

TOUGH MONKEYS

Buckmore Park Winter Team of Steel Round 3: 12/01/08

2007 has packed up it's bags and left home and now 2008 is in the 'hood. And while most people in the rose tinted world of Hollywood are roasting chestnuts on an open fire those of us who get our kicks from higher octane activities were taking to the race track for the first occasion this year. Tonight was the third of the four Team of Steel rounds with my GP86 team leading the championship at the halfway point but by too few points to call comfortable.

I had been keeping my fingers crossed all week for a dry track, but to secure that at this time of the year would have been fortunate. I have precious little wet weather experience, it being a year since my last splash about, so while I enjoy the art of going sideways and yelling "POWER" in a Jeremy Clarkson-esque frenzy I'm the first to admit I'm not the fastest out there. I just don't know the correct wet lines intimately enough to be able to keep pace with the fastest wet weather boys, and this particular series have several of the clubs top damp specialists....most of them in the team that are our main rivals for the title.

The day had been gloriously sunny and I was beginning to feel confident that I might have got my wish, but as the race start approached the track was beginning to glisten with the evening moisture closing in. Team GP had its customary shuffle around of drivers so for this round I would be paired with Mig Morland in the Thunders while Ian Charles went in the other direction to the Pro class to partner Barry Cooper. Both teams are pushing for championship honours which was the whole point of Barry and myself being drafted in, in a bid to claim both Pro and Thunder titles.

There were a number of novices racing tonight, resplendent in the Buckmore reds, but the main players were also present and all were delighted at the gradually moistening conditions. Main rivals Gee Force and John (Grant Wright, Gerrard Hubbert and John Mahoney, all of whom I'll be teaming up with later in the year at Le Mans), Corner Cutters (The Family Rook) and ACM (Adrian and Carl Matthews) would be the guys I were most concerned about as we went out onto the track for the first period of qualifying. I went out first for GP86, right behind Grant and Carl as we headed to Conways for the first time. The greasiness caught us all by surprise and Carl took an early spin and I tried to follow Grant. The difference in wet driving talent was evident as over the next couple of laps Grant raced away from me as I struggled desperately to learn the conditions. Although it wasn't raining, the wet lines were definitely the way to go tonight. Conways was to be taken sliding around the outside, as was HP2. HP1 was a

little wider than usual while the Esses were particularly tricky on turn in. Oddly however, Symes, Pullmans and Paddock were almost as quick as in the dry, and provided plenty of kerb was taken at Pullmans then immense speed could be the reward of immense bravery. Garda was wider than usual, Senna was bearable provided you'd taken a wide enough line into it and watched for the lack of grip on the exit under acceleration, while Café turn was particularly hazardous. I found my best line being to go very wide and deep into it and benefit from faster exit speed.

It took me my entire 10 minutes to start to understand what I was doing, and on my final flying tour had left the team lying third. Miggins went out onto the track and was setting similar times to what I had been doing. On his final lap as the flag dropped he'd set our fastest lap, however it wasn't enough to prevent us dropping to 5th overall for the start of the race. Corner Cutters had taken pole by a tiny gap from Gee Force, while Carl had atoned for his earlier spin by lining up 3rd. GP07 were 2nd in class on the grid, a respectable 8th overall, however things were soon to go wrong for my team mates.

I was back in the kart for the start of the race, and sat waiting for the lights to change feeling more than a little nervous. The first lap was likely to be very messy and potentially a lottery as to what would happen into the first couple of corners. For some reason I found myself singing Frank Sinatra's Come Fly With Me as the final seconds of peace drew to a close. The lights went green and 23 karts slithered towards Conways for the first of 113 laps.

It was a cautious start from what I could see, and excusing the odd nudge it was a clean start. I was passed under braking for HP1, but given that I was still pointing in the right direction after lap one I was more than happy to accept this. Carl had made a scintillating start and led the field and began to pull away steadily as I sat at the rear of a five kart train. I was pleasantly surprised to find that I'd locked onto a consistent and quick line and was keeping pace with the guys in front, and was poised perfectly to steal 5th at HP1 when the kart in front tried to turn in early to take 4th and spun to a halt.

I then was aiming to get past HWB, but almost every time I got a run onto the main straight there would be a yellow flag waving. It took 16 laps before I finally had the opportunity to make a move stick and into 4th I went. With some clear air to 3rd I was able to put some good lap times in and soon reeled in 3rd place, Corner Cutters, and took advantage of a piece of opportunistic driving through backmarkers. We came upon two slower karts at Paddock, and while they were busy with their race and slowing each other up I was able to take all three karts on the run up to Garda and secured 3rd place. By now I was some distance behind Gee Force in 2nd, but began to close as my lap times tumbled in clear air and indeed would go on to set the fastest lap of the night.

As the hour mark passed I began to look out for the fuel board which would signal the end of my stint. It was waved to me at something like 65 minutes, but it would be a few more laps before the fuel bay was clear enough for me to come in. I handed over to Mig with a few words of advice for the track conditions and he left the pit lane still in third place.

I could now only watch and give pit board signals to Mig, who only a few laps later came in for the mandatory second driver change stop, or “Runaround” as it is for the two man teams. Once he’d settled into his rhythm, Mig was devastatingly quick. He began reeling in ACM who had now dropped into 2nd following both of their pit stops, taking chunks of up to 3 seconds a lap off of them at times. Gee Force led the race but still had one stop to do, and Gerrard, Carl and myself strained to work out that this was going to be exceptionally close.

Miggins had now closed right in on Adrian, and on the very lap he passed for second Gee Force made their final stop. Mig now led the race, but the three of them were nose to tail and I could barely watch. Mig briefly dropped to 2nd behind Grant while a backmarker got confused following a yellow flag period, but was soon back in the lead.

It was then that the rain began to fall. Only slightly, but significantly enough for the track to change yet again. I feared that this would favour Grant, however Mig was to show why he should also be regarded as one of the finer wet weather drivers and began to move away. At one point he led by over 9 seconds as the race entered its final stages. Paul Rook had now moved Corner Cutters into 3rd and was beginning to give rise to some nervous expressions in the Gee Force camp, who still had the win in their sights. Mig had a small excursion with about five or six minutes to go which slashed the lead down to a fraction over 3 seconds and I was now pacing up and down the paddock counting down the seconds till the chequered flag fell.

Over the last couple of laps Mig was able to steady the ship and indeed pull the gap back out to around 7 seconds, and he took a jubilant race win. Returning to the pits he came running into the paddock and we both hugged and jumped around like a pair of nutters. It had been an awesome final stint from Mig and while I had proven my worth in the 2nd round this time it was all Miggins!

In the Pro class our team had suffered a nightmare start when they suffered three kart failures. After 25 laps they were running in a lowly 20th position overall, but Barry and Ian were to have a phoenix like rise up the rankings from then on as they began to march through Thunders and Pros alike, amazingly securing the final podium place despite all their problems. Ian and Barry were almost as elated as Mig and I were, Barry quoted as saying that he’s never been so happy to receive a third place trophy.

Despite the tricky conditions, and with a few indiscretions for a couple of novice teams I’m willing to overlook, the driving tonight was exceptionally clean. The top five teams were all on the same lap and the racing had at times been very close but never dirty. The circus rolls onto the final round in February and if my maths are correct GP86 are looking very good for the title. Gee Force can draw level with pole, fastest lap and a race win due to the count-back rule, but anything less than that and I think we have the title. I now have done my time in the Thunders, and return next month to partner Ian in the Pros stepping straight into a very tense fight to the championship in that class. GP07 currently lead the standing by just one point from Woodfordes, winners of tonight’s event. It’s going to be a great finish to a great championship.