

TOUGH MONKEYS

Buckmore Park Winter Team of Steel Round 2: 15/12/07

After having to sit out round one because I was watching some crazy Frenchmen and Scandinavians throwing themselves rally tracks in Ireland I was looking forward to finally joining my new team mates for the winter Team of Steel championship. My new sparring partners are Miguel Morland, Barry Cooper and Ian Charles, and they'd already put on a good show in round one so I was keen to show I was a worthwhile addition to the team. In the previous round Barry and Ian had driven the Thunder to 2nd in class under the name GP86, while Miggins had gone one better and finished the two hour race in the lead in the Pro class, team name GP07.

Tonight I would be alongside Ian in the Thunder and I was eager to show why I prefer that machine over the less powerful but easier to drive Pro. Although I had raced in a 6 hour event earlier in the year this would be new territory for me. In that 6 hour race there had been a team of five people looking out for every detail from checking and relaying time gaps to the current driver, to timing the fuel/driver change stops to the best possible advantage. Here, of a four man team, two would be out on track and the other two have to keep an eye on each other. It was to get a bit hectic let me tell you!

I let Ian advise on team tactics as he is after all the guru on this, his multiple championships being worthy qualifications to have a right to tell me what to do. So, as I was told, I took to the track for the first ten minutes of qualification. Ian would take over for the final ten minutes, but I had to go out and assess the performance of the kart and attempt to put a decent time in. And gloriously, that's what I was to do. My fastest lap was the only one to dip under the 50 second barrier that is many people's nemesis, and was almost six tenths quicker than the second placed kart. Ian went out, and while he wouldn't improve on my time he was still comfortably quicker than everyone else. The flag dropped on the session and I was delighted to have captured my first ever pole position at Buckmore. Further down the grid Miggins and Barry were third in class after a few issues during the twenty minutes but were confident of improvement.

The race began and confident of having a fast kart underneath me I was determined to make the most of the situation and get around the first lap cleanly and in the lead. The first lap is always a testing moment as the tyres are cold and mistakes are easy while trying to defend a position. I kept my focus on my lines into the corners and trusted that people behind me wouldn't be tempted to risk contact warnings so early in such a long race. Despite this I was certainly relieved to head across the line after the first tour still in the lead. The tyres quickly came to me as I settled into a rhythm and set about gapping the team behind. I actually set the fastest lap of the entire race on lap five, and continued

to lap close to this time for the next half an hour or so until I began encountering dense traffic as I made my way through the backmarkers. With a field split into two classes it's very easy to trip over slower karts so you have to be sensible and make passes as quickly as possible without getting dragged into a bumper kart contest. I've said earlier that contact warnings build up quickly over two hours and a stop and go pit stop is an expensive penalty to pay. In spite of this hazard, when I look back at my lap times I find that backmarkers cost me very little.

What nearly cost me a lot, however, was the fuel stop. I was looking for the fuel board from my team as I closed in on the hour mark, however where team mate was standing was directly in front of one of the circuit floodlights and I was finding it very difficult to see if he was making any indications to me. It turned out that during my stint I was being shown boards as to how far in the lead I was and I didn't see a single one of them! I think we'll have to discuss that prior to the next race. As I passed my team mate on lap 75 I just caught the signal to pit for fuel at the last possible moment and speared straight into the pits. However, as I'd seen the board so late I entered the pits far, far too fast and at a 45° angle through locked up brakes. I was basically out of control as I came in, and slid straight past the entry to the fuel bay. There was nothing I could do but stop in the standard pit bay and do what is referred to as a "run-around" stop. The rules of the 2-hour event stipulate that there must be two mandatory stops, one of which is a fuel stop. I think it's to lessen the possible advantage of a two man team over a three man team. So, we two man teams have to do basically a dummy driver change which involves getting out of the kart, running around it, getting back in and then buggaring off back out onto the track as fast as possible. I was annoyed with myself as the strategy was potentially flying out of the window, and Ian was waiting in the pit lane wondering what the hell I was doing. It would be two more laps before I finally came in to fuel and hand the kart over to Ian, while I retired to the paddock to find out where that had left us.

As Ian headed out onto the track for the final 55 minutes or so we led the field by nearly 20 seconds and everything was looking pretty rosy. Our Pro team were also leading the way in their class after a great first stint by Miggins. Barry was now flying around, but being hounded by a team called Wombles Allstars. Sadly for GP07, the absence of odd puppets on Wimbledon common was to pinch class victory with only a few minutes left on the clock.

My attention was definitely on Ian though. For reasons still a mystery to even Ian, he received a black flag and was forced into a 10-second stop and go penalty. As he headed back out onto the track he was overtaken and for the first time on the night we weren't in the lead. I was kicking the fence in the paddock, but my pain lasted mere moments as Ian retook the lead on the next lap and set about pulling away. There were still nearly forty laps of racing left and Ian extended the lead up to as much as ten seconds, but over the last ten laps or so this was whittled down to around six seconds. I was really getting anxious by now, fearing that we were going to lose this at the death.

I went down to the pit entrance close to the finish line to check on the clock and was delighted to see the counter hit zero and the chequered flag being prepared to be dropped.

I waited impatiently for Ian to appear and take the win while a marshal came over to prepare the pit lane for the arrival of all the karts in the next minute or two. What he or I wasn't prepared for was what happened next as Ian rounded the café turn and shot into the pits. The marshal dived out of the way of the incoming Honda powered missile, and Ian slowed briefly before spotting the guy bemusedly holding the flag on the finish line and nailing it back out on to the track. He crossed the line a mere four seconds before the team in second place did so also. I stood there wondering what the hell had just happened, and watched as Ian crawled around the pit-in lap, back to the finish line and splutter to halt. In a feat of spectacular timing the kart had died right at the death. One lap earlier and the previous two hours would have been worth nothing.

I met Ian in the pit lane who explained how the kart was beginning to die a few laps from the end and had pitted not realising that it was so close to the end of the race. It couldn't have been much more exciting at the end, but the result will show pole position, fastest race lap and race victory will go to GP86 and with it the lead at the halfway point in the championship. It was an amazing night and I'm already looking forward to working off my Christmas excesses at round three in January.