

TOUGH MONKEYS

Buckmore Park TYRO Sprint: 16/09/07

A few days ago Alan Wood kindly put a link to Toughmonkeys.com onto the Buckmore Park website, with a tag line stating that I was one of the up and coming stars of both sprint and endurance races. I didn't like to mention that I had never driven in a sprint race at Buckmore, however it turned out that Alan was actually having one of his prophetic moments.

Chris Pullman, Alan's equivalent in the owner/driver side of things at the circuit, had appeared on the forum to ask if anyone would be interested in taking part in the second running of the Tyro sprint class which was to be held on the same day as the Thunder 60 I was already scheduled to do. Given that I was going to be at the circuit anyway, and after Chris had sweet talked me into it, I accepted the offer and signed up.

The Tyro class is an experimental new format designed to bring new drivers into the world of owner/driver karting. Run under MSA regulations it forms part of a full O/D race weekend and so gives an opportunity to mix with the professional guys and experience how a full programme operates. Throughout the course of the day there all drivers would get a quick practise run, an 8 lap qualifying session, a 10 lap heat, 12 lap pre-final and 15 lap final. The result of one session would decide the grid for the next; therefore winning the pre-final would land you on pole for the final.

There was one tiny little detail that caused a small problem however, which was that signing on commenced from 7.30am! Given it takes at the very least 2½ hours to get to Buckmore, this represented a challenge. As I was in Stevenage the day before I took the decision to drive down on Saturday evening and camp in the car park. Alan had said to come and look for him as he was likely to be there till late on as there was a 3 hour race followed by a 60th birthday party for Peter who runs the kart shop.

Arriving at Buckers after spending a good hour trying to find a sensibly located McDonalds in Chatham, I sat in the darkness up by Garda slurping on my bucket of Coke as the final minutes of the 3 hour race came to a close. The circuit was as busy as I'd ever seen it given the race going on, people arriving for the party and a packed paddock full of owner/drivers and their expensive motor homes. I dipped my final chicken McNugget and wandered off in the direction of the club house and soon found Alan talking to a group of drivers. A few moments later we were up in the bar having crashed the party. I had intended to have been asleep by 10pm, but it was closing in on midnight when I finally pulled myself away from the party. Many thanks to Alan for entertaining me for the evening, and for not waking me up when he left the circuit sometime after 1am. I was happily wrapped up in my sleeping bag and under my duvet and had a wonderful night's sleep.

You know, I've written all of this and not even gotten close to mentioning the bits where I was actually in a kart. Let's crash on shall we?

7.30am and I'm sitting in the clubhouse with Chris & Jack Harding, Steve Brown Jnr and Snr and Will Thorling signing our lives away. Jack was actually there for the O/D but was there to support his dad. Steve Jnr wouldn't be racing until the later Thunder 60, but again was part of the support team. In total, there were 12 drivers enrolled, only those mentioned above did I know. The winner from the first race was also there, Gavin Parkes, plus several others I didn't know.

We would be out on track first for our practice session, while countless spectators lined the paddock fences to point and stare at the Muppets trying to put on a show. The Tyro regulation state that the circuit must provide the karts and must comply with certain safety regulations. As such, a collection of Thunder karts were made available to us, so at least this I was familiar with.

Heading out onto track for the first session brought an opportunity to bed in to the karts and get a feel for my competition for the day. We only had a few laps, but I knew immediately that Gavin was the class of the field. I'd set my sights on a podium finish for the end result, but it wouldn't be until qualifying that I'd know for sure what the real pace would be like.

Qualifying was a brief but intense affair with Gavin running just in front of me until he slowed suddenly and let me past. I figured he was just trying to find a bit of space to set a good lap time as there was a guy in front of him. I did manage to get in front, and set about putting in some times that I felt were very strong.

As it transpired they were strong, but not quite good enough. I would start heat one from third position, just 0.087 seconds off of pole. Gavin was in second while Will Anderson took the number one slot.

In another change to what I'm used to, we would be getting under way with a rolling start....something I've never done before. This entailed us all crawling around the track in formation until we approached the start line and a green light showed. Provided that we were all together, the leader could go across the line at whatever speed he saw fit. No one could overtake until over the line, and then the race was on.

The first lap was very tense with Gavin trying to get past Will but getting pushed wide at HP1. I went around the outside on HP2 and we ran side by side all the way till Symes when he had to yield and I was through to second. I didn't have time to set my sights on the leader as he appeared to misjudge the temperature of his tyres and slid wide through Symes and onto the geoblock. I was promoted to the lead and with a clear track ahead set about clearing off into the distance. And that's what I did, taking my first race victory at Buckmore some eight and a half second ahead of Gavin.

This meant that I would be heading the rolling pack in the Pre-final, and the result of this race would be far more important than the heat as it would decide the grid for the final. I was determined to put in a strong performance and was confident I could do the job again. We had all swapped karts so I would not be in the same chariot as the last race, and as the race got under way I realised I had a definite understeer problem. The guys behind were chipping away at me, and it took several laps for the kart to come up to temperature and begin to behave itself. As this happened I was able to pull away and build a decent lead, and I was feeling secure that race two was in the bag. Well, they do say that complacency is the mother of all cock ups, don't they?

Unseen behind me, Steve Brown Snr had taken the decision to try to leave the circuit, and indeed enter the flight path for Chatham airport when he somehow managed to get all four wheels off the ground and launch himself at high speed into the barriers at Paddock. Given that, as I later discovered, Steve had gotten bored of round steering wheels and had remoulded it with his ribcage the stewards thought it a sensible idea to red flag the race until a replacement kart was delivered.

This meant that I sat at the start line for a good five minutes before I led the field around for a formation lap and racing got underway once more.

As before though, the kart was terrible without temperature in the tyres, and under braking for HP1 I was disposed of the lead by a rather forceful move from Steve Mills. Still struggling, I was walloped entering Paddock and pushed to 3rd. Who hit me, I don't know, but Will Anderson was now in front of me. After a couple of laps my kart was coming back to me and I made a very swift return to 2nd and set about catching up the now distant leader. It took only a few laps and I was on his tail, but was now encountering a very wide and defensive kart. Try as I might I was unable to get past, and despite a great run out of the final corner and pulling alongside I had to settle for second, albeit only 0.1 seconds behind.

The final was where it all mattered though, and I'd be in second place and stuck on the outside of the track. Will led us around on our formation lap and I prayed to the karting gods that the kart I was in for this last race would be better than the last.

The pack passed the green light and off we headed into Conways for the first time. Once again I was unable to find a way passed Will, and Gavin was crawling all over the back of me. After a couple of laps Gavin was able to get a good clean move on me and almost immediately leapfrogged Will too. This was terrible news and I could not stay behind Will any longer. It took a few laps but I finally crept by and was faced with a gap of several seconds to a disappearing Gavin.

There then followed a party political broadcast by the going bloody fast party, as I put in four or five of my best laps and scampered right up behind him. As he later admitted, he didn't think that I'd gotten into second and hadn't realised anyone was behind him. The truth was that I'd set the only sub 50 second lap of the day in closing the gap, and had gotten a fantastic run out of Garda as I finally got onto his tail. As Gavin eased left to take the line into Conways I was already pulling out of his tow and coming up alongside him. I think he was a little surprised then when he came to turn in at 60mph that there was a red power ranger already there, and didn't even have chance to defend his position. I was through and despite Gavin sitting right on my tail I was shouting delightedly a few laps later as I crossed the line to claim my first event victory. The race had ended a couple of laps early as Steve Snr had once again tried to escape the circuit only to be frustrated by a crash barrier at HP1.

So I finally get my hands on a winner's trophy. In this case it was a real fake gold affair, and not only that but I got a trophy for the fastest lap too. Apparently my picture will be in next months Kent Karting magazine, a publication I didn't know existed and given my Derbyshire postcode will perhaps never see. Nevertheless, I was very pleased to have gotten that particular monkey off of my back. The day was only half complete though, and I headed into the evening's Thunder 60 in confident mood.