

Cassells shouts “Welcome Back” as he powers to the season opening win

Saturday 03 July saw the long and much awaited return of the SW Adair Tyres Northern Ireland Sprint Championship for 2021. After a non-championship covid friendly round on 08 May The Ulster Automobile Club put together a fantastic round on a date which was originally earmarked as a reserve event. I'm not sure what favours they pulled but the weather was amazing, as was almost every aspect of the day itself

After such a long layoff from Championship action 87 competitors gathered at socially distanced intervals around the paddock to see their season commence. Despite it being like a scene from a film about a robbery, with everyone wearing face masks round the paddock. There genuinely was a super atmosphere round the paddock again as friends who hadn't seen each other in months were able to see each other across the paddock again. There were of course a couple whom it was considered looked far better behind a mask, however we won't go there!!

Just as everyone was getting ready to commence their first practice run a few small drops of rain were felt around the paddock. Thankfully, for once, the pre event weather report proved to be correct and the rain was barely enough to show up on the ground s it didn't hamper proceedings. Indeed the sun shone all day and it was a beautiful day to be at Kirkistown.

After 2 practice runs it was straight into the timed runs and Alan Cassells started proceedings by going fastest with Adrian Pollock in his Dallara F301 second and Steven Gault third in his Reynard 903. Gerard O`Connell had an eventful first run with a slight spin registering him a fail in his Dallara World series car.

During the runs the times tumbled and Gerard O`Connell managed to claw his way back up to second place with a run of 110.68 secs. Adrian Pollock managed to set the same time in both his first and second timed run with a whopping run of 111.61 in EACH run to land third and Steven Gault also charged hard and set a run of 113.32 to claim fourth overall. No one was able to match Alan Cassells who guided his ultra-lightweight modern turbo charged OMS25 rocket ship to an impressive fastest time of the day with a run of 108.192 secs.

Despite being the fastest car overall Alan, surprisingly was not the fastest car through the speed traps. Gerard O`Connell took this honour with a speed of 127 mph, whilst Both Steven Gault and Adrian set 125mph runs through the clock. The most surprising one for me was David Hawthorne who was clocked at 112mph in his first timed run. When you consider that the speed trap was right at the end of the straight in and around the breaking point for the chicane it shows just how committed these drivers all were to earning the title of “last of the late breakers”

In terms of the rest of the field it was great to see Lee Kirkwood making a comeback in his Radical SR3 which he steered to an effective class win and ninth overall. It was also good to see the return of class 14 regular George Stevenson who debuted a beautiful Force PT. This cars was, without a doubt the best presented car in the paddock, and there were some beautiful cars in the paddock. Other returnees of note included Lewis Dunlop who was out in a Lotus Elan in which he surprised a lot of

people, Michael Boyle in his immaculate Escort MK2 , Jimmy Dougan who is no stranger to any motorsport paddock as he is a regular auto test driver, targa driver, ex sprint and hill climb driver and an ex formula ford driver too. Jaye Nevin has also returned to the sport in a 205 RWD rally car. Many of you will remember Jaye previously campaigning a Formula Opel to great success in the past however as Jaye got older he fancied the comforts of a saloon car over a single seater, especially in the wet, and built himself a beautiful 205.

In terms of the category battles of the day Phil Cardy showed that he had lost none of his speed during his recent break from competition. Phillip took the road going category win from Andrew Robb who was driving the family BMW M3 as usual. Sadly a small mechanical issue meant that Andrew was only able to set 1 timed run. Third in the road going category went to Kilkeel man Jonny Forsythe who finished a mere 1.3 seconds behind Andrew in his Fiesta ST. Jonny drove the car from Kilkeel on Saturday morning and needed the car to get home again so he was driving a little more conservatively than normal so this is a cracker result for him and makes you wonder just how much quicker he would be if he didn't mind walking back to kilkeel.

Modified honours went to Lisburn's Wesley Patterson who finished a whopping 16th overall in his Escort Mk 2. Second in the modified class went to Downpatrick's Stewart Strain in his immaculate Peugeot 205 which was a great result for Stewart on his return to the sport after a layoff. Stewart finished a mere 2.41 secs behind Wesley Patterson despite beating Wesley both days the previous weekend at the 2 day Carncastle Hill climb. This particular battle is going to be a clinker one to watch as the season progresses – mark my words!! Third in the modified category went to Lewis Dunlop in the most beautiful Lotus Elan. In my opinion the car is simply too nice to compete in, but the enthusiasts will tell you that it's a racing car, built to be raced and boy did Lewis race it. If you check out his on-board footage his driving is impeccable and he's as mechanically gentle on the car as someone doing a Sunday run to church.

For this event the specialist Category honours went to a hard charging David Hawthorne who set a 127.43sec run to take class and category honours along with 11th overall. As usual David's biggest and closest rival was his brother Stephen who finished second in the category a mere 0.98 seconds behind David. I heard it suggested that David makes Stephen go first to make sure all the tyres etc. are warm for him. Not sure if that's true or not, but I'm sure it will get a discussion going! Third in the specialist category and immediately behind the Hawthorne's was Graham Boyce who set a blistering 130.92 to take 13th overall.

In the Heaslip Ladies Challenge Kathy McDade took the honours a mere 0.38secs ahead of Emma Campbell with Sheryl McBride third 1.28 secs behind Emma. Fourth went to Catherine Donnelly who was only 2.96 secs behind Sheryl and fifth went to Amy Hawthorne on her first ever championship event. For the 2021 season the Heaslip Ladies Challenge trophy is being worked out using corrected times based on the ladies individual times, to allow them to be pitched together and compared against each other. This way the ladies are racing each other and so far it has proved to be close. An interesting point to note is that young Amy only passed her driving test at the turn of the year and therefore has no real driving experience. her road car is fitted with a "black box" to monitor her speed and with living in Belfast she literally cannot

get the opportunity to be above 45 mph, so she literally has never driven as fast as she does at the track. On her first ever run into debtors, it was the first time she had ever been above 45 mph. Amy's mum Nikki is also intending to contest the championship but she needs to practice her standing starts first.

Lastly, and one of the main battles of the day, was the fight for the title of Fastest mini in the West. This week the title went all the way to Irvinestown with Gerry McGarrity pipping Karl Johnston by a mere 0.22 secs. Third place went to Gary Milligan who according to Gerry McGarrity "forgot to get out of bed this morning" All in, there was just under 3 seconds separating the 3 minis at the end of the day so it was close. Rumour has it round the paddock that Karl, whilst trying to beat Gerry's time, followed Gerry's fastest line through the last chicane, and that if he had followed his own Line Karl reckons he would've beaten Gerry. Anyway, I'm not going to start any rows West of the Bann and rest assured this title will be hotly contested at the next event.

The next event is scheduled to be the 500MRCI Summer sprint at Kirkistown on 07 August. Details of this event will be announced as they become available. If you keep watching the championship facebook page and the website on <https://www.anicc.org.uk/Discipline.aspx?d=7> any updates will be posted there.

Now for the class battles:

Class 1 – Road Cars up to 1700cc

Class 1 for the smaller engine road going cars had a small entry today with only Dennis Watson and Stephen Donnelly entered. It was great to see Dennis back in the paddock after a long layoff and it's great to see he's lost none of his sense of humour. Sadly however Dennis, had a slight "off" at the chicane after he mistook the steering wheel of his saxo for the control yoke in a Hymac digger and he attempted a spot of landscaping at the chicane. Some might argue that he made some improvements? Thankfully Dennis was unhurt and the little saxo suffered only slight cosmetic damage. With Dennis out of the equation Stephen Donnelly had an enjoyable class win in his new Fiesta Zetec. This is a new car as he has previously competed in a Renault Clio. I watched Stephen through the back kart chicane a couple of times during the day, and he re-wrote the definition of commitment as he was fully committed. This is great to see even more so when he is prepared to walk home for that extra tenth of a second. Well done Stephen.

Class 2a – Road cars over 1700cc

For class 2 see the previous events. Sorry. Class 2a was once again dominated by Andrew Robb in the family BMW M3. Andrew who is never seen without a huge smile on his face, had a belter of a first run, finishing a mere 0.25secs of Chris Rogan's class record. Sadly a mechanical issue meant that he only made 1 timed run. Second in class went to the flying Kilkeel man Jonny Forsythe. Jonny, who has a bit of a thing for fiestas, after being a Kirkistown Fiesta champion finished a mere 1.3 secs behind Andrew. This is impressive going when you consider that not only is the fiesta a lot less powerful than the BMW M3 and that Jonny needed the fiesta to get

himself home again. Again like Stephen Donnelly above he was impressive to watch through the chicane. I do suspect that when Jonny gets back into the groove that he will take the fight to Andrew Robb this season. The fiesta is a lot lighter and a lot more nimble. Watch this space!! Third in class went to Aaron Vance in his clio sport ahead of Tom Lawther and another 3 Clios. As an outsider looking into this class, this modern breed of high powered hot hatches appear to be the way to go. It was like the front row of a used car dealership with all the clios, fiestas and the Robb BMW all lined up in the paddock shining together. If I was to change class, I'd fancy either a fiesta or a clio in this class.

Class 2b – Road cars Mazda MX5 challenge

After seeing the results for this class I had to double check that the regs didn't say "Brogans only" as father and son team of Adam and Derek locked out the top 2 places. In this instance the youthful exuberance of Adam took the nod over the experience of Derek as Adam took the class win by 3.89 secs. Third in class went to George McMillen with newcomer Dessie Martin fourth. The joy of this class is that all the Mazda's are similar in spec and they can be used for Targa rallies, Auto tests and speed events and the only change necessary is the addition of petrol. Indeed the top 3 in this class all use their cars in all of the disciplines aforementioned! This budget class is a perfect beginners rung into the sport and is closely contested.

Class 3 – Road cars specialist Production cars 4wd

Phillip Cardy returned to the paddock in his Subaru Imprezza and hit the ground running with a class win from Bangor man Barry Griffin. These 2 Imprezzas had a great dice all day with those around them in the results sheets and Phillip also managed to pick up the road going category win. Will Phillip be the man to take the challenge to Andrew Robb this year for the Road going Category honours? Watch this space as it will be an interesting season to watch.

Class 5 – Road cars specialist Production cars

Usually I start this by saying "Richard Munnis had a lonely drive to class honours" however today this was far from the case as 8 cars entered class 5 today. It is great to see so many people in class 5 both some old names returning like James Perry and Ashley Lamont as well as some new names such as Gilmore Murphy and Paul Forsythe. Class honours on the day went to Trevor Allen who guided his MNR Vortex home 0.88 seconds ahead of Andy Hawthorne in his Westfield SEIW. Third went to Richard Munnis who headed up Gardiner McIlwaine. Gardiner pipped 5th placed Gilmore Murphy by a mere 0.11 secs. Sadly Paul Forsythe and Ashley Lamont failed to set times in the timed runs due to mechanical issues. I was keen to see how Ashley Lamont would fair in this event as Ashley is a very well know and very successful Autotest competitor. I was especially interested to see if he would avoid "Craig's floppies" by driving past them, between them or doing donuts round them? Either way we sadly didn't see that today but Ashley vowed to be back again!

Class 6a Modified Cars – Series Production cars 8v

Class 6a saw something very different today as for the first time in ages there was not a Strain at the top of the time sheets. Sadly Johnny was at a wedding which left the rest of the class 6a competitors to fight the bit amongst themselves. After a bit of a disastrous practice session David Evans took the class lead in the first run and set a new class record. This is a feat which he continued on the second and again the third timed run as well. Second went to Karl Johnston who drove the wheels off his mini, and the socks off himself trying to catch David and he finished a mere 1.54 seconds behind him with Karl also under the previous class record. Third went to hard charging William Hutton who pipped Gary Milligan to fourth by a mere 0.63 secs with a blinder of a last run. It was great to see William back out again after a couple of seasons away from the sport. It's also fabulous to see 3 minis fighting so hard and doing so well against more modern machinery. On a tighter circuit like Nutts corner, or the Kirkistown short circuit today's result would have been very different as the minis are hard to beat. I also heard that Karl got an award on Saturday for the best silage cut of 2021. Congratulations Karl!

Class 6b Modified Cars – Series Production cars 16v

On Paper class 6b is going to be probably the closest contested class on the entire Championship in 2021 as it boasts some fabulous machinery, very successful drivers and a huge amount of friendly competition. Class honours went to Stephen Colbert on his championship debut in the family Sunbeam. Stephen is the son of the legendary Ken Colbert who finished fourth in class today. Stephen has a racing pedigree that many an F1 star would be taken aback by so it's a pleasure to have him join us in the paddock. Dermot O'Hagan took second in class 6b in his Honda Civic. Dermot has done a lot of work to this car in preparation for this season and it is showing as he lead Raymond Johnston home by 1.47 secs. Raymond was in his immaculate Escort MK 2 BDA. Ken Colbert took fourth ahead of hard charging Dara Fay with Andrew Kernohan fifth and newcomer Jason Frazer sixth on his motorsport debut in a metro. Jason has picked a very competitive class to join but also one of the best for a beginner and he is surrounded by some of the best people in the sport to learn from. Interestingly the top 5 competitors all broke the previous class record with Stephen Colbert taking 7.82 secs out of the record set in 2017. This just shows how much, and how quickly the pace has moved on in this class!!

Class 7 Modified Cars Specialist Production

Again the car in front was a Hawthorne as was the car behind him. Confused, yes so am I. Anyway class honours went to David Hawthorne who took a convincing 1.02 sec lead from his Brother Steven in the family Westfield Megabusa which they share. Third went to hard charging Graham Boyce in his DAX S2000 who finished a mere 2.51 secs behind Steven. It was great to see Jimmy Dougan returning to the sport in is Locost as he lead home Colin McBride and Ian Robinson. Ian was returning to the sport after a long absence and he was genuinely nervous on Saturday morning. However he was in great company as the Hawthorns wound him up no end and kept his mind on the racing and the nerves somewhere else. Ian had a great days fun and went home itching to get out sprinting again. Well done Robbo!!

Class 8 Sports Libre cars Special Saloons

Class 8 honours went to the ever popular Grandad (Rory Stephens) who had a lonely solo run to class victory on Saturday. Sadly Jim Hutchinson who also drives an RSR Escort the same as Rory's had a technical issue which side lined him in practice. Class 8 is a libre class which was set up to host the space framed saloons of which there are several in the country. It will host all the space framed minis, the RSR Escorts and anything else out there which fits the bill. Hopefully more cars will enter this class in the future as there are at least 8-10 out there that we know of who are all keen to come and sprint. Once this class finds its feet it's going to be a cracker! Especially if we can persuade Gerard to come back with his MK 1 RSR??

Class 9a Sports Libre cars Saloons and GT`s

Class 9a is where all the libre saloons go to play. Sadly today there were only 2 entered. None the less Mark Francis took class honours with a fabulous 131.789 sec run in the family flame spitting Escort Cosworth. Second in class went to Emma Campbell in her Peugeot 106. Having seen one of Emma's she finally appears to have got the hang of this little car and was wringing its neck enroute to a great 171.17sec run. Emma also took second in the Heaslip Ladies Challenge.

Class 9b Sports libre Closed wheel sports racing cars.

Pat Roche confused a lot of us when he entered an OMS SC to run in class 9b. Several of us didn't know what an OMS SC was, and others thought it was a single seater, however when he rolled it out of the trailer it soon became apparent what it was. However what wasn't apparent from a first glance was just how blatantly fast this little orange car was. As he powered it up the back straight it simply flew towards us. Pat piloted his pocket rocket to seventh overall and 1.71 secs ahead of second placed Lee Kirkwood. Lee has under taken a fair bit of work to his Radical and it was good to see him back out again. Hopefully this appearance will be the first of many for lee. Third place in class went to the 2020 Ladies Champion Sheryl McBride who pushed her little Global light out with a brand spanking pair of Avon slicks on the rear. Sheryl clearly means business when it comes to defending her ladies title.

Class 10 Sports libre Cars – small capacity Rally cars

Class 10 had a fairly good entry for class 10 today with 3 cars entered. It was great to see newcomer Brian Lyttle out in his escort G3, taking a day away from rallying to join the craic in the sprint paddock. Alan Roddy took class honours in his venerable Citroen Saxo after a day long battle in the overall standings with Noel Strain from the bigger rally class. Third in class went to the hard charging Derek Robinson in his Toyota Corolla. Both Derek and Brian Little would be gravel rally men at heart and it's great to see them coming to the sealed surface sprint events and being on the pace and having such good fun. It's an awful shame that this class just like class 11 doesn't get more support. There are plenty of eligible cars out there but sadly too many of them run in other classes where the chance of lifting a prize is greater.

Class 11 Sports libre Cars – large capacity Rally cars

In similar fashion to class 10, there was a very big entry in class 11 today with 8 Drivers joining in the fun. There were some new faces and beautifully prepared cars

as well. I spoke to one of them on Saturday morning and asked him what had brought him to the sport of sprinting. He truthfully told me that he did a sprint years ago and found it dull, however with all the recent social media interest and activity, including the interviews it made him interested in having another go. He also informed me that he is friendly with John Donnelly and that John had badgered him, and a few other fellas to come and have a days fun in the sprint paddock which they did. At that early stage I asked him if he was enjoying himself and he said that he was and that he couldn't believe the craic and atmosphere in the paddock. So hopefully he continued to enjoy himself all day and that he will return. Right, back to class 11. Of the 8 entrants in class I simply cannot highlight one driver over the rest for his effort or indeed the quality of their car. Every car present in that class on Saturday was fabulous and every driver was giving at least eleven tenths on each run. Wesley Patterson took class honours and the Modified Category win in his escort mark 2 with a 132.04 sec run. Second went to Stewart Strain who finished 2.41 secs behind Wesley in his Peugeot 205. Stewart wouldn't have the same pure torque and horsepower as Wesley but he carries ridiculous speed round corners so it will be interesting to see how these 2 fair at Nutts Corner or on the short circuit. Then add to this mix, third placed Jaye Nevin who made his sprint debut in his newly built 205. Jaye is still learning the car and setting it up so he was delighted with his 137.49 sec run. There is more to come from this package when Jaye dials the suspension in and gets totally used to this car. Also the sound of this thing coming up the back straight towards you is something else. Fourth went to the returning Michael Boyle who finished a mere 0.99 secs behind Jaye and 1.65 secs ahead of the hard charging Noel Strain in his BMW mini. Any of these drivers named so far have the potential to take class wins. add then to that mix Fergal McGuinness and Tony McKenna who both had good runs on their debut events and also Alan Griffith who sadly suffered mechanical woes and as you can see class 11, if this level of interest remains has the makings of a good class. There is no shortage of fast rally cars out there so why not get them out competing in this class with us?

Class 12 4WD sports Libre Cars

Sadly there was only 1 entry for class 12, Ryan Murray, but he failed to set a time due to an earlier mechanical issue. Ryan will hopefully be back again and it will be good to see him challenge the other class 12 machinery out there such as Paul Montgomery, the newly built car of the Lancashire brothers and of course Oliver Cormican.

Class 13 Formula Racing cars

Henry Campbell had the unusual honour of being both first and last in the same class. Unusually Henry was the only person out in class 13 today but none the less Henry was trying hard. From speaking to Henry he told me that his son Ryan was unable to attend as he was at a Kart race with his daughter who is doing well at the Karts. This is brilliant to see such a young girl enjoying her motorsport at such a young age. How long will it be until she is in the sprint paddock parked between her dad and her granda? The best part of this story was that she chose her own race number, and that she wanted to be number 90 just like her Granda Henry. Have we another young champion of the future? Watch this space.

Class 14 small Capacity Racing Cars

There were a few heads turned in the paddock today in class 14. None more so than when George Stevenson rolled out his beautiful new Force PT single seater. I spoke with George and asked him what he thought of it and his smile said it all. George took a maiden debut win with the car but finished a mere 0.50 secs ahead of local man Brian Fitzmaurice in his OMS PR. Brian had also been investing in new stuff over the long layoff, but he only purchased tyres which he said made a huge difference to his car. Third in class went to the hard charging Catherine Donnelly who posted a 131.562 run in her Delta ahead of Thomas Corey Tom Devaney and Roy Coulter,. Roy and Tom were only separated by a mere 0.24secs at the end. With other cars out there class 14 is another up and coming class and with Ryan McGimpsey and Trevor Roberts missing on Saturday they are bound to look at these times from today and realise just how hot a class this is.

Class 15 large Capacity Racing Cars

As usual the class 15 winner also won the event outright and Alan Cassells was going well to beat Gerard O`Connell from Adrian Pollock. I have dealt with top 4 battle in the main body of the text above so I`d like here, to mention John Donnelly who is finally getting to grips with his new Pilbeam MP62. John is getting progressively faster in this car and finished fifth overall. With a few other fast class 15 cars out there this class has the makings for a fast a furious season with close battles inevitable between John Donnelly, Steven Gault, Adrian Pollock, the Woodside brothers and Robert and Ryan McGimpsey when they iron out the issues with their Mygale SJ97. There are also a few other drivers who I have been badgering to bring their BOSS race cars to join us. I must mention Rob Dwane who sadly developed a slight technical issue in practice with his OMS 25. Hopefully he gets this sorted out before the next event as it will be great to see him go head to head with Alan Cassells in their similar machinery, and then there is Gerard O`Connell in his World series car.....

Class 16a Historic Road Cars

As always Gerry McGarrity was the man to beat in class 16a and he took a convincing win with a 13.71 sec lead over second placed Trevor MciLroy in his Sebring Sprite. Trevor had a close battle all day with Mervyn Getty in his MGBGT Sebring with Trevor getting the nod over Mervyn by a mere 0.51 secs. Vincent Rodgers too fourth in class after a good days banter with his friend Mervyn and Sadly neither John Hamill or Ian McCullough set a time.

Class 16b Historic Saloons and Sportscars

Class 16b saw a regular driver, a returning occasional driver and a new to the class driver and between the three of them the craic was mighty and the times tumbled. Lewis Dunlop made his sprint debut in a lotus elan which he has raced successfully in the Irish Historic championship with some success. The car itself is immaculate and beautiful. Indeed I`d be happy to say that it is too nice a car to compete in, but compete is what it did. Lewis guided the car to a class win, fastest historic car, a 23rd overall final position and an obliterated class record after he took 17.86 secs out of the existing class record!! Second place in class 16b went to another competitor who

competes in a car which is of museum quality and definitely far too nice to be driven as hard as it is. This is Stephen Nevin who pilots very very well one of the nicest Escort MK 1's on the motorsport scene. Stephen drove the wheels off his Escort to finish second in class with hard charging Paul Taggart (Or Harry as he is known amongst the class 6A competitors) finishing third in class. It was great to see Paul Taggart back competing again for the first time in ages.

Heaslip Ladies Challenge Trophy

Whilst its not technically a class, all of the ladies get to compete against each other in the Heaslip Ladies Challenge as well as continuing with their class battles. Their class times are compared as a percentage of the FTD and a "performance factor" is applied to pitch the ladies times together. The performance factor is influenced by the ladies times and so is continually evolving. Anyway this new method of pitching the ladies against each other proved to work today and Kathy McDade took the challenge honours by a mere 0.26 secs from second placed Emma Campbell. Third went to Sheryl McBride who finished up 1.18 secs behind Emma with Catherine Donnelly fourth and Amy Hawthorne fifth. With this being Amys first championship event she had no previous times to calculate her factor from so her conversion factor was 1 meaning that for this event anyway she was slightly further off the pace than she should have been. Now that she has 1 score on the board her factor will drop and she will find herself mixing it on times with the rest of the ladies. Any of the ladies I spoke to were happy with this new method of scoring as it meant that they were all racing against each other and scoring points based on this, rather than the number of competitors in their classes determining how they score in the ladies championship.