

TOUGH MONKEYS

Milbank Challenge 2007: 14/03/07

It's no Buckmore Park race, it's not against the calibre of drivers I normally find myself doing my best to keep up with in that little corner of England, but for some reason I always look forward to this race with great anticipation. The annual Milbank Challenge brings together several companies in the precast concrete industry for a night of prattling about at Kartsport in Caxton near Cambridge. We were returning to the circuit after last year's jaunt around the outdoor track at Rye House, one of Britain's leading venues. Having been invited to select the teams for this year's event, I was a little disappointed when I discovered we wouldn't be back at Rye House given the amount of outdoor circuit practice I've been doing since the last event.

However, you can only drive the track put in front of you, so having put in a practice session at F1 Karting earlier in the month to acclimatise once more to indoor racing I was pumped up and ready for this.

My employer Hanson had chosen to enter two teams as usual, and we'd left one of those race seats open for the managers/directors to play with while we put forward our best available team for the number one kart in a bid to win back the trophy we last had our hands on three years ago. I chose from past experience my colleagues Gary Bell and Neil Baxter to join me in Hanson A, while Tim Light was joined by Jon Morrish and previous team captain Trevor Poole in the second kart. I've raced with Gary and Neil before and they have proved to be quick, reliable and level headed behind the wheel so I felt they would provide the best opportunity for pushing for the top step of the podium.

The event was a two hour endurance race so it was pretty easy to decide that the best strategy for the evening would be for each driver to do two stints each, changing over every twenty minutes. Indoor racing is incredibly demanding on the body, and some teams would choose to drive shorter stints but time lost in the pits compromises overall performance so we just threw everything we had at the strategy.

After practice was complete, I was given the nod to start the race and through a lucky deal we were given the pole position on the grid. This was very beneficial on a track as tight as this, but I must admit I prefer to be attacking than defending the lead. The green light took an age to light, but I got away cleanly and rounded the tight hairpin first corner ahead. There was immediately an incident that I'm told involved Tim in our B team; however all I knew was that we were under yellow flag conditions for several laps before the racing got going ahead.

When I got going I wasn't entirely happy with both the performance of the kart or my own driving. The kart felt a little sloppy and in turn I was perhaps over driving in a bid to pull away. I was still surprised however that I was passed under braking into the hairpin after only a few laps and almost in shock immediately dropped to third. That was a kick up the backside that I seriously needed and quickly regained second. I was only there a few laps before I got caught behind a back marker and was mugged once more and dropped to third. I traded places with this guy for several laps before finally putting some space between us and setting off after the leader who had by now gone several seconds ahead.

I began to reel him in but before I got too close to him he was pulled into the pit for a driver change. I stayed out on track for a little while longer until I was pulled in by my team mates and returned to change over with Gary.

As Gary hit the track I returned to the paddock review the stint on the monitor. We were leading despite the change over, and we currently had a fastest lap at 20.12 seconds. While I was out on track, the Milbank A team had suffered a number of kart issues and were onto their third kart I was told, but they had been given the laps they had missed back and were suddenly beginning to catch up to the back of Gary.

Gary was lapping in the mid to late 20's, and importantly was keeping out of trouble. The Milbank kart did eventually get passed but Gary kept his head and brought the kart back in on the 40 minute mark inside 17 seconds of the lead. Neil took the third stint and was putting in some consistently good lap times for the duration of his drive. By now, differing strategies amongst the competing teams was shuffling the pack up considerably and backmarkers were a constant thorn in the side. The performance difference of the karts aren't great enough to put an easy move on anybody, so every overtaking move brought with it the danger of a black flag. Neil completed the hour cleanly and we when Gary took over we were in the lead after the Milbank team had picked up a black flag for a pit lane infringement.

The kart belonging to Team H had been looking threatening during both Neil and Gary's second stint, with the guy driving proving he was very fast, but also too aggressive. We'd been watching how much roughing he'd been doing and the marshals were obviously paying attention too and he'd picked up two black flags in the space of a few laps and any threat they might have been disappeared.

Gary's second stint was going well, but he did lose the lead midway through and was given a thoroughly questionable black flag for hitting a tyre protecting the inside of the hairpin. I say this was questionable as most people including myself had nudged it at some point and it was slowly making its way onto the racing line. Nevertheless, Gary served the penalty and finished his racing with about 43 minutes to go with Neil taking up the chase of Milbank who were now just under two laps ahead.

Watching the racing unfold, myself and Gary had come to the conclusion that we were racing only for second as we were nearly two laps down with the race approaching its closing stages. We were six laps up on the next team so we felt that it was simple going to be the best bet to drive safe and clean and pick up the silver. Naturally, by doing this we had rolled up a towel and flicked the genitals of fate who immediately retaliated by attempting to destroy our race.

While tackling the back markers, Neil followed a kart past our own B Team driven by Jon and was quite surprised to be T-boned and sent sliding into the barriers with a broken steering mechanism. Gary and I stood open mouthed in disbelief as the race continued and Milbank disappeared further into the distance.

Neil was pointed in the direction of the pits and we were given a spare kart to finish the race in. Against the odds, we were dealt a lucky hand with this situation. Just as Milbank had at the start of the race, we were given back the laps we had missed but Neil benefited with a better track position. When the call came for him to come in with 23 minutes to go we were actually on the same lap as the leader, Neil having driven superbly to bring us to within 8 seconds of Milbank. I took to the track to finish the race off and see if I could continue Neil's good work. The new kart felt so much better than the first one I'd been in earlier, despite having an awkward driving position. The seat was much further forward which resulted in a more balanced kart, and was immediately rewarding me with some fast times. We'd lost two laps to Milbank while we pitted, but I caught and passed them to reduce the deficit to one lap and was really pushing hard when I saw them disappear into the pit. Sadly, I suffered my first spin in a kart for many races while trying to pass a back marker into the hairpin and beached myself against the tyre that Gary had fallen foul of.

I sat motionless quietly fuming to myself while the marshal slowly wandered over to move the tyre. I noticed while sitting facing the tyre that the engine was still under part throttle despite my foot being off of the pedal. I was reasonably concerned about this as this would put stress on both the brake and the clutch and risk a mechanical breakdown. I knew I would have to balance any chase for the lead with conserving the kart. Back on my way I was delighted to see that John Milbank himself was driving the final stint in the lead car. A seasoned racer himself, his bright white Alpinestars overalls helped me to pick him out amongst the Kartsport boiler suits and give me something to aim for.

I caught up behind John very quickly and had passed him to unlap myself before he knew I was there. Going under the pit bridge I saw Gary waving his hands about to indicate I was now on the lead lap and I was sure my lap times would give me a chance to eat into that gap.

I don't know how many laps it took, but I threw in consistently quick laps and was able to pick off the back markers efficiently enough to sail up behind John once more. Gary and Neil were going nuts on the bridge counting down how far I was behind until I was sat on his back bumper.

John knew this time I was behind him and was immediately driving defensively. For lap after lap I would sneak up the inside going in to the hairpin but have to back off as John had the line for the corner. I would spend the remainder of the lap all over him and setting him up for another attempt at the hairpin.

I was just not finding a way past and I knew that time was running out. I remember thinking about Nigel Mansell swarming all over the back of Ayrton Senna at Monaco in 1992, unable to get past on such a tight circuit. I'm not saying I'm a Mansell, but I wasn't up against a Senna either! I changed tactic and tried to go to the outside into the hairpin in an effort to pressure John into outbraking himself, hoping I could turn in tighter and slip past, but still I wasn't getting any joy.

Finally, I hit a sweet spot going across the start line heading towards the hairpin, sweeping across and carrying enough speed to go right up the inside of John. I knew full well that I would never make the corner if I carried on past, but I'd done enough to unsight John. I stood on the anchors well before I would normally and sliced across the track to the outside. Perhaps leaving it a little late, John locked his brakes and gracefully spun around and I swept around the outside into the lead.

Just like I had been at the start of this stint, John was beached against the tyre and sat helplessly as I sped away. My only fear at this point was that the marshal may have looked across to see John spinning and me right behind him and think I had made contact. To my eternal relief, he had obviously been watching and I was free to race away. By the time John was back moving I was coming up to lap him. Gary was hanging over the bridge telling me there were only a couple of minutes left and was signalling for me to back off.

I did as I was told and backed off immediately. I came up behind a back marker and didn't even try to get past so as not to encourage a disastrous black flag. I did eventually slip by after he made a mistake, which I was relieved by as there was a gathering queue behind me and I wanted to be clear of any lunges.

The chequered flag waved and I crossed the line delighted to have made up for a disappointed first stint with a stirring drive to the flag. Pulling in to the pit lane John was the first to shake me by the hand, followed by an ecstatic bunch of team mates. In the final stint I had also put in a lap of 19.66 which was 0.33 quicker than anyone else had achieved, so I was utterly made up with not only the team result but my individual result.

Charles, our chairman, bought us all a drink in the pub afterwards in celebration and all that was left to do after that was bring the Milbank Challenge trophy back up the motorway to get our names engraved on it once more. It could do with a polish too!