

Robert's Rally Round-up

ANOTHER DONEGAL RALLY ENDS IN TRAGEDY

For the third time in eight years the Donegal International Rally has ended prematurely, and in tragic circumstances.

Back in 2002 we had the sad loss of two young marshals, then just two years ago the death of a spectator. In both incidents the unfortunate victims were struck by competing cars.

This time a young co-driver, Thomas Maguire from Longcross in Co.Meath, was fatally injured when the Citroen C2R2 Max he was sharing with Co. Mayo based driver Shane Buckley, left the road on a fast section of the famous Knockalla stage and plunged over a cliff. Shane was critically hurt and remained in a serious but stable condition as I write this, in a Dublin hospital. Shane is a nephew of former Irish Tarmac star, Ger Buckley.

The rally was halted as soon as the gravity of the accident became apparent, and the final Sunday section cancelled.

It had all started so positively for us as timekeepers. On day one, Friday, we headed for Malin Head right at the top of the island of Ireland on the Inishowen peninsula. Here we met up with Chief Timekeeper Liz Devine, who would issue us with our instructions, equipment and paperwork. John, Anna, Victor and I were due to cover the finish controls here and then on Fanad Head and Atlantic Drive, exactly the same locations as we covered last year.

A total of 150 cars started the 2010 Topaz Donegal International Rally and we had 144 cross the finish line on SS2 (Malin 1). Second time round, stage four, and that was reduced to 133, but both stages ran without any problems. The flying finish of the stage was right on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, and because the weather was glorious, Victor and I were able to sit out and watch the cars through the last two corners before they approached the timing beams.

When the Malin stages were over the rally headed for two short tests around the streets of Buncrana where around 10,000 spectators were gathered to watch the competitors put on a show for them. It was 1981 when the rally last visited here and the first "town stage" on the event for years. We on the other hand would head to Carrigans and our usual B&B which would be base camp for the weekend, but not before rescue crew Mitchell and Margaret Henderson, as was the case last year, treated us to a meal in their cottage which is situated at the end of the Malin Head stage.

So on to Saturday, and the good weather continued. We left Carrigans after an early breakfast and drove to the finish location of Fanad Head. Having covered this particular point for a number of years now, all of us knew what to expect. We arrived about 8.30, in good time to set up the equipment before the first car was due to start at 10.20.

For the first time in three years we had no major problems with the two runs of the Fanad stage and everything ran to time. Craig Breen in his S2000 Fiesta, second overnight, had a huge sixth gear accident on the first run but thankfully neither crew members were injured and the stage was able to continue. The star driver, for me, round the last corner was MG Metro 6R4 pilot, David Bogie who

led the National Rally; he just threw the glorious sounding supercar sideways and drove flat out across the line!

By the end of stage 10, the second Fanad, we had 121 cars remaining in the event as the field then headed to Knockalla and the first run over this classic Donegal test.

We were finished for the day and headed back to rally HQ in Letterkenny for a meal. It was while we were here, around 5pm, that news began to filter back that there had been a serious accident on the first Knockalla stage. As time went on the full details and severity of the incident became clear and eventually at 11.45pm Donegal Motor Club issued a statement to the effect that because of a fatal accident on SS11 Knockalla, the rest of the rally had been cancelled, there would be no Sunday stages. We handed in our timekeeping equipment and agreed we would attend the memorial service for Thomas Maguire which was planned for 11.30am the following day.

The large function room at the Mount Errigal Hotel, HQ for the Donegal International Rally, was packed to overflowing on that warm and sunny Sunday morning. An estimated 1,500 competitors, officials, marshals and fans attended the hastily arranged memorial service for the late Thomas Maguire, which was attended by Shane Buckley's immediate family as everyone prayed for his speedy recovery. Daimen Crawford, Chairman of Donegal MC, addressed the large crowd and spoke of a close knit rallying community who competed together, played together and mourned together.

For the record, Gareth MacHale and Brian Murphy led the rally for start to finish in their Ford Focus WRC, the same car as last year, when Gareth scored his first Tarmac Championship victory here in Donegal. Tim McNulty and Paul Kiely were a distant second in the S12B Subaru while Daragh O'Riordan took the final podium place in his S11 example, with co-driver Tony McDaid emulating his father Robert's feat of last year when he accompanied Sean Devine to third. David Bogie beat all the quick Escort Mk.2 drivers to win the National Rally in his fantastic MG Metro 6R4.

All of this was irrelevant; no one really cared about results on what was once again a sad end to an event which had promised so much.

As Donegal Motor Club enters its 41st year, there have to be huge question marks hanging over the future of the club's flagship event, the Donegal International Rally. A great pity, because, coming as it does at the height of summer, the spectacular event with its classic tarmac stages, always attracts large crowds and capacity entry lists, this year being no exception. I for one hope something can be sorted out, as this is one of my favourite events on the calendar and has always been hugely popular throughout the rallying world. Mid June just wouldn't be the same without the Donegal Rally!

GASS WINS FOR THE FIRST TIME

Darren Gass won round five of the NI Championship, the Newry and District Motor Club's Modern Tyre Service Mourne Rally, held over nine road closed tarmac stages in the Newtownhamilton and Slieve Gullion areas but based in Newry. This was local hero Gass's first stage rally victory.

Another glorious Saturday made the conditions ideal for fast tarmac rallying and the 84 crews who started the event on 5th June did not disappoint the large turn out of spectators.

Victor, Goff, Steven and I were covering the finish of SS 3/6/9 Deadmans Hill, while John and Anna were on the start of SS 2/5/8 Black Hill. SS 1/4/7 was a new long version of Slieve Gullion.

The only incident of note on our particular stages happened on SS3 when car No. 31, a Mitsubishi Evo.8 driven by Andrew Mullen and his co-driver Elaine Doherty, had a "sudden stop" crash towards the end of the test and although taken to hospital as a precaution, neither were seriously hurt. This did cause the stage to be stopped and the remainder of the field were sent back to the service park in Newry. Our other two runs ran without incident and young Gass, in his McKinstry Motorsport prepared Subaru S11 WRC, broke the timing beams on stage nine to record a famous win from the Group N Mitsubishi Lancer Evo.9 of John McGlaughlin and Crawford Henderson.

Gass and his co-driver Sean Mullaly had been leading from the start and were 45 seconds ahead of McGlaughlin after the second loop, but on SS7, the final run over Slieve Gullion, they picked up TWO punctures! The lost of 48 seconds stage time coupled with a resulting 30 seconds in road penalties as they replaced the tyres, dropped them 33 seconds behind McGlaughlin. Then on the last two stages a "kamikaze" drive saw the Markethill man take 44 seconds out of the Cookstown driver and thus claim victory by 11 seconds. Darren was bathed in sweat as I gave him his time at the end of the final stage. He and Sean whooped with delight when they realised that it was enough to ease past John and win the Mourne Rally 2010, an event which was formally sponsored by Darren's dad Maurice.

Third was Mark Donnelly from Omagh paired with Stephen O'Hanlon in an Evo.8, while fourth place was enough to give Stuart Biggerstaff and co-driver Antony Nestor in the S9, a six point lead over the absent Derek McGarrity at the half way stage of the 2010 Championship. The final five rounds will be in the forests and rumours persist that Derek will be back out for the next, the Dogleap in August.

As Chief Timekeeper on the Mourne I would just like to thank all BMMC/BRMC members who gave up their free time to help me out on the event. We all enjoyed an end of rally meal at the Carrickdale Hotel, where a total of 53 competitors made it to the finish ramp.

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ALL THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF RALLYING:

IRC Meeke takes on Loix and crashes out of Ypres Rally

WRC.....Ogier beats Loeb in straight fight for first win

ITRC.....Fisher leads by one point from MacHale after Donegal

BRC.....Greer leads going to Isle of Man, but Evans is dangerman

LOOKING BACK

Donegal timing memories

25 YEARS AGO1985

Tony Pond brought over a works MG Metro 6R4 to Donegal and I was the first person to start the machine on an International Rally. The supercar was fastest on the first six stages, and one minute ahead of everyone, then the engine blew. It later ran as a course car with 007 on the doors. Of course the local wise guys then referred to the main man as Tony Bond! The rally was won by Billy Coleman in the Rothmans Porsche 911 after a titanic battle with Austin McHale's black Shell Opel Manta 400. After day one Coleman led, but then lost a huge amount of time to McHale on day two only to claw back to 37 seconds behind going into the final day. Then by the start of the penultimate stage the gap was down to 8 seconds. Coleman blitzed the short stage to take the win by ONE second....the final test was cancelled because too many spectators had jammed the roads!

20 YEARS AGO.....1990

This was the year of the big battle of the BMW M3's in Donegal. Bertie Fisher lost out to Austin McHale after picking up a ten second penalty for an off-schedule tyre change. Had this penalty been quashed, Bertie would have won the rally by one second. James Cullen was third in a Sierra Cosworth.

10 YEARS AGO.....2000

Andrew Nesbitt in his Subaru Impreza WRC was fastest on ALL 18 STAGES of the Donegal Rally, a record that still stands to this day. Second, some 3 minutes down, was James Cullen in an older Impreza 555. Ian Greer was third in his Celica.

5 YEARS AGO.....2005

The rally was won for the second year in succession by Eugene Donnelly in his Toyota Corolla WRC. Nesbitt's Subaru crashed out of the lead at "Wilhare's Corner" on Knockalla. Tim McNulty was second in his S9 with Austin McHale third in the Focus WRC.

Rally Diary

SAT. 3RD JULY LOUGHGALL FESTIVAL OF MOTORSPORT

Sign on time for marshals is an early 07.30 for this North Armagh MC event.

TUES. 13TH JULY BADMC BISHOPSCOURT CLUBMAN RALLY

We have been asked to provide the Timekeepers for this the second round of the Pacenotes ANICC 2WD Rally Challenge. Sign on time is 9am. The six stage tarmac event, sponsored by Roy Haslett Preparation, starts at 10am and prizegiving is scheduled for 17.30.

SAT. 31ST JULY ORCHARD MOTORSPORT LURGAN PARK RALLY

For this the 30th anniversary of North Armagh MC's premier event, expect some new features including a Metro 6R4 Challenge and a visit from the "Slowly Sideways" group which will give demo runs in their restored rally cars from the Group B/4 era. Main field entries are expected to include McKinstry and McGarrity in their respective Subaru WRC's. I have been asked to provide fire marshals as usual so PLEASE, PLEASE, sign on at the cricket pavilion before 09.00 if you can help.

SAT. 7TH AUG. DOGLEAP RALLY

No information as yet regarding this, the sixth round of the Hankook NI Championship and the first forest event. Run by Maiden City MC the rally normally uses the stages in the Limavady area. We expect to be asked for timekeepers, so contact me nearer the date if interested.

NEXT WRC ROUNDS

RALLY BULGARIA..... JULY 9-11 (Asphalt)

NESTE OILS RALLY FINLAND..... JULY 29-31 (Gravel)

NEXT IRC ROUNDS

SATA RALLY ACORES..... JULY 15-17 (Gravel)

RALI VINHO MADEIRA..... AUG. 5-7 (Asphalt)