

Le Mans 2008 Race Report

Equipe Vitesse win hire class for a record 5th time

First of all a big thank you to the team, firstly Simon Rudd for a driving display that will have the owner drivers talking for years to come. Truly you would have had to have been there to believe it. Secondly to Russell Crowe who will still be taking for years to come and for his fast safe driving. Finally, many thanks to Phil Rudd for the pit wall support and all the small things that help make up the winning formula.

Thursday

We arrived in Le Mans on Thursday after driving from Kent to Calais. Only stopping for the ferry. We arrived at our base the Campanile Hotel in Arnage at about 5pm where a number of the other Buckmore teams were staying as usual. A few pints in the ridiculously expensive bar something to eat then bed we were all tucked up by 10pm French time (not together I must add) The earliest I have been to bed for years.

Friday morning

Down for breakfast then over to the circuit Alain Prost. Everything set up in our pit garage by 8.30 am. Down to the supermarket at Mulsanne for some food for the weekend. Then back to the track in time to sign on and be weighed for the penalties to be added. Myself, Simon and Russell weighed in and were awarded minus 5 laps.

Back to the pit garage and we were allocated our kart. This year the fuel tanks were centrally mounted and pulse pump operated so there could be no margin for error in calculating how long the fuel would last in each stint. We carried out a spanner check to all the components and were satisfied that everything was in order.

The start of practice arrived and so did the problems. Russell was out first and after about twenty minutes brought the kart in and complained of a vibration from the rear this proved to a distorted rear tyre which was duly replaced. Russell returned to the track and within ten minutes other drivers were pointing to the kart, as there appeared to be fluid leaking from the back. This was caused by the rear wheel hub moving and the tyre then cut its way through the fuel pipe. Once again the mechanics sorted the problem and we were out again on the track. At the end of Russell's track time he had set a personal best for this session with a 59.3.

I was next out and had a trouble free run over the next 50 minutes setting a practice time of 59.7 however with all the problems in the session we ran out of time to determine how long the fuel would last.

Simon completed the last 20 minutes of the session and set a personal best of 58.1 the kart was packed away for the evening in Parc ferme. We cleared the pit and retired to the bar for a pint then off to the local restaurant for a meal and then early to bed. A good nights sleep for all would pay dividends come race day. I was woken up in the middle of the morning to the sound of monsoon type rain.

Saturday and race day

The rain had fallen heavily and there were still heavy clouds in the air. The team had been doing a rain dance the day before, as we had wanted a wet race. The combination of the heavier karts, larger fuel tanks and better wet tyres would mean that we would have a chance to race for the outright win over the owner drivers. This belief would hold true after the qualifying session more of that later.

The final practice session started and I went out first in the rain. However my session did not last long as I had to bring the kart in as I had no brakes. This was sorted by the mechanics as the pads had glazed over.

Russell went next for a few laps then Simon finished the session with a time that was only beaten by two owner-drivers and unbelievably they were on wets. Whilst we were on slicks. Once again we checked the kart over before the 30-minute qualifying session.

Official Qualifying.

The hires were out first on a very wet track and Simon's times got lower and lower as the rain stopped and the track began to dry. At the end of the session Simon had secured pole for Equipe for the fourth year in succession with a 1.12.139 the very rapid Ministry of speed (more of later) set a 1.12.619 Speedbird North set a 1.13.166 Buckmore lightning and thunder were 6th and 8th.

The owner-drivers set off for their session as the hires came in. It would take over ten minutes for one of the owner driver teams to beat Simon's time and on a now much dryer track.

I truly believe that if it had stayed wet no one would have beaten Simon's time and a hire kart would have been on overall pole for the first time ever and the race would have been on - However it was not to be but the dramas were about to begin for Equipe Vitesse.

The race.

The grid formed and with just 10 minutes before the off. I noticed that there was a large gouge in one of the rear tyres and bubbles were coming out of the hole It had probably been caused by the amount of gravel that had been pulled onto the track in the practice session. I felt very fortunate to have spotted it and had the time to get it replaced. The mechanics came onto the track and changed the wheel with 5 minutes to the start.

The flag dropped and the parade lap started. Half way round Simon had his hand in the air indicating that he only had one engine running he tried desperately to pull the starter from inside the kart but the engine would not restart. He dropped to the back of the snake and a Marshall tried to start it for him breaking the pull cable in the process. Simon returned to the pits and the race started without him.

The mechanics replaced the starter but the engine would still not start. The mechanics decided to change the engine. Simon started the 2008 race 8 minutes after everyone else. It would take Equipe Vitesse 19 hours to regain the lead in what would prove to be very dramatic and incident packed race. The mechanics checked the engine and the fault was a bit of grit in the carburettor that caused fuel starvation hence the engine stopping and refusing to start.

After Simon's first stint it was Russell up next followed by yours truly. We made up a few places and we were gradually moving up the leader board. However a few teams in particular were running at a pace that was on a par with ours so at the end of Simon's second stint, I asked him as he was refuelling if he was fit to do a double. Although he needed the toilet he got back in the kart and did another 1 hour 50 minute stint, which moved us further, up the leaderboard.

Drama in the pit lane.

One of the front running teams only seemed to be racing with three drivers. (There is nothing wrong with having just three drivers, as that is how we have run since 2001 at Le

Mans.) However these drivers were all very small one not much bigger than Simon. The only other two people in there pit looked like bouncers and must have been sixteen stone plus. Yet they were on a Zero lap penalty. Two people from different teams voiced an opinion to me on what was going on. At this point I must add if this team had been running lower than they were I would probably not have done anything about it I knew of at least two other teams that had manipulated the weigh in to there advantage. This was very different as after 10 or so hours we had managed to pull back 4 laps on this team. We still had another four laps to find, plus the 5 laps we were giving them in penalties. If they were cheating I was not going to let it rest.

I spoke to the organisers and they asked the team in question in a friendly way who were the other two members of their team. The two heavyweight bouncer types were introduced as the other drivers. So all appeared in order until another driver appeared in a hire suit done two laps for them came back in without a signal got out of the kart and one of the original drivers got back in.

I watched the driver in the hire suit who appeared quite sheepish, as it was obvious that he new we were on the scent. He later put on a black race suit then took it off again when he saw me. He put the hire suit back on then went out in a different kart. The organisers got involved and out came the paperwork and sign on sheets. In short they had signed on 4 drivers weighed five and only intended to race three.

They had tried to gain an unfair advantage however they were caught bang to rights. As I had been the instigator of the investigations I took a lot of stick and abuse however I must add the driver did apologise to me just before going out on his fateful stint which would lead to him upside down under his kart which caught fire. I have to stress that I was not on the track at the time and had nothing to do with the incident. This put them out of the running, which was a shame as they were obviously a top team and it would have been a great challenge to compete with them on an even level.

We alternated drivers throughout the night and I took my favourite stint driving through the early morning as the sun come up and the suns rays warming my bruised and aching body.

With 3 hours to go our only challengers were now the formidable Speedbird I have raced against these guys many times and they are always consistent and always there at the end with just under a minute to our advantage a cruel fate befell there team. Andrew Mollison who had driven a great race had a stub axle snap at the end of the main straight and that really put an end to the teams chances of the win or even the podium.

Equipe Vitesse now had an 11-lap lead over Image Makers Asia. I should have been out for the last stint however Simon was sent out to finish the race due to his superb contribution. Before he returned to the track and with time in hand we put the kart on the mechanics trolley and did a 2-minute check to ensure that nothing was going to rob us of our fifth win in eight years. As the flags fell and were waved I must admit I had a tear in my eye.

I am very proud of the achievements of this very special team over the last eight years and my heartfelt thanks go out to the current drivers and all the other Buckmore drivers who have been a part of Equipe vitesse over the years.

Joe Flay
Driver and Manager
Equipe Vitesse #24

