

Robert's Rally Round-up

KRIS MEEKE SIGNS FOR MINI

As I predicted back in May, Dungannon's Kris Meeke has signed up to drive the Prodrive built MINI Countryman WRC in the World Rally Championship from 2011. Meeke becomes the first driver from Northern Ireland to contest the main category of the WRC and he could be a future World Champion. The Ulsterman's deal was officially confirmed at the Paris motor show where a concept of the new car was unveiled on September 30th. Incidentally the mock up appeared in a red and white colour scheme, another of my predictions to come true! The identity of Meeke's team mate, believed to be either P.G. Anderson or Marcus Gronholm, was not revealed in Paris.

Paul Nagle should continue to co-drive for Kris, as he has done in the IRC for Peugeot over the last two seasons. Any faint mathematical chance the pair had of retaining their Intercontinental Rally Challenge crown disappeared completely in Sanremo last month, when they slipped back to finish fourth after leading the rally early on. New champion-elect, Juho Hanninen in the Skoda, was second behind local hero Paulo Andreucci in his Peugeot 207.

The MINI's first WRC rally should be in Italy next May, and then Prodrive intend to contest five more rounds of the 2011 series. Following on from this will be a full WRC campaign in 2012. Given time Kris Meeke could be in the running for the World Crown by 2013.

Citroen and Ford also launched their new for 2011 1.6 turbo cars in Paris, the DS3 WRC and the Fiesta RS WRC respectively.

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SEVENTH WORLD TITLE FOR SEBASTIEN LOEB

A win on his home event, Rallye de France, was more than enough for Sebastien Loeb to claim his seventh World Championship in a row. This was his and co-driver Daniel Elena's sixtieth WRC victory, a feat which I am sure will never be equalled let alone beaten. Citroen also took the manufactures title as they swept to a 1-2-3 result with Dani Sordo/ Diego Vallejo second and Petter Solberg, with Ulster co-driver Chris Patterson, third.

As the WRC now moves on to Spain and the Rally RACC Catalunya, I wonder if Citroen will let Sordo win his home event for once? He is to be replaced by Sebastien Ogier in the senior team from 2011, so this would be a way of saying "thank you" from Citroen for all the support given to "his majesty" Loeb by the Spaniard. Dani has been second to Seb for the past four years in Spain, and has yet to record a WRC win. Loeb reportedly told a French magazine in an interview that as 2011 would be the last year of his present Citroen contract, he may then retire. Something which he has since played down, by saying that as long as he is still fit and enjoying rallying, then he will continue. Loeb is now 36 years old.

NO PLACE FOR CIRCUIT OF IRELAND IN 2011 IRC

The recent release of the calendar for next years IRC shows that there is no place for Bobby Willis's Circuit of Ireland Rally. Despite big efforts this year, it appears that a big pot of cash was required to "buy" one's way into the second biggest global rally championship, something even the charismatic Willis was unable to achieve. It is not known at this stage whether Bobby will continue to pursue a slot in the IRC at some time in the future. As an aside, with Easter next year falling on the last weekend in April, there is a fight going on between the Circuit and the Killarney Rally of the Lakes as to who runs in their traditional slot. Killarney's scheduled date, the May bank holiday, is just one week later. As I write neither side is willing to move! Both events are of course rounds of the Irish Tarmac Championship.

FISHER WINS THRILLING LAKELAND BATTLE WITH GREER

A rally long battle between Alastair Fisher and Jonny Greer was resolved on the Fisher Engineering Lakeland Stages when 22-year-old Fisher claimed victory on the final stage by just one second.

We were timing stage one, the 2.1 miles of Conagher near Derrygonnelly, and Fisher was fastest by one second from Greer. Kenny McKinstry was another second down in third. This would remain the order for the first loop of four stages, Kenny at a loss to understand why the two 22-year-olds in Gp.N Evo.9 Mitsubishi's were faster than his Subaru S8 WRC.

At the mid point service break in Garrison; Alastair led the rally by three seconds from Jonny. Then they returned to our stage. This time though it was Greer who set fastest time by two seconds. He was fastest again on the 2.5 mile sixth stage Big Dog, to take the rally lead by one second. Then came the 11.1 miles Of Carrigans and despite loosing third gear midway through, Fisher was one second quicker than Greer, leaving both young chargers dead level on time going into the final 4.6 miles of Ballintempo. Here Fisher pulled out all the stops and charged through the stage to take the narrowest of wins on this the seventh round of the Hankook NI Championship.

It was a historic first NI Championship win for the Co. Tyrone driver. Second on this event twelve months ago, again just ahead of Jonny Greer, Alastair's only other rally victory to date was two years ago on the tarmac Enniskillen MC Clubman Rally in the Fiesta, run over stages not too far from where we were to-day. His uncle Bertie had of course won the Lakeland event, sponsored by the company his family founded, way back in the eighties.

The vastly experienced Gordon Noble who was co-driving for Alastair, said "Those last two stages were mighty, we were in and out of every sheugh, but the notes were spot on"

Kenny McKinstry and Kenny Hull finished almost a minute back in third place, while sixth was enough for Stuart Biggerstaff to claim top points in the Championship and thus increase his lead with three rounds left. Adrian Hetherington won a nail-biting battle with early leader Frank Kelly to take the 2 wheel-drive class in his Mk.2 Escort.

Altogether 65 cars started the event from Fisher Engineering in Ballinamallard, while 44 made it to the finish at the Killyhevlin Hotel where all officials were treated to a meal, courtesy of the organising Enniskillen MC. Although dry to start with, some very heavy showers left the stages slippery, particularly during the second loop.

CAIRNS NETS FIRST NI CHAMPIONSHIP WIN ON BUSHWACKER

Two weeks after the Lakeland we were out again, this time down in the forests of Co.Tyrone for Omagh MC's McKelvey Bushwacker Rally. This was round eight of the Ni Championship and with just two rounds to follow, it promised to be a battle royal between young guns Mark Donnelly (18) and Stuart Biggerstaff (22) for the 2010 crown.

Victor, Ross and myself were on the finish of SS 2/7 Lough Braden North, which at 4.76 miles was the longest stage, while John and Anna would be at the stop line on SS 5/10 Carrickaholten.

The weather, although quite cold, was unusually dry this year, which made our job all that easier to complete. Ross was on a learning curve and I think he enjoyed the experience because he says he will be back.

Anyhow the rally ran smoothly apart from a nasty incident on the second stage which left driver Ryan Barrett in hospital with severe bruising when he crashed his Mk.2 at high speed.

The overall winners were Strabane's Martin Cairns and Andrew Purcell in a Subaru Impreza S9. Martin has been competing in this event for 20 years but this was his first win, and yet another driver to score a maiden NI Championship victory this year.

Second, for the umpteenth time, was Castlederg's James Gillen in his Subaru Impreza S6 (one of the first World Rally Cars). Co-driven by Jason Haron the pair finished just 8 seconds behind Cairns. A remarkable result, considering they were plagued with brake problems all day, which made the car dangerous to drive, the middle pedal going straight to the floor on most of the stages!

In third place was Dogleap winner Donagh Kelly and Kevin Flanagan in their Mitsubishi Evo.9 a further 9 seconds down. Top 2-wheel drive car was the Ford Escort Mk.2 of brothers Vivan and Paul Hamill, they were seventh after a classic battle with Frank Kelly and Adrian Hetherington who finished ninth and tenth in similar but slightly less powerful Mk.2's.

As for Championship contenders Donnelly and Biggerstaff, they were actually classified fourth and fifth respectively. Although both finished dead level on time after the 11 stage event, Donnelly got the nod as he had been faster on stage one. This makes the race for the championship even closer, Biggerstaff ahead by just 7 points going into the penultimate round, the F&M Contracts Down Rally, later this month. No one else can challenge these two young guns for the 2010 NI crown.

Following the rally, which incidentally had 84 starters and 62 finishers, we were treated to a fantastic meal at Rally HQ, the Silverbirch Hotel in Omagh.

THE DAVAGH MASTER "RAINS" SUPREME

Camillus Bradley was a late entry for Cookstown MC's Davagh Rally but that didn't stop the recognised "Davagh Master" scoring another dominant win over the fast but extremely challenging tarmac drives of the Co.Tyrone forest. This was round four of the Pacenotes ANICC 2WD Rally Challenge.

Bradley and co-driver Shane Quinn in the usual Mk.2 Escort, finished one and a half minutes ahead of second place Mark Massey/Paul McKenna in their Mitsubishi Evo. 9, despite having a huge sideways moment near the end of stage six, their only slip-up all day.

Fifty seven cars started the seven stage event but only forty managed to make it through to the finish. Stages 1, 2 and 3 were six miles long, while SS 4 was a very short "mini-stage" during which officials reversed the long test ready for the final three stages. We as a club provided all the timekeepers and some key radio personnel. Conditions were slippery and treacherous with persistent heavy rain falling throughout the duration of the rally. Although Camillus said he actually enjoyed it like this and there was plenty of grip for his 2-wheel drive car.

There were many incidents during the day but the most serious of these happened on stage two when the Escort of Mickey Conlon had a huge crash and blocked the stage. The crew were trapped in the car and the following Mitsubishi, running 30 seconds behind, had to take avoiding action resulting in another accident. Conlon's co-driver, Hugh McKenna suffered a broken neck and was carefully transported to hospital. He was detained in intensive care for three days but later discharged and hopefully will make a full recovery.

Although stage two was six miles long and so within the MSA guidelines for the 30 second interval start rule (under eight miles) to my mind and that of MSA Steward Nigel Hughes, this is not safe enough for Davagh! If the following car, travelling flat out, had hit Conlon's stricken Escort with the crew still inside, the resulting injuries could have been much more serious! Think on Cookstown Motor Club, for next time.

DONEGAL DRIVER WINS ENNISKILLEN CLUBMAN RALLY

Gary McElhinney and co-driver Darragh Kelly won the System Signs Clubman Stages Rally held on Saturday 2nd October over 12 tarmac tests near it's base in Derrygonnelly. This was the Escort MK.2 crew's first ever rally victory, and they did it in style leading from start to finish. Second were local men Harold Brown and Bartley Downey in a Vauxhall Astra GSI, just 3 second behind in the end.

We had a busy day timekeeping; Victor and I were working on the stages held over the five and a half mile Lough Navar Forest Drive, while John and Anna covered the short mile long stage known as Bothwell. Both locations were run three times and then reversed, so we did three finishes and three starts.

Although the Enniskillen MC organised event only had 32 starters and 23 finishers, the rally, which got underway at 10.30am, did not finish until 6pm. Luckily the weather was reasonable with only one short period of rain.

This event was also round five of the Pacenotes ANICC 2WD Rally Challenge. Points leader going into the rally, James Kennedy, retired his Escort on SS1 with mechanical problems, which means that Mickey Conlon, who finished seventh, is now just 7 points behind with only the final round, Newry MC's Gullion Stages, to come next month.

DON'T FORGET; ALL THE NEWS , VIDEOS AND PICS. FROM THE ABOVE EVENTS AND MORE INCLUDING KRIS MEEKE AT ULTRA HILLCLIMB ON RallyBuzz.com

LOOKING BACK

Marshalling memories

25 YEARS AGO.....Oct.1985

Richard Parsons driving his championship winning March won the Glenariff Hillclimb organised by Mid Antrim MC. We were marshalling on the hill which was held in very wet conditions. Second was Robert McGimpsey or "Turbo Sam" in his home-built Crossle Turbo.

20 YEARS AGO.....Oct.1990

Mervyn Hill scored his first victory in the Northern Ireland Rally Championship on the Lakeland Stages. He and co-driver Kevin Shaw were in a Ford Escort Mk.2 as were second placed Philip Young and Richard Hogg. Third place went to David Greer/Mark Crowe driving a Toyota Corolla. BMMC/BRMC club personnel were timekeeping plus covering rescue and radio on this Enniskillen MC event.

15 YEARS AGO.....Oct.1995

Frank Meagher and Michael Maher won the Manx Rally and with it the Irish Tarmac tile. Bertie Fisher was well in the lead after day one, but his Subaru developed mechanical problems during the second day forcing the Fermanagh man's retirement. Ray and I were timekeeping on the three day event which saw Alister McRae clinch the British Rally Championship and Trevor Cathers /Gordon Noble take both British and Irish Gp.N titles.

The 1995 Lakeland Stages was won by local hero Stephen Harron and Nigel Foster in a Ford Sierra. Derek McGarrity took second in his Metro 6R4 while third place was good enough to give George Robinson the NI Championship with two rounds still remaining. We of course were assisting as usual.

10 YEARS AGO.....Oct.2000

Denis Biggerstaff insured that the battle for the 2000 NI Championship would go down to the wire with second place behind Robbie McGurk's state-of-the-art Subaru Impreza on the Bushwacker. Having rolled out of the Lakeland Stages earlier in September, Metro 6R4 driver Biggerstaff would head to the final round, the Mid Antrim Toshiba Rally in November, ready to go head to head with Robin Phillips for the title, just like in 1999!

Rally Diary

SAT. 9TH OCT.

DONEGAL HARVEST STAGES RALLY

We have been asked to cover two stages of this event with finish timekeepers. The Rally is based in Ballybofey this year. Contact me for further information.

THUR.14TH -SUN. 17TH OCT.

RALLY OF SCOTLAND

This is Round 11 of the IRC (The penultimate round). Marshals are required. If you are interested please contact either of the Chief Marshals; Andy Straube at andy.straube@tesco.net or Colin Christie at colin.christie63cc@tiscali.co.uk.

SAT. 16TH OCT.**GORTIN GLEN RALLY TIME TRIAL**

This is always referred to locally as the Gortin Glen Hillclimb. Organised by Omagh MC. Sign on at bottom of hill 10am. I will not be going down this year.

SAT. 23RD OCT.**F&M CONTRACTS DOWN RALLY**

Although Victor, David and I will be in Spain that weekend to see Loeb and Sordo dominate again, we have been asked to provide timekeepers as usual. Stages featured are similar to last year, Rostrevor and Tollymore in the morning then moving to Drumkeeragh and Castlewellan in the afternoon. Entries should be boosted this year by competitors from the Southern Forestry Championship, of which the Down is the final and deciding round. It is of course also the penultimate round of the Hankook NI Championship.

FRI. 29TH -SUN. 31ST OCT.**CIRCUIT OF IRELAND RETRO**

This year's Retro will be similar to last year. Based in Lisburn at the Premier Inn, there will be tests again at Kirkistown plus other locations in counties Antrim, Down and Louth. Craig Hunt is the contact for further information.

SAT. 6TH NOV.**GLENS OF ANTRIM RALLY**

The 10th and final round of the 2010 Hankook NI Rally Championship run as usual by Mid Antrim MC will use much the same forest stages as last year. We are timekeeping and I HOPE, providing rescue as we normally would. Stuart Biggerstaff and Mark Donnelly fight out the destination of this year's NI title which should go right down to the wire.