

TOUGH MONKEYS

Buckmore Park Pro/Thunder 360 Round 3: 27/08/07

Bank holiday Mondays are about staying in bed for as long as possible and generally taking the opportunity to relax and unwind.

Well, that's usually the plan isn't it?

I, however, chose to spend the last Bank Holiday of 2007 competing in a 6 hour endurance race at Buckmore Park which required me to be out of the comfy confines of my bed at 4.30am. This was round 3 of the Pro/Thunder 360 championship, something I've never entertained the thought of entering before. That was until a post was left on the club forum by Dave Tebbutt saying that he was putting a team together and had a couple of spaces available. Not sure of my plans for the weekend I initially paid little attention to it, but once I knew I had a free day and had seen the drivers already entered I sent a speculative email to Dave offering my services. I didn't hold out much hope of getting a drive, but was still a little disappointed to find that my great Thunder 60 rivals Si Rudd and Steve Brown Jnr were pencilled in to fill the spaces.

It wasn't until Friday evening that Dave contacted me to say that Si would be racing with one of my other annoyingly talented rivals, Andrew Mollison, so there was a place available if I wanted it. I just about refrained from biting his hand off and accepted the invitation with flailing arms.

Race day at Buckmore and the clubhouse was over flowing with the great and the good of the circuit. Many of the guys who I race against in the Thunder 60 series were present, plus many more that race in other series. What was so great was that there was such a depth of skill and knowledge, brought together in teams trying to out perform each other both out on the track and in the pit lane. Strategy would count for a great deal today with driver changes and fuel stops a necessity. Our team for the day, called Dangerous as a nod to the nickname that Dave has lovingly acquired while racing at Buckmore, consisted of five drivers. Besides myself and Dave there was Stuart Belbin, a seasoned endurance specialist who recently entered the Le Mans 24hrs with Dave. Carl Tebbutt, son of Dave, and current Buckmore Star Pupil champion plus the aforementioned Steve Brown Jnr completed the team. With Steve currently favourite to land the Pro 60 championship and lying second in the Thunder 60's, despite his young years he would be our anchor man. His dad, Steve Snr, as recognisable a face as anyone in the paddock was also on hand to assist with the running of the strategy.

Alan's race briefing was up there with his best, managing to work headless corpses and exploding homosexual rodents into the usual banter. The 6 hour race would be made up of 14 Thunder karts and 6 Pro karts, each on track at the same time but each competing in their own championship. On paper, the Thunders should be a couple of seconds a lap quicker than the Pros, however a long season of racing is showing on the Thunders and there is now little noticeable difference. An end of season overhaul is imminent though, promising much better performance.

Qualifying lasts 30 minutes in this series and Stuart was sent out first to assess the kart and bring it up to temperature. His times were respectable at this early stage, and after a quick chat with me in the pit lane to relay his thoughts I went out to see what I could do. Stuart had suggested the kart was very skittish at the rear and the brakes were sharp. He was certainly right and it took a little time for me to bring the kart down into the quick times I was looking for. My stint ended and

we had climbed to 4th, however over the course of the session we would drop to 6th. Steve went out onto the track after I had, putting in times very similar to mine. On his last flying lap he dipped under my time, but could not climb us any further up the grid.

I was elected to start the race for the team, and immediately got the jump on the kart beside me before reaching Conways, and cleanly navigated the potential land mine of HP1. Directly in front of me was Miguel Morland in the lead Pro kart. Alongside Ian Charles they comfortably led the Pro championship and right now they led me. I got a good run on him a lap later and took 4th position, only to be re-passed almost immediately. It was then that the race was brought to a stop under the red flag as someone had thought it a good idea to escape the circuit via the tyre wall at Conways.

Restarting from 5th I swarmed all over Miguel for several laps, who in turn was molesting the karts in front of him. Sam Wilcox led out the team that also featured Si and Andrew and began to slowly pull away at the front of the field. For the first ten laps or so I was pushing to claim 4th, but couldn't quite do it. It was around about then that our kart began to suffer a sticking throttle which was hampering my efforts at turning into the two hairpins and Garda, plus leaving me unable to lift off and drift into Symes and Pullmans as is my chosen method. It was only losing me a few tenths a lap, but it was enough to drop me off of the back of Miguel.

During this phase of the struggle another kart had lunched its engine and had deposited a nice layer of oil all around the circuit. This gave cause for four or five laps of eye opening braking and cornering moments, with the kart wanting little to do with actually going around corners. It did offer me an opportunity to close in on Miguel, and I even actually passed him as he got caught up with a backmarker, but it was only a temporary gain as my throttle trouble sent me deep into Garda and again I was back to 5th.

The kart was becoming increasingly erratic to drive and I was thinking of indicating to my team mates in the pits that we should think about changing it when my stint was over. That decision was taken for me as my pit board was shown at around the 40 minute mark as I was beginning to drop back quite dramatically. At first I thought they were going to substitute me for another driver, but I was relieved to find that they'd secured another kart for me to climb aboard. It was treated as a fuel stop as the new kart was topped up, and I headed back out onto track a lap down on the leader and about to be lapped by the 2nd and 3rd teams. Heading around to HP1 for the first time I was more than a little concerned that there was an apparent lack of brakes. I didn't think I was going to stop at all, and this trend continued for a couple of laps while they came up to temperature. In this time I'd been lapped by the battle for 2nd and 3rd and I was wondering if the change had been a wise idea.

I shouldn't have worried. The kart came up to racing conditions and suddenly I was reeling in the karts in front of me. Wrapped up in their own fight and not expecting to be overtaken I unlapped myself from both karts on the exit of HP2 and set about getting my head down. And that I did as the kart began to feel so good and gave me more and more confidence. My stint would last another 40 minutes and I was able to undo the wrongs of the previous kart. Returning to the pits after my time in the kart I was greeted by cheers and hand shakes from my team mates who were happy to explain how much quicker I'd been in the second kart. Consistently quicker than anything else out on track during that time, I'd climbed from 7th to 2nd in class.

Delighted with my performance and just as happy with the team for making the call to change the kart, my racing was done for the day. It was now down to my team mates to have their turns.

Stuart was out next and did a great job of consolidating our 2nd in class position. There was a little scare when he arrived in the pits and missed the turn in for the fuel rig. A quick trip around the circuit and into the right lane and the drama was over. Dave then took to the track, resplendent in his bright yellow overalls to match his Lamborghini in the car park, and enjoyed an almost session long battle with Ian Charles in the apparently super-charged Pro kart. Although they were

exchanging positions occasionally they had sensibly decided to race with each other as opposed to against each other given that they weren't competing in the same race realistically.

Dave handed over to his son Carl who showed why he is the Star Pupil as he banged in consistently fast lap times. Although they were fractionally slower than the times I had set earlier in the day it could be argued that the hot conditions were slowing the overall times down so he was obviously doing an excellent job. It was also entertaining to watch as he was duelling with Si for many laps, despite being several laps down.

While Steve awaited the kart to be refuelled at the end of Carl's session the marshals spotted something that had broken on the front of our kart which forced a change to another machine. Sadly, it proved to be a real dog of a vehicle and Steve was struggling to put in the kind of times he's capable of. Just as we were considering whether to change to another kart, we were taken out of the decision process when Steve went past the Café with blue smoke bellowing out of the back. We immediately called him and he went back out in our fourth kart of the day.

We were now a little concerned as not only had we lost 2nd on track but we were increasingly in danger of losing 2nd in class too. Now only just a lap ahead and still with an hour to go in the race Steve was again wrestling with an uncompetitive kart. His initial laps suggested that we weren't yet safe, but gradually the kart began to come back to him and by the end of the race he was the fastest kart on the track. He'd not only hung on to second but extended the gap still further. Everyone in the team had reason to be pleased with their driving, but Steve's effort in such a poor kart underlined his considerable talent.

With Simon, Andrew and Sam taking the overall and Thunder win, and Miguel and Ian comfortably taking the Pro honours, we retired to the club house for a deserved round of back slapping. It was a great team achievement and a great personal milestone as it was my first 2nd place trophy at Buckmore. A season that I had earmarked as one for consolidating my solid first season with a podium finish as my goal has been far more competitive than I could possibly have expected. My next time out on track will see Steve and myself resuming our Thunder 60 rivalry, and with Si being away on holiday it gives me a very rare opportunity to claim the final trophy that I've not got in my collection. But then, I can think of several drivers who will be looking to take that opportunity for themselves.