

TOUGH MONKEYS

Buckmore Park Elite Championship Round 1: 08/03/09

I feel I should be played into this report by The Chain by Fleetwood Mac. This is where the season starts, right here. A winter of doing pretty much nothing in a kart for me and here we are in early March ready to kick things off once more. Round One of the inaugural Buckmore Park Elite Championship, the top hire kart championship in the country perhaps, has seen the gathering of a scarily strong grid of drivers lining up to take each other on. Many teams have graduated up from the 2 hour Thunder championship while several more have been put together around the talent that Buckmore has gobbled out over the years. As a five star event only the best need apply so we could be assured of some very close fought racing with drivers who know exactly what they're doing. And there amongst them stood GP Toughmonkeys, the evolution of the former GP teams of the last two years, starring Mig Morland, Barry Cooper and myself once more.

Barry and Mig had had the opportunity of driving at the practice session a few weeks back but for me I was heading into the race very cold and very out of shape. I was forced to sit out the practice with tonsillitis which had me laid up in bed for two weeks eating nothing and generally being pathetic. I knew I was going to struggle to perform today, but it wouldn't stop me trying. Mig went out first in practice to bed the kart, followed by me. After 15 minutes in the kart I was already feeling very fatigued so wasn't looking forward to 50 minutes of that in race conditions. I handed over to Barry who took the responsibility of setting the qualifying laps which was hampered by a large grey cloud emptying itself over the track a mere few minutes into the session. It left the grid a little mixed up and a former team mate of mine Paul Rook took advantage and put his team RB Racing on pole, while we were languishing down in 11th.

Barry was to start the race which began in marginally better conditions than the qualifying session, however the track was still damp. As the rolling up laps concluded and the mass roar of twenty three 2-stroke karts barrelling into Conways for the first time filled the air we waited for the karts to come into view. Barry survived the usual early mayhem and had clambered up the order to ninth when on the eleventh lap he headed into the pits for an early but scheduled fuel stop and driver change. I headed out onto the damp track and took a few installation laps to get used to the conditions. The stop had dropped us to 15th and it would be a little while before I was up to speed as these karts are a considerable handful in the wet on slick tyres. I always felt I was pretty good in the wet, but not stellar. I was about to have that theory severely tested as about ten minutes into my stint a monsoon hit Buckmore.

To my considerable surprise the karts directly in front of me that had been keeping a steady gap ahead of me suddenly were coming towards me very quickly. The conditions had descended into atrocious yet I was loving how the kart behaved on a waterlogged circuit. There was so much standing water that too much throttle on the straights would see the kart twitching and attempting to spear me off of the track. It was through being very smooth and very sensitive on the throttle and brakes while being sharp and reactionary on the steering input that enabled to me to take advantage of the relatively tentative pace of others, and those who were sliding off of the track in a wet mess. Throw in other people's pit stops and I was delighted to see that at the time of pitting we were actually leading the race. With two pit stops to most teams one Barry headed out for his remaining sting in second place, although quickly re-took the lead when the head kart also pitted for a second time. At the half way stage of the race, things were looking very good.

In football, however, they call it a game of two halves and karting was to prove the same as our race was about to begin to unravel in front of us. I didn't see what happened but Barry had a spin out on track which required the pusher-kart to get going again. He recovered to drop only to 2nd place, but the spill had cost approximately 25 seconds. The remainder of his stint was a sterling run however as he banged in consistently good laps to actually retake the lead briefly as the pit window opened again, and handed over to Mig in a strong 2nd place. Disaster was about to happen though as the kart refused to fire after the pit stop and we were stranded for what seemed like an eternity until the pusher kart got Mig on his way again. We were still looking strong for a podium position but by his own admission Mig was to have a mare of a stint, uncharacteristically spinning three times although he did set our fastest lap of the day as the conditions improved towards the end of the race. Disappointingly we were to come home in 8th, however given the calibre of the other teams I felt enthused by our performance given that we led the race on merit for quite some time. On a personal level I was delighted with my wet weather driving but know that I must build up my fitness before the next round as I would have been punished over 50 minutes of dry track racing if it hadn't rained today. I'm really looking forward to next month when I'm hoping TC will join Barry's lovely girlfriend Bianca and Mig's equally lovely father on the pit wall to throw further encouragement at the Monkeys.