

TOUGH MONKEYS

Buckmore Park Team of Steel Summer Round 7: 06/09/08

There are many races that I've been involved in that have been wet, some even with a liberal sprinkling of snow to keep me on my toes. However, round 7 of the Team of Steel championship will be remembered for the monsoon that unleashed the fury on the nineteen teams taking part, producing one hell of an eventful race.

The drive down to Buckmore was shrouded in a filthy rain cloud, which cleared up completely as I neared the circuit, bathed as it was in blue sky and sunshine. I made good on a promise to let my arch rival Jack Harding have a drive in my Scooby, mainly because I trust him more than almost anyone else not to go crazy and leave it spinning on its roof down in the owner driver paddock. Having returned to the clubhouse myself, Jack and Steve Brown stood outside on the steps assessing the sky and wondering where the promised rain was before heading off to get changed satisfied that we might get a dry race.

Oh how wrong could we be? Mere minutes later when we came out of the changing rooms the sky was as black as the ace of spades and depositing great wads of the wet stuff down upon the track. Now, I'm still in the undecided category as to whether I like racing in the wet. Let me clarify that statement; I enjoy racing in the wet as it is incredible fun, but I don't consider myself a wet weather expert. I'm very good, just not the finished article. Still, it normally evens things out and the heavyweight wet weather specialists were rubbing their hands with glee.

There's been a lot of talk about the unevenness of the karts in the fleet of late, and there's a growing knowledge of which karts are good and which should be avoided. It was therefore a little disappointing that I drew a kart that I was informed had been slow on its previous outing. Just as the weather can even drivers up, however, it's often the case that the karts are evened up too, so I decided I'd give the kart a good thrash and see how I felt with it.

The conditions as we streamed out onto the track were tricky to say the least. There was quite a bit of standing water and it took a few laps to reacquaint myself with the track in such conditions. The last time I'd raced in the wet was at Le Mans, and on that occasion I was properly motoring around, picking off faster drivers with consummate ease. I didn't feel particularly quick, but kept circling as I was overtaking karts all the time and not losing any places (always a good sign!). As the clock counted down I made the decision to stick with the kart I'd been given and get on with it. I was still very surprised and indeed delighted to find that I'd managed to qualify 3rd on the grid, sitting alongside my Team GP stable mates.

Tonight I was piloting GP07 on my own, while Barry was in GP86. He was joined by a stand in for the evening in the shape of Lee Belbin, deputising for the vacationing Miguel. Directly ahead of me in pole position sat Steve and Jack, heading the championship and looking to put the title finally out of Team GP's grasp. Alongside them sat Gee Force, wet weather specialists and owners of the worst luck in kart selection all season. All three members of Gee Force were members of the great Le Mans team I was part of so it was nice to see them back up at the sharp end of the grid for a change.

Action packed the start with immediate effect, and controversy was soon knocking on the door. If by door I mean the kart I was sitting in as I turned in to the first corner. If by knocking

on it I mean a massive broadside impact. And by controversy I mean a young team that will remain nameless that has not exactly endeared itself to the regulars over the last few rounds. I still have no idea how they came to be piling into the side of me, given that I was in 3rd place and they had started outside of the top ten, but the speed they carried into the first corner up the inside on a wet track was frankly stupid and was always going to result in contact.

It took quite some time to recover my composure, especially since being sat behind the same driver heading into HP2 for the first time he blatantly rammed into Adrian Matthews, sending him spinning off of the track in a flurry of gesticulations and I imagine colourful language. I was astounded with what I'd bore witness to from my grandstand seat, and was dumbfounded when no contact warning was handed out for either incident. This was further ridiculed when on lap 5 they repeated the trick, taking GP86 out at HP2. It came as scant consolation that this contact had damaged their own kart requiring a pit and a change to another kart. I really don't like to speak ill of other drivers, and all previous incidents levelled against this team have only been relayed to me from other witnesses, but tonight I witnessed three counts of shocking driving within 5 laps of the start. As a member of another team later commented, they've come from the sprint league and try to win the race on the first lap, a tactic not popular in a 2 hour endurance race.

Anyway, it's not my place to moan about the standard of other people's driving, and it's only distracting me from what was to be a white knuckle ride of a race.

The rain was off and on for the first hour of the race and the track never had opportunity to dry out. After steadying the ship that was left rocking on the first lap I was running 5th for some time, before creeping up to as high as 3rd through the incidents I've previously mentioned. At around about the 50 minute mark I dived into the pits for my fuel stop, something that had been playing on my mind all race. Being a one man team I have no spotter in the pit to tell me when the fuel bay was clear, as this can be a hugely expensive mistake if you head down the fuel lane with someone already there. In the two previous races I've been able to time it right by keeping an eye on the pits as I circled the first half of the lap, then keeping an eye on all the karts in front of me in the second half of the lap while the pits are out of sight. There's perhaps only a small amount of time where you can't see either the pits themselves or anyone slowing down to enter them, however with the rain steadily intensifying and visibility reducing I simply couldn't see what was going on so took a pure gamble and headed for pit lane.

It was relieving to find the bay clear and I was soon back out with the minimum of delay. I came back in on the next lap to do my compulsory run-around stop which left me just under an hour and ten minutes left to see if I could make any in roads into the leaders.

Sadly, it wasn't to be. As the conditions worsened my kart became more and more lethargic and I was losing ground quickly, and with it positions. At the start of the race the conditions had masked the poor performance that I'd been warned about with this kart, but as the corner speeds became slower because of the weather I found that the kart hadn't enough low down grunt to provoke oversteer in the corners. I'll explain this as best I can for those wondering what I'm talking about. Even in dry conditions I prefer a kart to be twitchy at the back end with the grip at the front. I don't like understeering vehicles at all; I much prefer them to be dancing around at the back as they suit my driving style better. I'm not suggesting I want powerslides around every corner as that isn't the quickest way, but I do like a lively kart.

In the wet, this is even more critical. Racing in the wet on slick tyres is a tricky hobby at the best of times, and the only method of getting around a corner is to turn in and give the kart enough welly to bring the back end around, otherwise you'll just get hideous understeer. The trick is giving it suitable throttle to bring the tail around while not ending up spinning into the tyre wall. And it was this that I was unable to do in this kart. I'd stand on the throttle for all I was worth and I'd just understeer on to the outside of the track, haemorrhaging time. I was getting increasingly frustrated and any chance of a decent finish was going the same way as the prospect of winning the championship at this rate, so with half an hour left on the clock I disappeared into the pit lane, returning a minute later with a new kart.

The first thing I noticed with the new kart was that it had a great deal more low down grunt, and as I drifted effortlessly around turn one I was wondering why I hadn't changed sooner. The second thing I noticed was that the brake pedal went to the floor with little or no effect to the momentum of the kart. Frankly, I was past caring, and armed with the knowledge that braking was an option that was to be denied to me I was able to drive around the problem. I'd actually gone from one extreme to another as where the other one had to turn on the brakes as it had no torque to spin the back end, this one had to be turned on the throttle. And that's much more in keeping with my driving style.....and boy was I enjoying it again.

By now the light had completely gone and Buckmore was basking in the yellowy glow of the floodlights. This isn't normally an issue, but the track was now directly in the path of the monsoon that I mentioned at the head of this report. It was a storm on an epic, almost biblical proportion. The puddles across the track grew into streams, and then into kart swallowing lakes. This was compounded by not actually being able to see to avoid them. The rain was bouncing off of the track and hanging in the air like a mist and objects mere feet away were disappearing into the gloom. I'm not sure I can accurately convey to you just how bad the conditions were, merely to ask to you imagine driving at 60mph down a country road in the pouring rain at night, with no headlights or windscreen wipers and headlights constantly being shone in your eyes. Now further imagine that with the knowledge that there are 18 other people around you, some spinning in front of you with you completely oblivious to their presence.

It may have been a dangerous journey into the unknown, but I thrive on extreme weather. When it snows and they tell you on the news not to attempt a journey unless it's critically important, they're referring to me. I'm the one in the pictures in the newspaper standing in driving rain up to my ankles as people run for cover. I love it, and I was loving racing in it. The cries of anguish that came from behind my visor in the first three quarters of the race were now replaced with hoots of delight as I slid around Conways and re-passed everyone that had benefitted from my unscheduled stop.

The race clock counted down, not that I could actually see it, despite passing by no more than 6ft away from it. Frantically waved yellow flags were spotted only as I could get no closer to them and several karts littered the side of the track as water in their carburettors caused them to stall. Every lap as I approached the end of the finish straight my own kart spluttered, struggling with the volume of water being thrown in its direction by Lake Buckmore at the exit to the pit lane, but every time I managed to tease it back to life. The conditions were simply farcical, and I was expecting a red flag at any moment, not that anyone would have spotted it.

When the race ended, I kept my foot down as to be totally honest I wasn't sure if I'd actually seen the chequered flag being waved or not. The guy waving it was standing at just the point where the karts entered the lake and my attention was more focused on my wagon pointing in completely the wrong direction as it aquaplaned lap after lap, before snapping back under control before once more being lurched into a controlled slide around Conways. So much fun that it was a shame to have to finish.

It wasn't until about twenty minutes later I learned that I'd only managed to salvage 8th place, virtually ensuring that tonight's winners Jack and Steve would be crowned champions at the next round. Barry and Lee brilliantly recovered from their unscheduled trip into the tyre wall on lap 5 to record a wonderful 2nd place, meaning that the two GP teams are tied for points in 2nd place. We're still not completely secure of 2nd and 3rd in the championship as HWB are only a few points behind, so we'll be watching them closely next round.

Despite the best efforts of one team to knacker up the evening, and the poor finishing position, I'll remember this race fondly for the pure unrivalled entertainment served up in that final 30 minutes. As my overalls continue to dry some two days after the event I'm already looking forward to the next race, and more importantly the next season as I'll go into in more detail elsewhere on this website.