

TOUGH MONKEYS

Buckmore Park Star Pupil 2007: 24/11/07

I won't lie to you; I've been looking forward to this event. The 2007 Star Pupil would be the second time I'd be taking part in the event having probably crept in via the backdoor last year. This year I was there on merit after a strong first full season that had built on my sporadic outings last year. This is the pinnacle of the season as all the drivers taking part were talented enough to deserve to be there and it's the only occasion when drivers from all the various championships would be racing against each other. Sprinters and endurance specialists taking part in both disciplines in a bid to find the most accomplished race driver. And it's about your performance on the day, with no regard given for how much silverware you'd picked up during the last few months. There were obviously favourites to win, but it's anyone's guess who would be able to deliver the goods on the door.

The clubhouse was a comprehensive who's who of Buckmore with talent young and old all mingling together in the great community that the club serves up. There were a few noticeable absentees through whatever reason, such as heavyweight front runner Gerrard Hubbert, pocket sized inferno and Pro 60 runner-up Adam Michaelis and also my new two hour team mate Miguel Morland. With those exceptions aside, it was a sea of familiar faces from the events I take part in and others whose reputations precede them. Ollie Varney, Jack Harding, Simon and Matt Rudd, Andrew Mollison, Steve Brown Jnr were all there and in my book any one of them would have their name on the trophy at the end of the day. Add to those the heavyweight luminaries such as Grant Wright, Justin Dobson, Dave Tebbutt and the returning John O'Brian (who in his time away had now become a lightweight) it would be a fascinating day.

The ultimate winner of the Star Pupil title would not necessarily be the winner of races, but who was judged to have given the best performance and conducted themselves in the most race driver like fashion, whatever that would be. So, as you can imagine, everyone was on their best behaviour and two fingered salutes would be at a premium.

The day kicked off with the endurance events, split into two races to take account of the number of drivers in attendance. I was in the second race so I was able to watch with interest the scraps out on the track, and see Grant take an early lead. He was soon overhauled by the newly streamlined John who scampered off to a comfortable lead. Sprint specialist Matt was now fighting with Grant and was soon joined by a fast charging Jack who had started a little further down the grid. Swapping his own Rotax Max kart for the day he was proving he still knew how to handle the Pro kart and was

quickly into second and set about catching John. Into the closing stages he took the lead and seemed to be running away with it so I retired to the clubhouse to suit up for my race. However, a black flag for a trio of contacts led him into a stop/go penalty and would hand back the lead and the eventual race win to John.

Now it was my turn for a spot of lunacy, and I took to the track to set a qualifying lap. We only had 5 minutes with which to put in a good time so there was little margin for judging how good the kart was. I didn't feel particularly impressed with the Pro that I had been given, however as I passed all the karts in front I didn't think it could have been too bad. I was of course totally wrong, as all the top guys had started well behind me and twelve of them had gotten the better of me on the timesheet. So, a lowly 13th on the grid was my reward. I was disappointed by this, but frankly in this company it was always going to be a struggle, and there were plenty of more talented drivers very close around me so perhaps it wasn't all that bad.

The race went green and the melee began into the first series of corners. It was a little fruity at first, but I gained more places than I lost and soon found a rhythm. It quickly became apparent to me what the quirks of this kart were. It was very good through the corners, but painfully slow down the straights. Anyone I was tucked up behind coming out of Garda would be three or four kart lengths ahead by the end of the main straight. This removed any chance of using my second favourite overtaking manoeuvre into turn one, but the trade off with the handling meant that I could go much faster than most through Symes, Pullmans and Paddock and set up nicely into my favoured spot at Garda.

I picked up several places until I caught up with Steve Jnr, and that's where the fun began. Steve, let me remind you all, is the reigning Pro 60 champion so is therefore arguably the best driver in these particular karts. It was apparent then that he had a few issues with his kart if he was sharing the same stretch of tarmac as I was. Fascinatingly enough though, he had the exact opposite issues to those that I had. As such, I was catching him at an alarming rate through the corners, but he became a dot in the distance every time a straight bit loomed. Eventually, I got close enough to whip past at Garda, only for him to sweep past down the main straight. This continued for several laps, until I upped the ante and started overtaking him at HP2, only because he'd starting going past me into HP1. On many occasions he'd late brake into the hairpin, only for me to cut back and get back in front by the second hairpin. For a good thirty minutes this went on, during which time I lost count of the number of times we swapped positions. Steve's dad remarked after the race that on one lap we changed places five times. I can go whole races without making that many passes!

Inside the final five minutes however, the fun came to an end. The track had been dry despite the intermittent drizzle, but I managed to find a damp bit on the inside of HP2 as I passed Steve for the 213th time. I suffered terrible understeer and slid towards the outer edge of the track, and before reigning it back under control I was caught a glancing blow from the kart behind us and took a trip along the tyre wall before climbing back onto the track having lost a good four or five seconds. I struggled with the kart for the remaining couple of laps, and lost another place on route. Despite the disappointment of a mediocre

pace, I was delighted at the race long battle I'd been part of, especially since at no point was there any contact between us. Good clean racing all the way. Just to round up though, Ollie won this particular race, with Si a couple of places down.

I was back out on track almost immediately for heat one of the sprints. The Pro karts had now been put to bed for the day and it was now time for the Thunders to take to the track. And boy do I prefer them. Lap times are little more than a second apart from the Pros, but they are so much better to drive. Handling and braking is crisp, and I can balance the kart on the edge of control much more intuitively than I can in a Pro.

My first of two heats saw me starting from the back of the grid, way down in 15th place. Given that I'd started in 13th in the endurance and after 45 minutes had only climbed to 9th, I wasn't too optimistic about my chances in this race. However, sprint racing is a different beast altogether, and I was to have a storming race. I scythed my way through the field in the limited 5 laps of racing, and was delighted to come across the line in 4th position and moments away from taking 3rd.

My second outing would be in heat six, and I would be starting this one from 2nd on the grid. I had high hopes in this one, despite the talent sitting inches behind me. I got away well and led the field into the first corner, and stayed there until Paddock when Dave came screaming past in a do-or-die bid for the lead. In an effort to remain alive I kept out of his way, and took advantage of his deep line by getting back past at Garda. This lead I kept until HP1 on lap two when Dave came sliding sideways past. Again running deep I lined up a move into HP2....and then it all went wrong. I don't know what was going on behind me but Mark Figes was in the process of spinning under braking, and collected me also. I was turned around to see twelve other karts emerging from the late afternoon gloom and heading in my general direction. Amazingly, only two karts got through before I got going again. Ian Charles, one of my new team mates in the 2 hour, and Justin were off and running and I had just three laps to catch them up. And that was what I did. Heading into the final lap they had both caught Dave and I was anticipating a little barging and hoped I could take advantage of anything. Sadly for me, nothing happened, and despite much better drive out of the final corner I couldn't quite get past Justin. I was virtually sitting in his kart as we crossed the line, but he'd pipped me nonetheless.

With all the heats now finished it was announced that there would be a grand final for the top twelve drivers and four wildcards. I was delighted to find that I was in amongst those twelve, albeit only just, but I was in the final regardless.

I'll be honest straight away, it didn't go brilliantly. It was always going to be bedlam, and I just couldn't get onto the racing line for the first couple of laps. Every time I tried to get back on it there would be another kart there. It was lap three before I settled, by which time I was dead last. When I regained my composure I retook a couple of places, only to be punted back down to the back. I didn't finish last though, but that was only because poor young Jack suffered a kart failure on the last lap.

That wrapped up the racing for the day. It was now time to retire to the clubhouse for the results to be announced, and the Star Pupil crowned. The first name out of the hat was a little surprising purely because I didn't know who it was. Ryan Lindsey took third place. In second place was Brummie Paul Cox after an impressive days racing.

So, it came to the big prize, and there were two names that I thought it could be. Both Ollie and Si had done the business on the day, but in the end it was Si that was given the nod and with it the title of Star Pupil 2007. Well done mate.