it appeared quite calm, but from where I was sitting in the middle of the swarm it was anything but. Karts were swerving all over the place, mine included, trying to find a clear space as 44 drivers filtered into the Esses at the end of the pit straight. I got mugged all the way around the first lap, unable to get onto a decent line into the corners and slipping back quickly culminating in running wide at the final hairpin while trying to avoid being broad sided. I lost momentum and with it a lot of places, apparently dropping all the way back to fourth to last. I've had better opening laps.

It took several laps before things calmed down and I was able to settle into a rhythm and begin to claw my way back up the order. The kart was feeling pretty good and I was soon on the climb, although I was still being careful with passing people as it the first hour and fifty minutes is not the time to be throwing everything into winning a 24 hour race.

I was regularly shown updates from the pit wall as to my current status and with each passing lap it got better and better. There were a number of incidents that helped me on my way, along with other team's strategies coming into play. By the end of my stint though I was ahead of my starting position of 6<sup>th</sup> and going well, but it still surprised me when I realised I was catching Jack rapidly. So much so that as he pitted for the end of his stint I was right up behind him. I discovered after I'd returned to the pits myself that there had been an incident at the final corner of the second lap between him and Si that resulted in Jack being pushed against the kerbs and damaging the kart and slowing his pace. There was definitely some heated debate going on when I returned but I kept right out of it having not seen anything from the lowly position I'd been in at the time.



Dave had by now replaced me at the wheel of Thunder and was going very well. He too was a Le Mans virgin but was putting in consistent laps and we were still running high up the order, right up until the shout of "Dave's off!!" came from the pit wall just a lap before he was due in. Sure enough Dave was beached in the kitty litter on the outside of the final corner having been the victim of an optimistic dive up the inside of another hire kart by one of the owner/drivers. In avoiding the spinning hire kart he ended up being

forced onto the kerbs where the grip is zero and into the gravel he went. After nearly two hours behind the wheel the last thing you want to have to do is drag a heavy kart out of the gravel.

Mig was out on track next and trying to put the previous day's indiscretion behind him. I didn't see much of his stint as I was sat in the garage trying to cool down and prepare myself for going out next. The tactic had been to use me while the track was at optimum temperature and maximise the



benefits that my speed could bring, while the heavier drivers did the night shift to lessen their disadvantage in the cooler conditions.

My stint began and the kart felt superb underneath me. I would leave Le Mans reflecting on this kart in its current state being one of the best machines I've ever



driven. Everything felt good about it from the brakes and the pick-up to the handling and top end. I spent my entire session scything through traffic and setting consistent mid to low 59 second laps and taking Thunder up to what was 2<sup>nd</sup> place in class at the time of my pit. The only person other than the owner/drivers that

went past was Si who would normally scamper up behind me but instead took many laps to get up onto my tail. It was a thoroughly satisfying stint, culminating in my own personal best lap time of a 59.1.

That would be it for me for the next fifteen hours of the race. I wasn't due back out onto track until just after 10am the next morning so I had a lot of time to kill. I'd timed my stint perfectly to coincide with the beginning of the barbeque on the roof of our pit garage that Chris was getting going. It was a welcome tonic after two tightly packed sessions in the kart.



Following me there then came the night watchmen of Justin and John who did back to back sessions which I take my hat off to. Justin would come in to be replaced by John but remained suited up so he was ready to jump back in when John came in himself. Darkness had long since descended across Le Mans by the time Dave and Mig went back out.

I had opportunity to get some sleep through the night, although it was difficult to get much of any quality. I'd nestled down into a deckchair with my Buckmore baseball cap tucked down over my eyes and tried hard to drift off. It would take a long time before I felt myself drift off as there's the constant drone of 44 karts spanking past, lap after lap, but any chance of a deep slumber was ruined every time one of our karts came in for a pit as everyone swings into action to help out.



What sleep I was getting was leaving me more and more tired as I'm not a cat-napper. Come daylight I was really starting to feel tired and feeling a little envious of Jack that he'd managed to slob out on the floor of the garage in his sleeping bag and



appeared to be dozing happily. At some point I did drift off for a good hour, but I was feeling rough when I decided to get up and stay up.

During the night shift I'm not entirely sure anyone knows what actually happened but we'd dropped from 2<sup>nd</sup> and had fallen off the pace a little. I'd heard all through the night Steve calling out "If the race finished now Thunder are 2<sup>nd</sup> and Lightning are 3<sup>rd</sup>", but now both teams were out of the podium places and continuing to drop back. Vitesse and the university team Ministry of Speed were battling for the lead and were now way out in front of the two Buckmore teams.

As the late order drivers went through their stints it became increasingly obvious to me that my final stint wasn't going to be a grandstand finish like last year when I was sent out to hunt down a podium spot. It had energised me and given me something to fight for. This year it was just a case of bringing it home safely, which didn't inspire my now aching arm muscles to want to spend another hour and 45 minutes out there.

A further set back befell us when Dave came into the pits having suffered a serious failure of the wheel bearing/hub/axle. I never found out which it really was, but the upshot was that the wheel was basically at a silly angle and barely attached. This was fixed at the cost of many laps, which dropped us behind Lightning and into 6<sup>th</sup> place.

So, the last two hours of the race had already begun as I hit the track for the last time and joined Jack and Si in the sprint to the finish. You remember I said that the kart was one of the best I'd driven? Well I don't know what traumas it had seen over the last 15 hours but it had turned into a right dog now. Corners that I'd previously taken flat now required a lift or even a dab of the brake to get the front end to turn in. Around the tightening infield section the kart was moving around all over the show and swinging from understeer to oversteer unpredictably. It made the stint a challenge!



It took a while for me to adjust my driving style to suit the characteristics of the kart, something that I've always struggled with. In the right kart I know I'm quick, but if it's not quite right I'm not so good. Think of me as Jenson Button, but with less facial hair. During the early phases of the stint both Jack and Si had sped past and gone away from me at a depressing pace. Things were about to happen that made my last hour at Le Mans a bit more interesting.

A crazy ten minute period was kicked off by furiously waved yellow flags at the end of the main straight. I was drafting up past a couple of slower karts when I clocked the flags, and backed off with my hand in the air as I slewed into the dog leg right hander. As the three of us came through the corner I spotted a marshal stood on the track, plumb in the centre of the racing line, waving his yellow flag enthusiastically and another marshal dragging a kart on a trolley about twenty feet further up the track on the edge of the rumble strip. The two karts in front of me that were on the inside line went to the right of the first marshal while I had no option to go to the left of him. This put me on a direct collision course with a second marshal with the kart elevated at roughly the same height as my head. It was a clenched buttock moment

as trying to alter your trajectory on those rumble strips is next to impossible but I just managed to avoid what was now a petrified looking marshal.

Barely had I stopped thinking about the what-ifs of that moment then I saw the depressing sight of Jack standing by the stricken Lightning kart on the infield. I



couldn't help but notice the missing wheel which all in all is a bit of a bummer. It had been a sudden failure that Jack hadn't been expecting and it brought the pit crew to life who I imagine were just counting the minutes down to the end of the race. The raced around the track with a trolley and diced with the karts buzzing past as they made there way to the

infield to recover the kart back to the pits. A conservative estimate would put the lost time at about 15 laps, elevating Thunder back to 5<sup>th</sup>.

The last half hour or so was about me pounding around the track as fast yet as safe as I could. I was very keen to avoid the vicious kerbs on the edge of the tarmac for fear of suffering the same fate as Jack. The kart had begun coming back to me a little towards the end and I was back in the sub 60 second laps, but still way off of my earlier pace. Si and the now mobile again Jack came up to pass me and I let them both through without hesitation and tucked in behind to follow for as long as I could but they soon edged away.



The last five minutes flew past and as the clock ticked past midday the chequered flag fell and the 24 hours of Le Mans were over. After the warm down lap there were two parade laps with all the karts flying aloft various flags as we went round. I tell you, it's not easy holding a flag with one hand and driving a kart with the other when you're totally drained of energy.

I was able to shake Si by the hand on the warm down lap to congratulate him and Vitesse on taking the race victory yet again. Thunder had finished 5<sup>th</sup>, one place lower than last year, and Lightning 6<sup>th</sup>. I should feel a little disappointed by the result as we had been running so well midway through the race but I take great positives from my own drives and will remember fondly that second stint.

The karts were returned to the possession of Teeside Karting and we gradually filtered back to the hotel for a shower and afternoon rest. Grant, however, was

unable to drive his Navarro back as he'd managed to lose his keys at some point over the weekend. The garage had been searched, the pit lane had been search, the car park had been searched and even a track walk had failed to find them. A sheepish call back to Portsmouth would see his mum jumping on a ferry and driving down to Le Mans the following morning with his spare set. I hope he got her a good Mother's Day present!

I was tired as I caught about four hours of sleep in the afternoon, but not excessively so. Last year I had done four stints which had about killed me, but this time the three stints were tolerable. Slowly as the evening began drivers began to emerge from their rooms and we all met for a late evening meal at our favourite dodgy restaurant around the corner. It was a riotous evening and one that I'm sure everyone enjoyed as the banter reached a peak with everyone letting off steam one final time.

It was an early night straight after the meal for most of us, just time enough to pack up our kit bags ready for the morning. Unlike previous nights at the hotel when I'd struggled to get to sleep there were no such problems tonight.

### **06/07/09 – Monday**

Our last day in France and it started early. I was up at just before 8am and had a very refreshing cold shower to wake me up. A large group of us went back to the supermarket for one final time to enjoy the patisseries and exhibit our breathtaking ignorance at the French language. No sooner had we checked out of the hotel and Grant had taken delivery of his spare car keys courtesy of Mum Couriers Ltd we were on our way north and heading for Le Harvre.

The convoy stopped as last year in Honfleur for a spot of lunch before finishing off the last few miles of the journey and hopping straight onto the ferry headed for Portsmouth. I suppose I better say that during the crossing Justin did beat me at Ferrari 355, but as everyone observing will testify it was a gentlemanly defeat as the door was left wide open into the Suzuka hairpin as the clock counted to zero for a late lunge, but that would have been wrong to take him out like that.

Our crossing was a little rough and the clan were subdued through fatigue, many of us lying as flat as possible in the chairs with our eyes closed trying to rest as much as possible. The strong winds delayed our arrival by nearly an hour, which wasn't going down well with all the drivers desperate for their beds. The fond farewells were passed and we were soon heading out into the darkened gloom of the English night and off in our respective directions. It was after 11pm when Justin steered us into Woking, and less than five minutes later Scooby was firing me off in the direction of Derby.

It had been a very tiring day and I arrived on my doorstep at 1:50am in the morning and was in bed by half two. A brief sleep followed and I was slumped at my desk at work by 8:45am.

Once more the whole Le Mans experience had been fantastic and enjoyed it all. As this report hopefully illustrates it's not just the racing that makes the trip for me but the wonderful atmosphere that lasts from start to finish. Buckmore has a lot of great drivers and just as many great personalities. Only another 51 weeks before it all starts again and hopefully I'll have an invite back to see if I can make it third time lucky.

Great racing with you all guys. See you all on Sunday for round four of the Elites. No rest for the wicked!



**Buckmore Thunder & Buckmore Lightning – From back left clockwise: John Mahoney, Dave Hearne, Justin Dobson, Miguel Morland, Stuart Jones, Jack Harding, Craig Laws, Gerrard Hubbert, Grant Wright, Graham Gillham.**