

TOUGH MONKEYS

Buckmore Park Thunder 60 Round 2: 15/04/07

Even with Buckmore's famous ability for producing weather completely at odds to what might be happening just a few hundred yards away there was little chance of this evening's race being staged in anything other than glorious sunshine. The hottest day of the year to date had registered a peak of 27.5° on the long journey down, and the track temperature was sure to be higher.

The names and faces of the Buckmore elite were once again littered around the club house as zero hour (well, 17:45) approached. The only faces that were to be missed from the event as far as I could see were Jack Harding and the younger of the Rudd brothers, Matt. Rudd elder Simon was, however, competing and would certainly start as favourite to add victory to his win from round one.

The briefing was indeed brief as the regulars were booted out early while race director Alan brought the series newcomers up to speed. The lightweights went out onto the track first and I was third kart out and stayed there for the first couple of laps while I brought the tyres and brakes up to correct temperature. It's normal in this time for the superstars to get the confidence to turn the wick up sooner than me and shoot past, but on this occasion it was me that made the early moves. I picked off the two karts in front and scampered off into the distance in search of the quick qualifying time that so often eludes me. Only twice have I started from inside the top ten at Buckmore, with fifth spot being the loftiest I've ever experienced.

Tonight would bring about a change in fortunes though, and with the kart in full swing I was happy and confident I had the kart under me that I didn't need to make a change before the end of qualifying. When the chequered flag brought a close to the session I returned to the pits to see my dad hanging over the paddock wall holding aloft three fingers to show I would be on the second row of the grid should none of the heavies set a quicker time in their qualifying session. Feeling very happy with myself, and after taking lots of pats on the back from other regulars I watched the heavies take to the track. I was delighted ten minutes later to see that the track conditions weren't playing into the heavies' hands and I would indeed be starting from a career high of 3rd on the grid.

As Alan called us back to the grid I said to my dad that finishing any where in the top ten would be fantastic achievement. He just said I should think about holding position and challenging for the podium. I knew this wasn't going to be likely, but I was in the best position to try. Back on track, sitting in the kart I looked around me at the recognisable helmets and race suits of the A-list surrounding me and took a huge bite on the lump in my throat as the race went green and 36 Thunders swept into Conways for the first time.

With the karts sitting in the pit lane for over ten minutes they have a horrid habit of losing all the temperature from the tyres you'd worked so hard to pump into them earlier, so the first lap is always tentative. I was perhaps a little too cautious rounding Conways and two karts appeared either side of me heading into the braking zone for hairpin one (HP1). The kart on the inside dived in and went a little deep and pushed the second kart out wide allowing me to regain my original third on the run up to HP2. I was on the outside around the corner, which is not the optimum line, but I was able to carry enough momentum to pull off the move despite being

pushed on to the grasscrete on the exit. Once back on line I was able to sweep through the Esses and down through the Symes, Pullmans and Paddock complex unchallenged. I was expecting to see a nose cone at some point, or maybe a nudge up the rear but it never came. Instead I was able to sit on the back bumper of the talented Andrew Mollinson.

Andrew was as close to pole sitter Simon Rudd as I was to him and the three of us began to gap the field. Sitting so close to them was fantastic experience for me, watching so closely two very competent drivers. I was amazed I was able to keep pace with them, and again amazed at how clean the racing was. Occasionally Andrew would show a nose cone to Simon, but there was never any hint of contact between and each respected the others presence. As such, despite racing each other, they were lapping exceptionally quick, and in turn so was I as I was in a position to benefit from the tow from Andrew's kart down the straight and my weight disadvantage wasn't hampering me.

We quickly began to reel in the backmarkers and slice through them swiftly. As Simon would pass a kart, they would almost jump out of the way in surprise letting Andrew and myself sneak by also.

This came to an abrupt end when we caught a pack of karts fighting for position. This is the dangerous time for the leaders as the guys about to be lapped assume that kart coming through is trying to take their position away and so defend it vigorously. Simon came close to being a victim of such a manoeuvre at HP1, locking up and briefly pointing in the wrong direction but somehow dragged the kart around the corner. Andrew fought his way passed a couple of karts but was pushed wide coming through Senna and I cut to the inside. For a moment I was into second place, but saw clearly I wasn't on the right line approaching Café Turn and yielded to Andrew to avoid any unpleasantness. The very next lap we both tried to pass a kart at Garda. He went right and I went left, but this time I had the door shut firmly in my face and was escorted to the grass and lost valuable time. A previously lapped kart sneaked back past and it was several more laps before I'd cleared them again.

By now Andrew was several seconds away and I had lost the tow that had kept me tucked behind for the first twenty or so laps of the race. I was left in a no mans land as the battle for fourth was some way back. It's very hard to keep your concentration up when you're driving on your own. Nevertheless I stuck to the task and continued to encounter a succession of backmarkers. As I clawed my way deeper into the field drivers were faster and more difficult to pass. Some I would say were down right dastardly in their efforts to stay ahead. One kart, which I was sure I'd already lapped, was very aware of my presence behind him as he would glance over his shoulder on every straight to see where I was and then swerve to shut the door on me. I quickly grew frustrated at this behaviour and as I didn't know where 4th place was in relation to me I was certainly keen to get passed. I took three or four laps of his antics before I finally pulled off a dummy move into HP1 and nudged my way past.

The last ten minutes were relatively devoid of drama and I was able to bring the kart home an excellent third, albeit some thirty seconds by now behind the Rudd/Mollinson battle. Simon was just strong enough to hold off the charging Andrew, but there was only 0.12 seconds in it after an hour of racing. I was 7.5 seconds ahead of Ollie Varney who led home a close following Paul Cox and Steve Brown Jnr.

Scooping myself out of the kart I steered clear of any Fernando Alonso-esque celebrations, but felt extremely satisfied with my performance. The kart was a fine chariot for the evening and my consistency over the race was better than I have ever achieved in all my events at Buckmore or elsewhere for that matter. My inexperience of lapping karts proved costly in the end, but hopefully I will get the opportunity to run at the front end again and capture more practice at the art.

The post-race debrief and presentation is always a fun place to be, but it's even better when you get your first ever Buckmore trophy and get a photo of your ugly mug stuck on the circuit's website. I was fortunate enough also to have a long chat with Simon, who despite his enormous talent is a very amiable young lad and even an old dog like me can do well to listen to what he has to say.

So, finally I've got my feet on the podium and my hands on a trophy. It may only have been third, but I consider it a greater achievement than any of my race victories at other circuits. My ambition for the season was to get onto the podium at some point, but I didn't count on it being so soon and I certainly wasn't expecting it to come in the Thunder 60, the premier hire-kart championship in the UK. There are twenty or so drivers who race regularly at Buckmore that I hold in such high regard for their talent that to finish where I did is a massive boost for my confidence and I look forward to round 3 in five weeks time with great anticipation.