

EPEC 2011 Rd 4 Le Mans (24 heures du Mans) 2-3 July

We set off for the Ferry on Tuesday and met up Tuesday night in Portsmouth and then the stories began of previous campaigns which had been successful (few) and those that had ended in disappointment (many). Bob Pope's promise to maintain/improve grids had been kept because this year's Championship keeps getting bigger and better in spite of the recession. Le Mans had a 40 kart grid instead of 45 which is explained later in the article. This caused some teams to drop their second kart and others to amalgamate before the circuit maximum was changed too late in the day.

Thoughts turned to the current event and what might happen. Wright Karts under Jeff Johnson felt that this could be their year and 7 kart with Adam Lea were convinced that their team was stronger than in the past. MS had introduced driver changes as well as kart changes and were looking forward to a strong showing. Alpha had combined with AJB to produce a very strong team. The Dutch Team, racing for Holland, were hoping to repeat their successes of the past and were quietly confident.

Off Line racing had started the year before as an "arrive and drive" hire team but had performed so well that this year were a "full" Clubman team and in a rich vein of form. It would be the first 24hr event for the Portuguese team NKT –Transitex. The University team Canterbury were embarking on what would turn out to be an expensive and eventful week. The Isle of Man had sent a strong contingent and were expecting to have an enjoyable and trophy filled weekend.

In fact the usual buzz of excitement was going through all 40 teams as the weekend approached.

Practice

Each year the French authorities decide on the maximum number of teams in an event. They provisionally decided on 40 teams and then at a late stage upgraded this to 46 teams. The teams discovered why in first practice when they tried to ride the kerbs as per usual. The kerbs had been re – modelled to "encourage" drivers to drive between the white lines. Teams now had the dilemma of trading a fast lap for the real possibility of damage with the repeated impact of kerb riding. However, all this was forgotten when setting up in a "proper" garage in a line like F1 teams with all the lap times piped in which added to the racing atmosphere .

Qualifying

It was hot and sunny.

Overall

Pole		2 nd		3 rd	
43 MS SoCo 1	56.42	177 Racing for Holland	56.47	4 Alpha/AJB	56.51
Steve Welsh		Senna		Chris Freeman	

Clubman

Pole		2 nd		3 rd	
71 Rogue Racing	56.68	99 GKD Balmforth	56.84	8 Team Stretton	
		Mark Brown		Ronnie Rowe	

5th 25 Autotekk (Wright) 10th 187 Frascati (7 kart)

Start (12 noon till 6pm)

The teams looked extremely colourful and smart at the start line which stretched off into the distance.

At 12.00 noon they passed the start flag and another Le Mans was underway. 43 MS SoCo 1 (Steve Welsh) were quickly into the lead , closely followed by 4 Alpha/AJB (Chris Freeman) then 177 racing for Holland (Senna) . Keeping them honest was 78 SPA (Adam Nicholls), 99 GKD Balmforth (Mark Brown) , 19 Pro Gem (Daz Sandbach), 8 Stretton (Ronnie Rowe) 25 Autotekk (Jamie) and 71 Rogue Racing.

At 6hrs in, after 3 refuel/driver changes the race was starting to settle. 35min in 78 SPA had risen to 2nd briefly. At 1hr overall 43, 4 and 78 with the Club Hires 74, 1 and 68 leading their class. 57 Dazzle locked their brakes at the end of the straight which required the fitting of a steering column and the lump of time lost.

70 min in and 144 McDonalds tangled with a Hire Kart and then began a slow fight back through the field.

6hours (395 Tours, 250 miles)

43, 4, 78, 177, 99, 25, 77, 187, 8 and 2

6pm till midnight (800 tours 500 miles)

Wright karts in the shape of 25 Autotekk were circulating steadily between 5th and 7th , and well placed to take advantage of any slip ups by the leaders.

The 7 kart of 187 Frascati , unfortunately, was hampered with mechanical gremlins as they also circulated steadily albeit further back.

At the front 43 MS SoCo 1 were “flying” but so also were 4 Alpha/AJB and 177 Racing for Holland. These 3 had pulled away from 25 Autotekk, 77 Offline and 99 GKD Balmforth.

In the Club Hire class 1 Banzai, 74 RDI Shake and Bake and 73 Core GB were leading.

Midnight till 6am

This period is when the second set of tyres are fitted , engine oil checked and a quick kart inspection and adjustment (if necessary). There were many stories to tell of hub studs being cross threaded, tyres with directional arrows going the wrong way, wheel nut gun batteries mysteriously going flat in the “controlled” panic of the “long” pitstop as the teams tried to minimise the time lost. This is the session when tiredness catches up and driving mistakes become more frequent. It is the time when experience really begins to pay off as the challenges begin to fall away.

43 MS SoCo 1 consolidated their leading position to 2 laps in front of 4 Alpha and 4 laps to 177 Racing for Holland.

In the Club Hires 74 RDI Shake and Bake were 32sec ahead of 1 Banzai and 2 laps to 73 Core GB.

6am till 11.30am

Dawn had broken and the karts looked as though they had driven 750 miles as body work was streaked with black rubber and dented with the evidence of overtakes which nearly worked.

The teams in front were beginning to believe but apprehensive that the circuit still had a sting to deliver.

In the overall race the positions were settled barring a mechanical set back but the club Hires were still in the middle of a furious battle that would not be resolved until the finishing line was crossed. 43, 177, 4, 25, 99, 77, 8, 19, 187, 144 and the Club Hires 1, 67, 73 at 6.00am.

At 10 am 177 racing for Holland “beached” their kart across one of the chicanes, would they lose position? The gaps between 1 Banzai, 67 Ministry of Speed and 73 core GB were still closing.

End (12 noon)

On the line 43 MS SoCo 1 (Steve White) finished first. The only team to complete back to back Le Mans wins in the history of EPEC. 2nd were 4 Alpha/AJB with a win and 2 seconds in the last 3 years. 177 Racing for Holland with a win and 3rd in the last 4 years.

43, 4, 177, 25, 99, 77, 8, 144, 187, 2 were the top 10 in order.

The club Hires 67 Ministry of Speed, 1 Banzai and 73 Core GB

Scrutineering and Presentation

No irregularities were found even though engines were stripped and karts checked for compliance with the regs

Thanks to the organisers for a fair and exciting race and we are looking forward to Clay (6hr) 31 July and the UK 24hr 30/31 Aug.

Championship Points

Overall

1st		2nd		3rd
43 MS SoCo 1	286	4 Alpha	220	8 Stretton 168
Clubman				
1st		2nd		3rd
8 Stretton	168	78 SPA	165	77 Offline 165
Clubman hires				
1st		2nd		3rd
1 Banzai	117	3 ANKC	81	10 DBS 48