

TOUGH MONKEYS

Buckmore Park Thunder 60 Round 5: 15/07/07

Let me start this race report first by saying that uniquely I'm sitting in a hotel suite in Sydney at 5am Australian time as I write this. The 5th round of the Thunder 60 fell only a few hours before I was due to fly out here on a business trip, so it's fair to say it's been a manic few days. Focussing on the race, however, Buckmore was to yet again prove the weatherman to be nothing more than a gibbering fool in a dodgy tie as the tidal waves and monsoon conditions covering the M1 gave way to blue skies and brilliant sunshine. With most people expecting a wet race, we were all surprised to find that this would be one of the hottest races for some time, if not all year.

Once more, the clubhouse was full of the usual great and the good of the championship. Paul Cox and Andrew Mollinson returned after missing the last race, but my sidekick Adam was off terrorising the locals somewhere in Africa so he was to be the only notable absentee. I was also able to put a face to the name of Will Thorling, who I've been chatting a lot to recently on the circuit forum. Heading into the round my goal was simply to consolidate my current 4th position in the championship. With my closest rival being Adam I wanted to put in a good result to cover his dropped round, given that I've already written off the first round as one of the two we're allowed to forget about.

Once Alan had wrapped up the briefing he sent us lightweights out first for qualifying. A summer of excess and work related disruption of my gym routine is doing its best to challenge that lightweight status, but I just sucked in my gut and squeezed into kart 74 and headed out onto the sticky tarmac in search of a good grid position. This month's kart felt pretty composed and I quickly was up to competitive speeds. During the course of qualifying I was able to pass all bar one kart that was in front of me, however that one kart I was unable to pass was clearly quicker than me and it scampered away into the distance. It's difficult when you see someone substantially quicker to know if it's the pace of your kart or his, and you consider coming in to change karts. I figured though that since no one had passed me then my wagon must be decent enough, so stuck with it. I was glad that I did, as series front runner Andrew changed twice during the session and still ended up with a kart that was unable to place him at the sharp end of the event. Even Si Rudd changed his kart during qualifying, something rarely seen.

Returning to the clubhouse afterwards to watch the heavies try to catch the times set by their less chunky friends, it was clear that the track conditions weren't going to be kind to them. Only the giant-handed Grant Wright would trouble the top ten, and he put his kart on the grid in a very respectable 8th position. The often luckless Sam Hood locked out the front row with returnee Paul Cox while the second row contained Hugo Bush who started the race right very close to me in the championship. I was delighted to be starting the race from 5th on the grid, alongside Mr Rudd himself. It meant that I was to be starting in front of everyone who was ahead of me in the championship, with Andrew and Steve Brown Jnr in 11th and 14th respectively,

The race began in the usual fashion, what with a green light and karts piling towards the first corner at Conways. With entirely expected style Si was ahead of me before we reached the first corner, and I tucked in behind him for the first few corners as despite the occasional nudges the front runners got off to a clean start.

Si was immediately hounding the guys in front, being slowed in the process allowing me to get my nose ahead on a few occasions before he saw an opening and slipped into 4th. While trying the take 3rd he was dumped onto the geo-block on the outside of the circuit and dropped back to just ahead of me. Quickly he was back into 4th, before an audacious move at the Esses saw him jump two places and take off in pursuit of Sam, who by now was starting to gap the field.

Unable to get ahead immediately of the kart in front of me, I quickly came under pressure from behind myself. A kart appeared beside me containing Grant as I turned into Garda, and I found my path blocked resulting in a relegation to 7th place, before top man Miguel Morland got me a lap later. A little rattled by the sudden place dropping business that was going on, I was quickly another place down into 9th before I felt I had to put my foot down in every sense.

Settling the ship, I stayed where I was for a while, but was in the thick of a several kart battle that raged as 3rd to 10th were all within a few feet of each other. Taking a few knocks from one particular driver without being spotted by a marshal, Miguel took decisive action and returned a punt with interest but was himself spotted by race control and was brought in to serve a 10 second stop-and-go penalty. This split the group a little, and allowed me to take a run at 7th. A few laps of place trading saw me finally secure the position, but not before the group in front had gotten a long way down the road ahead.

By half distance I was feeling pretty secure in 7th, and was beginning to edge back towards the guys in front. Despite the constant flow of lapped traffic, it's fairly easy to distinguish the top runners by their racewear, and I began to zero in on the whites of Grant. It took the best part of the rest of the race to do so, but I dragged myself up right behind him just as he was stuck in a battle with a couple of unyielding backmarkers. He was animatedly trying to get past, but was getting no help from the slower drivers. On two occasions he got past, but was retaken by the next corner. Having dispatched one of them, and with me right behind him, Grant was to spend several more laps behind the final lapped car while trying to find a way through.

I was sitting right behind Grant weighing up the situation. Being a heavyweight, finishing ahead of Grant would serve very little purpose as my total points would be unaffected. Considering the championship points I came to the decision that I would not risk a collision and so stay behind unless an opportunity presented itself. This tactic went straight out of the window when the nose of a kart appeared beside me at Garda trying to get through. It rattled me at first, as I didn't think anyone was behind me. I could see Si elsewhere on track so I was sure it wasn't the leader coming through to lap me, so I thought it was time to get on with things and pass Grant. Heading into HP2, Grant made a move on the slower driver ahead of him, diving to the inside to cover the corner. I'd taken a wide approach to the corner, but ducked inside to follow Grant. While both of us successfully lapped the slower kart, Grant's trajectory pushed him onto the geo-block beside the track, slowing him momentarily. Returning to the tarmac he found my kart right beside him and we went into the Esses together.

With a smile on my face, I emerged from the Esses in front, and concentrated on keeping the kart in check through the Symes, Pullmans, Paddock complex. Feeling Grant breathing down my neck all the way I put in a number of solid laps and held the position. I was starting to breath easily, thinking that now Grant would be holding up the kart that had appeared beside me a little earlier, when the very kart came alongside me once more at Garda. On the outside, I kept the throttle planted and despite only a bit of the kart being on the track was able to hold position through Senna and into Café. This close racing continued for another lap, before heading into the final lap I was out-dragged down the main straight and found myself behind.

Cursing myself, as we crossed the finish line at the end of the lap, I was surprised to see the chequered flag being waved at the kart in front. It suddenly clicked that it was Sam and he was lapping me! I didn't recognise his racewear, and wasn't expecting anyone other than Si to be coming though to win the race.

So, the evening's racing came to a close and I was reasonably happy to have taken 6th position. I felt that 4th or 5th was possible if I hadn't lost so much time in the early stages, but I would leave the event with solid points. Although I gained a small amount on Andrew and Steve, Sam's victory and Hugo's 3rd had elevated them both to a point in front of me in the championship. 6th on the night, and 6th in the championship. It's going to be a struggle over the next three races to get back into the top 5th that I covet, but I'll give it a damn good go.

Okay, well the sun is rising over the Sydney skyscape, so it's time for me to get to work. Round 6 will be on me before I know it, and I expect a great battle ahead.