

TOUGH MONKEYS

Buckmore Park Thunder 60 Round 6: 12/08/07

I said after last month's race that it was going to be a struggle to get back into the top five in the championship, but that was the desired outcome of tonight's race. I still set myself the target of a top ten finish at every race at Buckmore, but really to stand any chance of getting back into the thick of things I needed to aim much higher.

For the 6th round Buckmore was bathed in sunshine once more and, despite a downpour a few hours before the race, the track was dry. Almost the entire series has been run in the dry, amazing given the weather Britain has experienced this year. Only the first round, way back in March, saw any rain. I seem to recall I was standing on the balcony of the club house at the time though as my kart had packed up and headed back to the pits for an Ovaltine and an early night. The summer months had brought with it a few casualties of holidays and the number of recognisable suits were fewer than usual, however, with the exception of a couple of the leading heavies, all the main players were present. Joining my dad in the clubhouse to offer their vocal and photographic support were my new cheerleaders, Dominic and Chris. Accompanied by what your average Jessops ram-raider would consider a good haul they were to be later found littering the outside of the track waiting for the moment I'd lose control of the kart and head spectacularly towards the M2. Thankfully, although disappointingly for them, that was not going to happen this evening. Their appreciated efforts will soon be finding their way onto the gallery area of the website, so do check out their handiwork.

Out on track, the heavies led the way into the qualifying sessions. The lesser-bellied amongst us remained in the café out of the heat for as long as we could before the call came to get in our karts. Picking up my race number for the night I knew this was going to be a good race. Seeing 69 plastered over the kart for the first time at Buckmore, finally matching the number of the very kart that adorns the Tough Monkeys logo, was a good sign. Plus for the first time since getting it printed I was actually wearing the logo on my race-shirt, so I was determined to do the job right. Incidentally, for those who wonder about my choice of number on the logo it actually originates from a scene in Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure, a film I watched long before I knew what the relevance of the number was. The fact that it refers to a lewd but gratifying sexual practice has absolutely nothing to do with it at all. No sir.

Moving quickly on, the slim-fast regulated amongst us took to the track for our qualifying session. I'd noticed as I sat in the pits that 69 was sporting a new pair of front tyres, something I've never experienced at Buckmore, and ruddy hell does it make a difference. The kart was quickly up to speed and I set about picking off the karts in front, and doing so quickly. The kart was an utter delight to drive with immense front end grip giving wonderful direction change and offering unparalleled braking. The rear tyres weren't so new, but this gave the kart a balance that suited my driving to a tee. I like a kart to be sharp at the front and a little looser at the back, offering a controllable slide when things get a little hairy. The top end speed was maybe a little down, but the handling more than made up for it.

It was then surprising that Paul Cox slipped past me at Garda and began marching towards the horizon. Okay, so I'm not the quickest, but this kart still feels good. I'm not about to change a kart that was giving me so much confidence. Shortly before the end of the session however, Paul slowed to a stop at HP1 with a dying kart. He'd start the race with a different kart, however he'd done enough to put himself on the front row alongside resident pole dweller Si Rudd. With the best seat in the house to watch these two head to the first corner would be little me, very happy

with my joint best ever grid slot. Alongside me was Hugo Bush, a point ahead of me in the championship, while Steve Brown and Sam Hood who are also ahead of me were in 6th and 8th respectively. The man missing from the roll call was Andrew Mollinson, who was undeservedly astride a kart which appeared to be powered by a Braun hairdryer. He would start in 24th position, while series returnee Adam Michaelis seemed to be suffering from the effects of his holiday in Kenya and was further back in 28th. In fairness to Adam, he'd tried out more or less the entire Buckmore fleet and still couldn't find a fast enough kart.

So, the lights went green and the noise rose as 32 Thunders moved south across Kent towards Conways. Hugo got a better run off the line and squeezed me as we approached the corner, and seeing a tyre wall getting rapidly close to me I backed off and let him take third. Si had by this time won the race, galloping away towards HP1 and never to be seen again. I got through the two hairpins cleanly, and was sat tight on the back of Hugo for a few moments before he made a move on Paul. Coxy had obviously changed to a slower kart, and was soon holding me up. Steve Brown came alongside at one point as I struggled to get past Paul, but I was able to hold position long enough to set up a move for third, done so without much fight from a visibly slower kart. Hugo was by now a couple of seconds up the road, and Si was out of sight. I was able to get into a steady rhythm once I had the clear track in front of me, and stabilised the gap to Hugo for several laps and as we began to reach the first round of backmarkers I was actually closing a little.

In fact, I closed a lot as Hugo struggle to get passed a kart, but sadly I would be held up even more so. Passing into HP1, I was forced wide into HP2 by a late lunge from the backmarker who seemed none too keen on being passed. The biggest challenge when lapping quickly is encountering backmarkers who either think that you're racing them for position, or perhaps even worse want to prove something by coming back at you. The comfortable lead I'd built over Paul and Steve suddenly disappeared, and by the time I was clear of the slower kart I had totally lost sight of Hugo. Paul and Steve would suffer a similar troublesome time with the backmarker, and this at least gave me an opportunity to put daylight between us.

And really, that was pretty much the end of the action for me. I still had 50 odd minutes to go, lapping quicker than all the karts behind me but unable to do anything about Si and Hugo. It was a lonely race to be honest, and was all about me keeping my concentration level up. I had a few more altercations with backmarkers who refuse to yield, but other than that not much else happened. Si lapped everyone up to fourth and was closing in on the back of my kart as the race drew to an end, but he'd made the decision not to attempt to overtake me as he was so far clear. He crossed the line to take the victory and with it the 2007 Thunder 60 championship, even with two races still to run. Hugo was 35 seconds behind him, and I took third a further 15 seconds back.

I was elated to be back right at the sharp end again, and was sad to leave kart 69 behind. The championship may have been clinched, but the matter of the minor places behind has been heated up. Steve and Andrew who were clear in 2nd and 3rd have been pegged back over the last couple of races by Hugo, Sam and myself. There's still a reasonable gap, but with two rounds to go it's anybody's guess in what order the top six will finish. My desire would be to finish in the top five, and my podium tonight has sneaked me back in there, but there's some immense talent who won't be so keen to see that happen. Roll on September.