

EQUIPE VITESSE

LE MANS 2009 RACE REPORT

By Joe Flay



Historic win and retirement for Equipe Vitesse

After leaving on Thursday morning and arriving at the Brit Hotel late Friday afternoon we retired to the bar and restaurant for drink and food unfortunately a little too much alcohol and we felt the worst for it on Friday.

First stop on Friday was the supermarket only to find it closed, as it was only 8.45 am. We waited until the doors opened and then bought all the various bit and piece's to sustain us for the long road ahead. I had forgotten to pack my hair gel and was pleased to find some for sale in the supermarket, which was aptly named 24-hour endurance super gel, probably worth a 10th of a second a lap. We met a number of the Buckmore boys shopping and were pleased to see Le Mans virgin Stuart with a big grin on his face obviously looking forward to the race ahead.

Next stop was the revamped Le Mans museum once again bumping into the Buckmore boys. After negotiating our entry using the coupons we picked up at the hotel which is a story in itself as the French woman at the ticket desk did not know what we wanted. Which I think by any stretch of the imagination would be obvious. WE WANT TO GO IN THE MUSEUM. The museum done off to the circuit.

We set up the garage and then went off to sign in and get weighed. This year we were slightly better off with only a 2-lap penalty. However the very strong Ministry of Speed were on 0 laps. Last year they gave us a run for our money until flipping on the straight and catching fire. This year they would however run us to wire, more of that later.



We collected our kart and we were told that we were lucky to have a kart at all, as an administrative error had us down as an owner driver team this was put right just before the Teesside organisation were about to leave for Le Mans. I do not think the team would have been very happy if we had been just spectators.

As always the first thing we set about doing was to check that all nuts and bolts were tight along with chain alignment, throttle openings etc. We decided as last year to retain the original seat, as it was stiff enough and we would only have to use a seat insert for Simon. On with Alphano and that was it. One of the first things we noticed was the 9 litre tanks, which could possibly mean that potentially, we could run for two hour stints just 12 stops throughout the 24 hours. But would the other teams notice this advantage. This would become evident on race day at the first round driver changes.

Out for practice and this 2 hour session was used to set the tyre pressures (our tyre pressures are used by the organisers for the other teams as a benchmark).

However the changing temperatures meant that they were never going to be at an optimum level and I believe most people made there own decisions or went along with the organiser's recommendations. Saying that most of the serious teams including Buckmore, Blue Lizard and

ACS seemed to be relatively on the pace. After the practice session Simon was on a 58.6 Russell on 59.7 and myself on a 59.9. We packed everything up and went back to the hotel for a meal a quick night-cap then early to bed in preparation for Le Ronde Infernale.

Race Day

With the sun blazing we used the one-hour session once again to ensure that all was in order. Everything was as it should be so we relaxed until our qualifying session. This was due to be after the owner drivers. With about three minutes notice we were informed that the hires were to go first. Panic set in with some of the teams as this gave no time for final adjustments let alone giving qualifying drivers time to mentally prepare themselves for the job at hand. We sent out Russell first to burn off the excess fuel that was not needed for the session. In order to give the Machine Simon Rudd the opportunity to stake his claim for Pole position for the fourth time in his four appearances for Equipe Vitesse at Le Mans.

The session over it was the reigning champions on hire kart pole with a 58.681 some 4 tenths quicker than nearest rivals RDI koks 1. Buckmore lightning were 3rd Blue Lizard 4th Ministry of Speed 5th Buckmore Thunder 6th and the ACS team a troubled 10th followed by the other 13 Hire kart teams. In total 44 karts would take the grid 23 hires and 21 owners the biggest grid for many years due to the French allowing more teams to compete.

11.20 and the teams were asked to form up the karts in echelon fashion in readiness for the famous running Le mans start which was brought back this year to commemorate the twentieth running of the event last employed in the nineties. All the drivers posed for the official photo then it was back to the karts for the dropping of the French Tricolour to start the race.

The Race.

The flag dropped and off went the 44 teams with 88 engines raring in a cloud of dust and exhaust fumes up to the Chicane.

The rapid Jack Harding took off like a rocket and headed the hires for two laps until a late lunge by the Machine saw Equipe Vitesse take the lead back. At the end of his two-hour stint we brought Simon in and out went Russell for his two-hour stint, which kept us in the lead.

I was out next and towards the end of my 2 hours it became evident to Russell that if they could keep me out for another 3/4 minutes we could take advantage of the compulsory service stop which was due to take place from 8 PM to 10 PM.

We never have to queue for fuel due to the strategy we use but at the end of my stint, I was caught in the refuelling bay by a very slow owner-driver who did not seem to have any urgency in the process of getting out of the way. One kart stand was utilised for a service and the other was free until one team pushed the kart up the pit lane and took my available slot. We would have to queue or get back on the track. Then use the end of the next stint for the service this would throw out the strategy of 12 pit stops throughout the race and leave us vulnerable to more queuing, as it seemed that most teams were now opting for 2-hour stints.



Next out was Simon and because of the problems in the pit lane we were now down over a lap to Ministry of Speed who had made their way up the leader board and now lead the hires. After much deliberation I decided to throw caution to the wind and bring Simon in early refuel him, do the service then get him back on track. I felt that this would firstly throw us out of sync with everyone else and thus avoid any potential bottlenecks in the pits. This would also give us the opportunity of new front tyres for two hours earlier than Ministry of Speed. (They were not due to stop until 10 PM). It all seemed to be going to Plan, both myself and Russ looking at the monitor and just about to watch Equipe Vitesse take the lead back, when Simon appeared in the pit lane with a punctured rear tyre.

The kart was put on the stand for a replacement tyre. Simon was very upset that we were not waiting for him we had not seen him come in and he was ranting and raving. Next to appear on the scene was Bob Pope's brother, he then started ranting and raving, accusing Simon of speeding on the run in behind the weighing area before the fuel bay. He gave us a drive through penalty. Simon returned to the track and completed the drive through penalty. Meanwhile I had put on my helmet and finished the stint as Simon was obviously very incensed.

It later turned out to be mistaken identity with apologies accepted but at least another 4 laps was lost and the damage was done. Equipe Vitesse were now some 10 laps down and we were really up against it our main competitors were running the same lap times as us so it was looking an impossible task. I brought the kart in at the end of the stint done our service without a hitch and Russ took to the track in third place behind Ministry of speed and RDI Plymouth who had also benefited from our problems.

Great driving by Russ for the next two hours together with a slow service for Ministry of Speed took us from 10 laps down to just 7 laps. I went out next and on leaving the pit lane noticed that the front inside wheel was wobbling. My lap times confirmed the worse and I brought the kart back in and found the front tyre was about 30% bigger than it should have been more time lost. I returned to the track and finished my two hours without further incident.



Next out should have been Simon but it was decided to rest him until he was needed in the daylight. Half way through Russ's stint Ministry of speed came into the pits with a misfiring engine the disconsolate driver pacing back and forth while the mechanics sorted the problem. This probably cost them some 6 or seven laps. They returned to the track in third place behind us, with RDI Plymouth now in the lead. By the end of Russell's stint we were back in the lead but now both our other competitors had the same number of stops to make until the end.

I kept Russell out as long as possible to coincide with the opening up of the servicing time. We were the first to be serviced and paid the penalty as there was only one mechanic on hand to carry out the work we saved a small amount of time by not having a new set of front tyres fitted. RDI Plymouth had a fatal service stop. After the mechanics had completed the service the driver tried to start the right hand engine and broke the pull cord this put them out of contention for the win they would however eventually finish 3rd.

With five hours to go and only a 1-½ lap lead Simon completed his two hours neither gaining nor losing anytime. 3 hours to go with Russ up next for a short 1 hour 10 minute stint. Again nothing lost or gained and still only 1 ½ laps in it. By now my heart was pounding, just under 2 hours to go.

A perfect pit stop and Simon was next with the sprint to the flag could we do the remaining time without a problem and make this the teams 6th win at Le Mans.

Ministry of speed's Driver was lapping at a fantastic rate and setting their fastest time on lap 1214. But it was not to be for the well organised Ministry of Speed they were to finish second just one minute behind us after 24 hours of fast clean and safe driving. This being my last Le Mans 24 hours I had intended to take the final stint, but because there was so much at stake I decided that it was not to be.

With twenty minutes to go Phil Rudd told me that Russell and Simon had arranged for me to do the lap of honour if we won. I walked down to the gate and crossed the track to the control tower. With just five minutes to go Bob Pope handed me the chequered flag and gave me the honour of flagging the end of the race.

I had more than a tear in my eye as the race ended and so did my last Le Mans. The karts were stopped and the drivers were handed the flags of all the competing countries I proudly accepted the Welsh Dragon from Paul Beattie.

Simon got out of the kart we hugged each other and the karts set off for two parade laps. With the Marshall's flags waving all around the track, the Welsh flag in my right hand and the steering wheel in my left I don't think I could have retired in a better way.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has been associated with Equipe Vitesse over the last nine years. You have all contributed to this great team and made it the success it has been.

Thanks also go out to Geoff Lamb for the laugh he gave us. Well done Mister Lycra on your teams award.

To Gerard Hubbert we hope you like your new personalised number plate.

To Phil Rudd for his support

To Russell for not having to repair the plumbing this year in the hotel bedroom and keeping me awake.

To Simon reminding me on how fast I could have been.

To Laura for the food we forgot to eat again.

To Richard for the mistaken identity

To Norman for the loan of the 3.3 litre Chrysler Voyager

To the Bank manager to help pay for the fuel for the 3.3 Chrysler voyager

To anyone else I may have forgotten on purpose or by accident.

Here is to next year. Sorry I forgot I have retired.

Joe Flay