

Suzuka Dream Cup 2004



Suzuka, Japan

30th July - 1st August 2004

Report 6 - Sunday 1st August

We woke to just a few odd patches of sunshine, the howling typhoon continued to generate wind and we were hoping for clearing conditions. The TV weather channel reported ongoing rain for the Suzuka area, but the centre of the typhoon on the west coast.

We arrived at the windswept Suzuka Formula 1 track just after the start of the 4 hour Enjoy Class solar car race. Enjoy would have been a difficult feeling. These small cars were buffeted and rained on, but the spirit of these racers is great.

By 10.00 AM the batteries for the entrants in the main race were released by the officials. This is a race in itself as the teams run with their trolleys to where their solar cars have been set up for a 2 hour solar charging session. Today this was a desperate struggle to hold the large arrays down against the wind yet keeping them pointed vertically to the lighter part of sky where we thought the sun was.



Typically we registered from 200 to 500 watts and just once or twice a maximum of 1700 watts - nowhere near enough to fill the battery. All the teams were in the same situation. We all faced 4 hours of racing on unfilled batteries with worse weather to come. A solar car race with no sun ahead!

We did have our own panics. Thirty minutes before race start the officials asked to check the turn indicators. The left hand indicator failed due to a water short. We frantically looked for the fault, and finally just 7 minutes before the race start we satisfied the officials and rolled on to the grid in 5th position. And wait there's more. The motor wouldn't start. After 3 attempts we thought it was OK, we had to leave the car in Derrick's hands

and hope that he would get going. No worries mate!



Derrick jumped to second place and seemed to be traveling well. Tom, who had the most responsibility in fixing the electrical problems was prone with exhaustion. Stress was the order of the moment.



The necessity was to conserve all the energy possible. This was a lap by lap thing as occasionally the sky lightened and a bit of sun came through. Derrick paced the Aurora 101 solar car very well. Doug Williams was monitoring the data every lap from track-side. We were pacing well with the leading entrants Kanazawa, OSU, TIGA and Panda Sun. The remarkable private team ENAX were in front.

After the first hour ENAX stopped for a driver change and Aurora 101 was in the lead. The pack made up of TIGA, OSU and Kanazawa were close behind, all watching their energy usage more than carefully. Panda Sun was out in front on aggregate results and was handling the conditions well. The weather worsened - could it get any worse? Periods of driving rain made the track slippery for the special low friction tyres used on these cars. The number of retired cars on the side of the track was mounting.

Around the 2 hour mark, most of the leaders came in for a mandatory driver change. Aurora 101 remained in the lead although slowing as the batteries drained. At 3.50 PM it was time for Damien to take over and a slick driver change was accomplished. Poor Damien was served up the worst of the weather and on a marginal amount of battery energy. This last hour was in the gloom of sheet rain. More cars were exhausted as the battery systems expired and the side of the track was the only recourse.



At 4.45 PM Damien called to say that the car was stopped just before the chicane. Just 30 metres before the downhill section towards the finish line. He had to sit there and hope that he could get a bit of solar energy into the battery. We are joking but he did get enough to restart for another 10 metres. The rest of us were back looking at the TV to see the tense finish. All cars were at the end of their available energy. Car 4, the Panda Sun entry scraped across the finish line seconds before the chequered flag, allowing them to attempt one more lap. TIGA crossed after the flag and looked like winners, but...

We all wondered if Panda Sun could complete their last lap. Incredibly they did and were the winners, yes and grinners.



Panda Sun, TIGA, OSU, Kanazawa and Aurora 101 were the top 5. Aurora recorded the fastest lap of the race but the motor problems in the first heat were sufficient to dash a better finish. We want to come back.

The new members of the Aurora team made a terrific contribution to the way we dealt with the many problems we encountered and the comments of Damien, Doug and Derrick are worth reading.

Damien's Comment

The hospitality has been amazing. Everyone has greeted us with a smile and a wave. The race and the whole stay in Japan has been an experience I will never forget. It would have been nice to have had some more sun, which would have made the strategy much easier. Hopefully we will be back next year for another awesome race.

Derrick's Comment

For the first time coming to Japan it was quite an experience for me - the weather, food and language. It was great to be at the Suzuka race circuit and have the chance to race around it. With 33 cars in the field it was a very exciting start in both of the races.

Unfortunately we had a little trouble in the first race which put us back a bit from the leaders. In the end we gained most of the ground back that we had lost, but the weather didn't seem to play our way in the final heat. But I think we all had a great time and learnt a lot, and looking to next year perhaps there will be some sun!



Doug's Comment

It was all go when we got to the track, in the three days before heat 1 we had successfully created and fixed many problems, passed scrutineering and realised that there was a typhoon heading towards Suzuka. It wouldn't be a solar car race without the challenges, and despite them we all pulled together as a team and did our best in the conditions. We all had a great time and we look forward to the next races and challenges.

