

Britcar - Oulton Park

23rd June

The fifth round of Britcar Production Cup was held at the picturesque Oulton Park circuit in Cheshire. After a second place at the last round, we were keen to go one better at this one but we knew it was not going to be easy.

The Piranha Motorsport team was split between Brands Hatch and Oulton Park this weekend and unfortunately Simon's duties as team manager, required him to be at Brands Hatch. This meant I would be sharing driving duties with team owner and ex British GT driver Chris Bialan, which I was very much looking forward to.

We arrived at a rather damp Oulton Park on Friday morning to start testing for Saturdays race. We had had no wet testing so far this year, so this was a good opportunity to learn a bit about the car in these conditions. This weekend also held other new challenges for me as a driver. My team mate for the weekend, Chris, is very experienced and accomplished in motor racing but he is a gentleman driver and it was now very much my responsibility to work closely with our engineer Ed, to do the set-up on the car. Although I normally contribute with this on race weekends, I did not have Simon's experience to bounce off of, so I had a lot more responsibility to make sure the car was handling well and to help Chris get up to speed. It was a challenge I was looking forward to though and one I had better get used to if I was to pursue a career in GT cars further.



We made some really good progress with the handling of the car throughout the morning and by the afternoon, it was a lot easier and more predictable to drive in the tricky wet conditions. Chris drove both of the afternoon sessions to give him as much time in the car as possible and he was feeling increasingly confident in the difficult

conditions. All was going well until the final 10 minutes of the day, when another car didn't check their mirrors and launched Chris into the barriers on the pit straight! Thankfully Chris was okay but the same could not be said for the car! The impact had caused considerable damage to the suspension and drive shafts and meant the team had a huge task on their hands to get it ready for the race.

We had a rather late night and very early morning sourcing parts whilst the guys worked their magic repairing the car. They did an unbelievable job and had the car ready with literally minutes to go before our qualifying session. This hadn't been quite the way we had wanted to prepare for qualifying but we were there none the less and it had even dried up too!

Qualifying



We decided I would drive the car first in qualifying to make sure there was no issues with it after the shunt. I did 2 laps and deduced the car needed a minor set-up change but was essentially fine. I immediately returned to the pits to hand the car over to Chris, so he could drive the rest of the session and get used to the car in the now dry conditions.

We ended the session 4th fastest, in class, behind two Honda Civic's and a Mini Cooper S, which was a pretty good result given the circumstances!

Race

After qualifying everyone took a couple of minutes to catch their breath back, after the drama of the past 12 hours and we worked out our strategy for the race. The skies were looking a bit suspect and suggested we could have some tricky tyre decisions to make during the race. It was decided I would start the race and as I was likely to be able to maintain a faster pace than Chris, the team planned to leave me out as long as possible. The weather and safety cars were going to play a big role in this race though, so it was impossible to forecast how the race was going to pan out.

I climbed into the car to start the race and as we sat in the holding area the rain started gently. Oulton Park is what most racing drivers call a proper race circuit. It's various undulations and fast corners, combined with little run off if you make a mistake, mean it is a great challenge and a brilliant circuit to drive. This does make it a bit of daunting place and even more so when it starts to drizzle and your on slick tyres!

I concentrated on getting heat in the tyres in the slippery conditions and focussed on making a

good start. As we crested the hill coming onto the start finish straight, I managed to judge my start perfectly and instantly moved into the class lead before turn 1. I dived with various cars from the class above and my class on the opening lap. I was being very cautious during these opening laps as the combination of the tricky weather conditions and varying levels of abilities around me could easily result in a big accident, which was the last thing we needed this weekend.

I dropped to 3rd on lap 2 and held this position for the next few laps. The rain came down slightly heavier but it only seemed to be effecting one part of the circuit, (turn 3 - turn 5) which made judging the grip levels very difficult. A few minutes later the Mini ahead of me had quite a big crash on the wet part of the circuit and this brought out the safety car.

The safety car was out for about 10 minutes and although this would be a good time to do your mandatory pit-stop, (as you would not lose as much time to your competition, as under full racing conditions) we decided it was too early in the race for this.

We were now 2nd in class thanks to the Mini's early departure from the race and thankfully the track was drying up a bit more. I made a decent re-start and began my pursuit of the leading Honda Civic. The damp conditions had suited the front wheel drive Honda better and initially after the re-start they pulled out a decent lead again but as the track started to dry out, I was able to start eating into their advantage.

I then came across some traffic from the class above, which was frustrating as although I was a bit quicker than them over a lap, their cars were faster than mine and this made it very tricky to overtake them. However, after a few laps I had managed to take advantage of a small mistake and get myself into clear air again. With clear dry track ahead of me, my lap times were fast and consistent and I was able to home in on the leader.

The Honda pitted around the half way mark but the team left me out and told me to push as hard as I could. We were now in the lead courtesy of the Honda's pit-stop but we needed to build up enough of a margin to be able to make our pit-stop and still keep the lead when Chris re-joined the track. I continued to lap quickly and it seemed we were marginally quicker than the Honda but it was going to be super close.

About 70 minutes into the race, I came across an accident in the first sector of the lap and I knew immediately it was going to require a safety car to clear it up. I got on the radio to tell the team and seconds later the safety car was out. This was our golden opportunity - by pitting under the safety car we would effectively get a free pit-stop and would be able to re-join the track in the lead.

I dived into the pits and swapped with Chris. He re-joined the circuit under safety car conditions with under 20 minutes of the race remaining. The safety car peeled off the circuit after a few minutes to allow the final 15 minutes of the race to be run under full racing

conditions. We now had a comfortable lead but this did not make the last few minutes of the race any less nerve wracking! A small rain shower kept Chris on his toes but he did a great job and brought the car over the line for the teams second win of 2012!



I don't think any of us could quite believe we had managed to win this one - it had been a complete roller coaster of a weekend, which defined team work. There were points on Friday night where I didn't think we would even be in the race the next day and full credit has to go to a very tired team, who worked miracles to give us a car capable of winning the race. The safety car at the end of the race was slightly lucky but never the less our strategy man Andy made brilliant calls throughout the race and being able to capitalise on the safety car was no fluke. From a personal point of view, I was pleased with my performance. I had been fast in the car and proved that I was capable of working as the lead driver in the team.

I just have to say a massive thank you to my sponsors and team for making this all possible. The next round see's us return to Snetterton on 18 & 19th August, where we were rather successful earlier this year and will be looking to make it win number 3 of 2012.

Kind regards,

Rory

