

TOUGH MONKEYS

Rye House Endurance: 25/03/06

This was a Tough Monkeys first. The team's and my first experience of wet weather karting. Today was the annual Milbank Kart Challenge, the seventh time I personally have competed in the event. However, where as all previous challenges have been held at Kartsport at Caxton near Cambridge, this race was to be held at Rye House at Hoddesden. It was also an evening race under floodlights.

On arrival there was an endurance race in progress, and the circuit was a complete lake. I spent quite some time hanging over the armco watching the alternate lines that people were taking through the corners. I might not have raced in the wet before, but I have an idea about how to go about it.

There were twelve teams competing in all, and the race was 1½ hours in total. We had a 15 minute practice session to acclimatise ourselves to the conditions, during which we quickly had to obtain our bronze swimming certificates. My team mates for the evening were to be the two most senior people in the company I work for, Hanson Building Products. David Szymanski the MD and Trevor Poole, his number two. I've raced with Trevor twice before to great success, but David was new to the team. However, he is an accomplished racing driver in other disciplines, and has attended Jonathon Palmer Race School before.

I waded out on track in the first group and crawled up to the first corner, turned the wheel and slid slowly straight on. We were driving on slick tyres in deep standing water and the steering was practically useless. It took a couple of very slow, nervous laps to figure out that the best way to get the car to turn was to approach the corners at a wholly inappropriately fast pace, stand on the brake to unsettle the car, turn in well before the corner, then feather the throttle to slide the car around sideways. It's a totally alien way of driving...if you think you're going to slide off the outside of the track, you have to boot the throttle and cling on.

Trevor went out for his practise session and then David. The race began as a rolling start and David was in the lead as the green flag dropped (I hadn't actually noticed the race had started for a few minutes). However, the transponder on our kart was not working and we had to come in to pit for a replacement. On returning to the track we were awarded our laps back and led the field. The initial lap times were around 1:10.00, coming down gradually to around 1:05 to 1:06. MC2 and Milbank were a little faster than David, but we'd been fortunate with early track positions. The fastest drivers were getting around now in 1:02 to 1:03. When he came in after twenty minutes to swap for me, we were still in the lead. I slid out onto the track and got on with keeping the thing on the tarmac. The rain was still coming down, it was very dark save for the occasional flood light, and going offline on the main straight to overtake resulted in hitting standing water and skipping around like a Barnes Wallace bouncing bomb. There was serious aquaplaning going on.

After a couple of fact finding laps, I was breaking under the one minute barrier...which Milbank and MC2 quickly followed. I had a major heart failure early into my stint as I lapped a back marker on the main straight. Heading towards the long stadium corner I hit the brakes and the car pitched left instead of right and from that moment I was heading backwards at 60 odd miles per hour to

the scene of my own accident. Somehow, the kart didn't hit anything, but there were a few choice words being yelled behind my visor.

At the end of my stint we were still in the lead, and Trevor took to the track. Unfortunately, through traffic and a few spins here and there (which everyone was doing in fairness), we dropped down to third. Our lap times were between 1:04 and 1:12, with the occasional one minute dead coming in. Trevor stayed out for about 20 minutes, before David went back out. He was only out there for a few laps before signalling that he wanted to come in, and then I was back out till the finish.

We were by now well down the order in 4th position and some four laps off of the lead. However, I'd found a groove by now and was having enormous fun out there. Visibility was limited at best, but instead of complaining I just nailed it. The fast stadium turn was fantastic and a real leap of faith. The majority of karts were sticking to the inside line, which is totally wrong in the wet. I was flying past karts, hugging the outside of the tarmac in a graceful slide.

The finish came all too soon and I had no idea where we'd finished until I came in and oozed out of my drenched overalls. We'd finished a highly respectable 3rd, although I'm always disappointed not to win this challenge. My spirit was lifted when it was announced during the prize ceremony that I'd achieved the fastest lap of the night on my very last tour of duty.

Whatever the result, it was tremendous fun and valuable experience. Roll on the next wet race!