

Seeing Red

Written by Ron Dale
Wednesday, 26 May 2010 02:24

A bruised sky was a portent of things to come this past weekend at NASA's Llihrednuht event. Five Norcal 944 racers braved the weather and came to try their hand at racing Thunderhill Park in reverse (the track not the cars!) and were treated to an unusual weekend. The forecast was for rain showers beginning at 3:00pm and our Saturday race was scheduled for 12:40 but as usual mother nature holds her own clock.

Most of us lacked experience running the track in this direction so practice was going to be important. As we lined up on grid to go out in morning warmups our 944 cup transferee and Thunderhill rookie first trouble of the day started when a grid worker noticed a brake duct hanging loose. He would have to fix it and would miss the sorely needed practice time but as it turned out he didn't miss much. As we headed out under yellow, the flags were quickly changed to red. Apparently a tow truck was driving in the wrong direction on track and thought the track was clear but a late arrival at grid was trying to catch up to the pack and they met head on over the blind hill at turn 4 (this is the story as it was relayed to me and is not intended to be a factual account of the incident as I didn't see it and didn't speak directly to anyone that had). Everybody was ok but our session was quickly black flagged and the track was down one tow truck! Unfortunately that was not the last red flag of the weekend.

Qualifying went off without a hitch with Sid grabbing the pole while I lined up next to him on the front row followed by Greg, Steve, and Jerry in a tight qualifying session. As racetime approached the clouds thickened and the RainX came out. I don't have wipers and neither did a few others and all of us except for Sid with almost new R888's were running very worn or shaved tires so when the rain started at the 5 minute whistle trouble was coming! Steve's troubles continued on the formation lap as he soon discovered the hard way that he hadn't put his hood pins in and soon got a close up look at his paint job on his hood! He lost a lap fixing the "problem" but quickly came up to speed and gave a glimpse of the speeds he was capable of running. Coming to green we all forgot they moved the flag station and as Sid and I were trying to figure out if we were still under yellow and were being waved around again, the green flag waved from the pit wall! I was caught napping and quickly got freight trained by everybody! Sid stayed out front but was hounded by Greg who had his hands full battling the wet track. Jerry followed waiting for his turn to pick up the pieces if someone went off and was soon rewarded! Greg slid off as the track got wetter and Jerry seized the chance. Greg wasn't throwing in the towel however and got back on the horse and reeled Jerry in only to have another off that traded his transponder for a cone. Greg was clearly the class of the field and made up for lost time by getting back by Jerry and catching up the leader Sid even though timing and scoring didn't show him anymore.

I faded far back as I wasn't prepared for rain. My car was much too stiff and my skill were too atrophied for the conditions. I first lost contact and then sight of the front 3 and went into survival mode. The rain had stopped however and the track was slowly drying so I picked up the pace! As a dry line appeared I was able to get the car back under me and soon was rewarded with a glimpse of the leaders. Laps winding down I threw everything I had out there to try and catch up. I caught Jerry with 1 1/2 laps left and the battle was on! I showed the nose but Jerry doesn't rattle easy. I got a good run out of the tight turn 10 and pulled alongside going uphill to turn 9.

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Jerry had the inside line for the turn but I was alongside his door on the outside. I waited to turn in very late and "diamond" the corner which got me along side and now it was a drag race to the extremely fast turn 8! Side by side we Side by side, mirror to mirror we charged into 8 where something would have to give! Alongside, I looked over at Jerry to give him a wave hello or goodbye as would soon be determined but he wouldn't look at me so I knew he was determined. I held my breath and braked as late as I could locking up the rear tires! Jerry is brave(foolish?) as well but I had the better line and was able to get by. A few turns later coming to the checkers thing turned surreal. Out of turn 3 heading to 2 I saw a Jackrabbit running in the field heading towards the track on a collision course with us! My "live and let live" attitude took over and I felt I had to lift to save the little bunny's life. All I could think of was that my stupidity was going to cost me a hard earned third place but Mr Bunny hesitated and I stood on it and maintained my spot. Jerry on the other hand had to not only had to lift but had to get on the binders because little fuzzy changed his mind and headed for the track again. He live, I finished third followed by Jerry and Steve.

Up front Greg threw everything he had at Sid but couldn't get by. Sid drove another flawless race and earned another stirring victory.

Sundays weather was clear and cool and hopes were high for a good race. Hopes were soon dashed! Practice and qualifying went smooth as Steve was able to get his car on track for a full session each time and Greg threw down some VERY fast record breaking times with Steve trying for a place in the sun as well. They qualified in that order with Sid third, me fourth and Jerry fifth.

Steve had a plan for the start and executed it perfect grabbing the lead at the green flag. Greg grudgingly accepted second but didn't intend to stay long. I got the jump on Sid for third and Jerry stayed glued to his bumper for fifth. Greg's car was very loose as he tried to get by Steve for HIS first place. Through 7 turns we were locked together, and then it happened. Climbing the off camber hill for turn 5 Greg got sideways and was trying to collect the car. I wanted to capitalize on the opportunity but wasn't sure what would happen. I lifted but was too close and going too fast to stop. Greg was now in a full spin and I was closing in. I chose the right and turned hard as he came back across the track. Fortunately I cleared him by inches(according to my wife who saw it all)! Sid saw the spin coming and knew he had to drive 2 wheels off into the dirt to avoid contact. Jerry was unaware of what was happening and was on it hard cresting the hill. Unfortunately Greg was still on the track and despite Jerrys attempts at avoidance the impact was hard. Unawares, I raced on but the next flag stand showed red. My heart sank! These aren't my competitors, they are my friends and the thought that they may be hurt was very emotional as I sat on track unable to see what was going! The red flag period seemed like forever. I was heartened by the fact that I didn't see an ambulance come out on track. The good news is that nobody was hurt just cars. The collision was front to back and although it

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appears that one car is a write off and one Might be fixable, the drivers will race another day!

The race did resume but was mostly a blur. Sid got by me on the restart and I hounded him to the finish but Steve ran away for an impressive win.

All in all it was a tough weekend but I learned to appreciate my friend more off the track than on. I hope to see everyone again at the track or over a bottle of wine soon. Very special thanks have to go out to Tony and crew at TC Designs for building strong race car roll cages and Art and the guys at Autopoint motors for making sure they are track worthy and also to the fellow racers like Jeremy and Rod and the crew at Thunderhill for helping us take care of the carnage and getting it on the trailers

Ron Dale