

TOUGH MONKEYS

Buckmore Park Thunder 60 Round 3: 20/05/07

It's been five weeks since I last donned the red Power Ranger suit and hit the track, and with the podium finish from the last round still fresh I headed to Buckmore confident of building on that performance. I set myself the conservative goal of a top ten finish, but the heart desired another strong challenge for the silverware. The five weeks hadn't been wasted, with much time being put in at the gym working not only on the usual cardiovascular routines but on building up my chicken wings to give some upper body strength to fight off late race fatigue.

Following a week of inclement weather, rubbishing once more the tree hugger's claims of ultra violet mega-death from global warming, Buckmore was resplendent in the late spring sunshine. The holiday season had brought with it the absence of several of the regular top runners, leaving the club house devoid of many of the usual personalities. The grid was, however, beyond capacity with a meaty 38 karts lining up for combat, and the names that counted as far as the championship battle was concerned were all present and correct. Simon Rudd, winner of both rounds so far, and Andrew Mollison who led me home last month would begin as clear favourites. There were a great many faces that I didn't recognise, and the general standard of the racing in the mid to rear of the field during the race would suggest that the experience perhaps wasn't what you'd normally expect of Buckmore's premier hire-kart championship. While most make do with flesh and blood, race director Alan Wood obviously had crystal balls at his disposal and had made a point of reminding all the drivers in the briefing that karting is a none contact sport. A pity then that several drivers weren't paying much attention to someone who one really should listen to.

Qualifying saw us lightweights hit the track first, and I'd already decided that the kart I was in had an issue before I'd left the pit lane. Crawling out onto track it was obvious the kart had significant tracking issues, pulling to the left and requiring me to hold the steering wheel at about 5° to the right. Knowing, however, that the number of drivers tonight had virtually eliminated the possibility of a kart swap without anything short of a wheel missing or possible fuel tank explosion I brought the kart up to temperature to give it a try.

It's always tricky to gauge how quick the kart is in the short space of time available, but early on my opening lap Si Rudd had slipped past into HP2 which gave me the perfect opportunity to compare my speed to his. Ruddy slow would be the answer, as he scampered away from me. Given that I was sat on Si's pace for a good percentage of the race last month, it was a little soul destroying to see him gapping me at a second a lap. However, despite this, I was catching everyone else who was in front of me, including my sparring partner Adam Michaelis. I sped past Adam very easily, prompting him to come in and exchange his wagon for the only spare kart available in the pit lane. Nevertheless, Adam would be starting the race way down in 21st position. I had finished the lightweight qualifying in 7th position, but after the heavies had shaken their funky stuff I would line up in 9th on the grid. Slightly disappointing, but I've perhaps come to expect more than that. I should remind myself that I've only ever started higher than that three times before at Buckmore, so in what was an uncompetitive kart it was a decent performance. Naturally, Si would start from pole, with Andrew again pushing him all the way.

As the lights when green and the race began, I was on the inside for Conways which is a good place to be normally, however the kart in front of me was a little slow away and I watched helplessly as a number of karts went around the outside of me. The first lap was very intense,

with my kart being humped from behind for almost the entire duration. Indeed, I'd lost three places in the first few corners and was struggling to get any kind of rhythm going. I edged back to eleventh before being punted wide at HP1 on lap seven, losing me a couple of places. I began lap 9 back in eleventh, and benefited from some lunatic driving at HP2 as a ridiculous lunge resulted in a melee that allowed me to sneak into 8th. Sadly, my initial joy at having a clear track in front of me was short lived as on the very next lap I was myself the victim of a farcical attempt at a pass by a kart at Garda. Walloping into the side of my kart, the driver made sure I wouldn't keep my place by escorting me all the way out to the tyre wall. Fuming under my visor as I lost four places, things didn't get any better as I was punted one way or another down to 15th over the next couple of laps.

The behaviour began to settle down for a while after that, but through all the contact I'd received my kart had developed a vicious vibration which was awful along the high speed main straight. I was already suffering terrible understeer on right hander's due to the tracking, and now I was down on top end speed too. The race was not going terribly well at this point and I really had no idea where I was position wise. I could only remember karts going past me, rarely the other way around. Adam past me at about half distance, but he himself was soon spun off of the track and rejoined behind me.

The last half of the race was merely a matter of keeping going. I had no real speed to catch people in front of me at all. My only chances came when karts became involved in duels that slowed them down, allowing me to sneak up behind. Adam once more came past, and in fact we spent a good twenty minutes nose to tail which was possibly the most enjoyable part of an otherwise disappointing race. While trying to gain another position Adam was slammed into the tyre wall on the exit to the Esses, but he recovered to come past me for the third time, and as the chequered flag fell he pinched one more place on the line.

I was actually really surprised to discover that I'd finished in tenth position, and in fact seventh in the lightweight class. The pit lane was a heated place as the drivers clambered out of their karts. There were several drivers confronting each other over the standard of driving this evening. The post race prize giving in the club house was a quiet affair though as many drivers had gone home to lick their wounds instead of hanging around to argue. Simon had managed to make it a hat-trick of wins to firmly cement his position as series leader. He led home Steve Brown Jnr and Andrew, who maintains second in the points table. Incredibly though, because of the dropped round system where a driver drops his two worst rounds, I'm currently lying 4th in the championship. Granted, I will have to have much better rounds than tonight, but to be in that position in this series is simply awesome.

It's another month now before my next race, with a two week break in Wales to relax my aching muscles in between. The desire is burning fiercely to get back out on track and put right tonight's wrongs. I just have to hope for a better kart and that the talented and sporting regulars return to bring back the top drawer yet clean racing that tonight only the front runners demonstrated.