

11-14 January 2007
NEC Birmingham, UK

Autosport
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▶ THE RACING CAR SHOW



Autosport International 24 hour Kart Race

Equipe Vitesse win the Autosport 24 hour

Exclusive report by Joe Flay

The team arrived at the NEC early Thursday morning and got the first look at the track. It was evident from the outset that the surface was slippery due to the painted concrete and would probably afford no grip. This posed no problem for the team with the amount of wet weather driving each member had done over the years on slick tyres.

The practice session was only 30 minutes and with eight team members this would equate to only three minutes per driver although this amounted to approximately 9 laps.

At the end of practice there was nothing between **Tom Huxtable** and **Simon Rudd** so I tossed a coin and it was **Tom Huxtable** that would qualify in the 10-minute session. At the flag we would be 6th on the grid, an unusual position for Equipe Vitesse to find ourselves in. However the competition was top notch and it would be an indicator that the team would not have this race all its own way.

Equipe Vitesse
Autosport 24 hour
Driver line up

Joe Flay
Russell Crowe
Simon Rudd
Matt Rudd
Tom Huxtable
James Wilson
Norman Kenvyn
Jay Fairbrass



All the top teams would run to the fuel and this we calculated would last approximately 2 to 2 ½ hours. When I told the team how long they would have to stay in the kart there were some long faces as we all knew that this race was going to be tough.

Tom Huxtable would start the race and would work his way up to 2nd overall after about 30 minutes through some purposeful driving. There was nothing in the times of the top teams and the slightest hesitation would see the snake train of karts back on your bumper and jostling for position

Yours truly was next and within ten minutes someone would make a mess of the barriers at the hairpin. The next lap I came around there was water all over the racing line with two karts in the barrier. I drove the outside line for about six laps with a full course yellow. When the

lights went to green I was hit up the back by an unknown kart which seemed to affect the kart. There was a growling sound coming from the back axle. There now appeared to be no power coming out of the slower corners. A number of karts were all over the back of me and were pushing me wide in the corners. I was losing time and positions hand over fist. I made the decision to have the kart changed which took time and cost further positions.

Matt Rudd would take over from me and he would again set out to make up lost time Equipe Vitesse were now 4th some 3 laps down and out of sync on the pit stops. Matt would pick up a driver warning late into his stint, this he interpreted as a full black and came into the pits only to be told that there was no penalty, more time lost however his pace more than made up for the mistake.

The organizers had decided at the beginning of the race that at the refuelling stops each team would be given a new kart, this was due to health and safety as the karts could only be replenished from outside the building. Although all the karts were brand new as is always the case some karts would be quicker than others and it would be a lottery on which kart you had for your two hour stint.

James Wilson was up next and for the next two hours drove like a man possessed, clawing back lost time and eventually moving us up the order even though we would still not feature in the top three we were now on the same lap as the third placed team.

Simon Rudd was the next driver up and as always drove superbly with not one team able to match his pace. Numerous other teams and reporters commented on his driving and it was a joy to watch as he carved his way through the opposition. However the top teams were only running 10ths slower and that meant hardly any change to the positions.

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Jay Fairbrass was next and although he was suffering from unhealed cracked ribs he kept it on the island and did well to recover from another change of kart early on in his stint. It appeared that some of the karts were suffering from incorrect valve clearances as they appeared to be quick for about 10 laps and as they got hot would drop of the pace, this of course is only supposition as we had no way of really knowing for sure.

Norman Kenvyn was up next to do battle for Equipe Vitesse and he drove superbly for his two hours and whilst not gaining any positions he did not lose any time. However once again a warning flag for contact was misinterpreted for a full black and an unnecessary pit stop ensued. His stint kept us in contention although we were still running in fifth position.

Russell Crowe was the last of our 8 drivers in the kart at what was now around midnight. An early change of kart, which was well off the pace, cost more time and we were now some 15 laps adrift off the leaders with an uphill struggle to even get a position on the podium. The driving standards of more than 50% of the teams warranted black flags however it all went unnoticed due to a lack of marshals in the small hours of the morning. Once again **Russell** kept it on track and at the end of his stint looked exhausted and battered by the constant contact from a number of other teams who shall remain nameless. Equipe Vitesse were now seven laps off the third place position and we were currently 5th overall; nine laps down on the leaders with 10 hours to go, an insurmountable task but the team battled on and never gave up.

In order to make up for the time we had lost I made the decision to run only the lightest and quickest of our eight drivers. I broke the news to the team that they would not feature again and everyone without exception agreed that if we were to win this race then drastic measures would need to be adopted. This would be the turning point of the race and we began to claw our way up the leader board.

James Wilson went out for the next two-hour stint between fuel stops. His display of driving skills was a pleasure to watch; he carved his way through the traffic like a knife through hot butter running some ½ second quicker than anyone else on track. His stint moved us up the leader board and we were now 5th overall, some eight laps down on the leaders, and 4 laps down on second. When **James** finished his stint all of the team were there to greet him with cheers and slaps on the back. We had just witnessed the start of the Equipe Vitesse steamroller; the other teams looked on with worried faces. One rival team member said “thank god our next driver would not be as quick” I answered that all our drivers are capable of the same pace and this would prove to be true as **Tom Huxtable** was up next.

Over the next two hours **Tom** would carve his way through the opposition like poetry in motion. Opposing teams were now letting him past when he arrived on their back bumper having to accept the inevitable, reminiscent of the Red Maclaren of Ayrton Senna dominating the psyche of the opposition. After two hours Tom had worked his way up to third. We were now only 1 lap away from second and three laps behind the leaders. Once again at the driver change all team members were there to greet Tom with hoops and hollers the atmosphere was now electric.

Simon Rudd was the next driver back in the kart to chase down the leaders. Lap after lap he put in the quick times, he had now set the fastest lap of 18.6 seconds. Once again teams realised that the inevitable was happening. Equipe Vitesse were now up to second. Two more laps to make up and we would be first. It happened in the 18th hour, **Simon** took the lead from team Eleven who had lead the race from the green light. Panic was now setting in for the former front runners, as they made driver changes to try and stop the number 24 kart of Equipe Vitesse, who were steam rolling ahead. At the end of **Simon's** stint he had taken the team from third to first position. Equipe Vitesse now lead the race by two laps.



Simon Rudd fastest lap 18.6 seconds

Tom Huxtable was out next and once again the fastest driver on the track showing the other teams the way in pace and driver skill. At the end of Tom's final stint Equipe Vitesse had moved ahead and lead the race by some six laps which equated to just over 2 minutes. More backslapping and cheering on the change over with just an hour to go.

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I was due to go out and finish the race but decided that if we were to win this race it would be a fitting tribute to allow a driver who had not taken a chequered flag in a 24 hour race to do so. I made the decision based on the quickest lap time and **Simon** was to finish the race. At this point **Simon** had lost the quickest lap and was a man on a mission to get it back. The last hour of a 24 hour race is always a worry especially if you are leading as one small mistake can lose you the race. I contemplated telling **Simon** to take it easy however I decided to let him do his own thing. For the next hour **Simon** lapped at an incredible pace each lap reeled off within 2 tenths of the last, all in the 18second bracket. The race had now turned into a one-hour qualifying race to try and get the fastest lap. Although **Simon** was pipped to fastest lap by fractions of a second, in the process he moved the team further from the opposition and Equipe Vitesse would win the race by some 10 clear laps.

With just 5 laps to go the flashes of the cameras from the gathered press and TV cameras greeted each lap. When the flag fell the crowds and press engulfed the number 24 kart. First at the scene was John Hindhaugh from Motors TV who interviewed **Simon** and I and I have to admit I was lost for words and had to turn away as I filled up with emotion. This was my 29th 24 Hour race but I have never been so happy and proud to be associated with such a great bunch of guys and professional drivers which made this prestigious win so special.

After the celebrations it was off to the Le Mans Gala dinner where we were honoured to be associated and photographed with some of the greatest 24-hour Le Mans drivers in history. **Tom Kristensen**, seven time winner, **Derek Bell** 5 times winner, **Johnny Herbert**, **Mark Blundell**, **Andy Wallace**, **Paddy Hopkirk** and so many more.

The dinner really put the icing on the cake for the team and some of the many memorable moments of the evening included **Russell Crowe** being mistaken for a wine waiter, this was made up for later when he was asked for his autograph. Equipe Vitesse signed the book *The British at Le Mans* for one lucky recipient however I have to add that we had to explain who we were. At this point if **Mark Blundell** gets to read this, my apologies for calling him **Martin**.....Twice. All in all a memorable event

Joe Flay - Team Principle & Driver - Equipe Vitesse #24



Mark Blundell with the team...or was it Martin?



Tom Kristensen and Joe Flay

Tom
"He's just called me Martin!"
Joe
"I've just called him Martin"



The team with 5 times Le Mans 24 hour hero Derek Bell



Our good friend from Buckmore Park Johnny Herbert



"Joe - did you call him Martin AGAIN!"



Drivers have all the luck



At 12 hours, Simon, Tom & Russell were "resting" ready to be called into action