

Sprinting returns for 2021

Saturday 08 May is, for some people, was a fairly insignificant day, like many Saturdays of late. However for others it was a day that we had all been dreaming of. No we didn't win the lottery, but it felt like we had, as Larne Motorsport finally put Sprinting back onto the 2021 Northern Ireland sporting calendar.

After a Covid inspired lay off of 7 months Larne Motor club took the brave decision to host a Sprint at Kirkistown within the current Government Guidelines. Sadly the guidelines meant that no more than 100 people, which included competitor AND everyone associated with the running of the event. Therefore Larne Motor club limited their entry to 65 competitors and they certainly got an entry of quality, rather than quantity. Due to the limited numbers it was decided that this event wouldn't run as an SW Adair Tyres Northern Ireland Sprint Championship round.

With a strict 100 people policy in place the event was run behind locked gates, with no spectators, and with only drivers allowed. The competitors were not permitted to bring any mechanics, helpers or team mates etc with them. This meant that those in the paddock were all there on their own and so a lot of friendly banter and craic was heard throughout the paddock during the day as everyone shouted across their 2m socially distanced spaces to each other. Truthfully, it was one of the most relaxed and enjoyable atmospheres I have ever encountered at a sprint, or indeed at any sporting event.

With a wet start to the day, everyone gradually eased themselves back into the groove with the hope of drying conditions approaching. Sadly it took until the second timed run in mid afternoon before the track dried sufficiently to be classed as a dry track as the strong Easterly wind swept across Kirkistown faster than Oliver Cormican off the start line drying the track very rapidly. Indeed all but 4 of the competitors set their fastest time in the 3rd timed run, and 3 of these didn't complete a third timed run,

As usual it was hotly contested at the top of the time sheets. Ballymoney man Steven Gault set the early pace in his Reynard 903 as he was fastest during practice and the first timed run. Hot on his heels was Dungiven man Gerard O`Connell who debuted his beautiful new Dallara World Series Car. Gerard couldn't quite match Stevens form in the wet but once it dried up he was able to grab the Dallara by the scruff and use all of its power to the max to take the event win from Steven Gault. Jim Hutchinson debuted his newly rebuilt RSR Escort to take a very well deserved third overall. Having spoken to Jim afterwards he assures me that there is a lot more to come from this car once he sorts a few things out! This car and driver combination is one to watch and with there being at least 4 more RSR`s in the country class 8 will be a very good class to watch if we can entice more of them out to play!

For me the drive of the day went to a returning new comer to the discipline. Yes, a returning new comer!! Let me explain..... local mk2 legend and rally driver Wesley Patterson returned to the sport of sprinting early last year after a superbly successful career in rallying. Wesley was an avid supporter of both the sprint and Hill climb championships many years ago before he moved on to be a very successful rally driver. Wesley has since made a conscious decision to return to his roots in the speed

championships, as apparently he doesn't like people telling him what to do, and therefore someone sitting beside him telling him what way to turn, and when and what gear he had to be in was beginning to annoy him!!

Wesley drove his famous blue Mk2 Escort S00 608R , in a style and with a level of commitment which was just incredible to watch. Indeed after the first timed run he was third overall in the rain and then after the circuit dried he was 7th overall after the second run. Wesley still finished 10th overall in his escort at the end of the day fending off a lot of more powerful and lighter machinery. Don't forget that his escort is a full blown rally car which weighs significantly more than a lot of the cars behind him.

It was also great to see David Francis making a return to the series in his immaculately prepared Escort. I was behind David as he started one of his runs and it was incredible to watch how he got the powerful flame spitting escort off the line so quickly, with so little wheel spin. Driving like that can only be described as skilful and experienced! Pleasure to watch David!!

Another exciting event to happen on Saturday was the debut event for young Amy Hawthorne. Amy has only very very recently passed her driving test, and therefore had never been above 45mph behind the wheel. She can no longer say this now!!

Amy is from the local Hawthorne Motorsport Dynasty which saw her dad David, Uncle Stephen and granda Andy Hawthorne all also competing on the day. This is, we think, a first for the sport in Northern Ireland as no one else I spoke to could think of 3 generations of the same family, competing at the same event. So it was a truly historic day for Amy.

To make it even more historic, the McAleer timekeeping team decided to use the new Ladies Championship scoring system to compare all the Hawthorne's times against each other to see who really was the fastest Hawthorne, and answer that much anticipated question. At the end of the day when all the calculations were completed Amy, Her dad, and her uncle were only separated by a mere 0.38secs on corrected time. Amy went home with bragging rights as the fastest Hawthorne. I won't embarrass the rest of them by saying who was last, but I suspect he was the person doing the dishes on Saturday night in that house hold. Well done Amy what a cracking start to your motorsport career!

As well as the main event there are also 4 other sub categories which were fought so hard for on Saturday. I will start with the Modified Category. Oliver Cormican was fastest modified car and had a super run to take 7th overall in his 4wd Mitsubishi Evo, a mere 0.63 sec ahead of 2nd placed modified man David Francis in his RWD Escort Cosworth. Third went to Wesley Patterson who finished 10th overall and a mere 1.09secs behind David Francis.

The road going class, as always was a battle royale with returning Phillip Cardy taking top spot honours in his Subaru Imprezza with a fabulous run of 120.16 which saw him 22nd overall. Second road going went to Kilkeel man Jonny Forsythe in his Fiesta ST who was 24th overall and exactly 1 second behind Phillip. (Jonny O told you not to have that second fry for breakfast) Third placed road going went to Adam

Stewart is his seriously sprightly little Toyota Starlet. If ever there was a sleeper car, this is it!!

In the Specialist Cars Category Jim Hutchinson romped to victory in his beautiful RSR Escort taking 3rd overall. Second in this hotly contested Category went to David Hawthorne who finished 5th overall a mere 2.35 secs behind Jim Hutchinson and 0.02secs ahead of his brother Steven Hawthorne in the Westfield Megabusa they share. These 2 brothers always end up closer than a Mach 3 shave!

Lastly is the historic category and the honour of fastest historic car went to Alan Jardine who piloted his beautiful Mk 1 Escort to 27th overall. Andrew Blair borrowed his father's beautiful mini and drive it to 32nd overall and 2.92 secs behind Alan. I just hope Andrew does more events in this car as it will be great to see him battling against Gerry McGarrity if he does. Third Historic went to Trevor McIlroy in his Sebring Sprite.

All in all it was a hugely successful event and everyone who made the event happen should be immensely proud of themselves for making it so successful.

As I write this I'm unsure as to when the next sprint will be and whether or not it will be a championship event. All of these factors will be dictated by the local government restrictions as laid down in Stormont. 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 saw the return of the McClurg brothers in their venerable AX. David was supposed to be out in his locost but was afraid of getting himself, and his hair wet and so double drive the AX with younger brother Garry. Sadly for Garry, who has been renamed "the Stihl", David had lost none of his speed as he took class honours from Garry by a mere 1.04 seconds. Garry had been fastest after the second run but David took the class win in the third run. Third in class went to the hard charging Stephen Wishart in his Peugeot 106 who finished a mere 0.86 secs behind Garry and 3 seconds ahead of hard charging Keith Scott in fourth. As always class 1 was extremely competitive and it was great to see Dennis Watson back out again!

Class 2a – Road cars over 1700cc

Jonny Forsythe was the class winner in class 2 with a stonking run in his Fiesta ST which saw him finish an impressive 21st overall. Jonny was a well-established and super quick driver in the fiesta race series and has shown that he has lost none of his speed, or his love for fast fiestas. Adam Stewart had a super run in his Toyota starlet to take 2nd in class and 29th overall. This little car is unbelievably quick in a straight line and is a real sleeper car as it certainly goes a lot quicker than it looks. Tom lawther steered the big rover to third a mere 1.03 secs behind Adam and 1.97 ahead of fourth placed Crawford Ewing.

Class 2b – Road cars Mazda MX5 challenge

After a slow start to the day Adam Brogan took class honours in his Mazda MX5 from last year's class champion Paul Magill. Paul lead the time sheets all day but a superb last run from Adam was sufficient for him to take the class win by a mere 0.61 secs. Third in class went to Derek Brogan in his Mazda. Derek is well known in the paddock and it's great to see him back out again. George McMillan took fourth with Gerard Larkin fifth in class. It was great to see 5 of these Mazda's out together as this little class has all the hall marks of being a great class throughout the year.

Class 3 – Road cars specialist Production cars 4wd

Phillip Cardy made a welcome return to class 3 today but sadly none of his classmates came to play. Phillip took class honours with some competitive times which saw him finish an impressive 22nd overall.

Class 5 – Road cars specialist Production cars

Richard Munnis was the happiest man in the paddock on Saturday afternoon when he realised that he had someone to play with in class 5. Class 5 has historically been low in entries but it was great to see 5 cars entered including Andy Hawthorne in a Westfield SEI and new comers Gilmore Murphy and Paul Forsythe. As the day dried times tumbled and Richard Munnis took class honours from Paul Forsythe. Andy Hawthorne was third but sadly was unable to complete his third run after a mechanical issue side-lined him in the queue to the start line. Andy and Richard had swapped times all day, usually in Andy's favour so the results may have been slightly different had Andy been able to take his third run. For the suspicious amongst you, I can confirm that Richard was nowhere near Andy's car before the third run!

Class 6a Modified Cars – Series Production cars 8v

With only 5 entered in Class 6a today, on paper, it was destined to be a very close battle, which indeed was how it finished. Stephen Harvey set the early pace and lead from Karl Johnston and William Hutton after run 1. Stephen did however set David Evans a bit of a challenge to catch him. David had been plagued by small issues all day and managed to string it all together for a blinder of a second timed run which moved him from last in class to first during the second run, a mere 0.01 ahead of second placed Karl Johnston with Stephen Harvey demoted to fourth. It all went down to the last timed run where everyone took huge chunks of time out of their best run apart from David Evans who only made it as far as Debtors with an exhaust issue. Karl put in the drive of his life to take class honours from Stephen Harvey. David finished third with William Hutton fourth and Gary Milligan fifth. Interestingly when David had been having his issues all of his class mates came to help or offer assistance to him. This just shows how friendly our sport is.

Class 6b Modified Cars – Series Production cars 16v

Class 6B saw a new name at the top of the pile when Stephen Colbert took class honours in the family Sunbeam Lotus which he dual drove with his father. Stephen has a well-known history in motorsport having raced in the British F3 and the seat

series as well. He is almost as well-known as his father Ken Colbert who he battled royally with on Saturday. Stephen set the early pace in run 1 and then Ken reacted by taking nearly 3 seconds out of him in run 2. It was all to play for in run 3 and Stephen set a blinder of a run to win the class by exactly 2 seconds from his father Ken, and finish 17th overall. In this instance youth beat experience, but was this a one off?? This family battle will be one to watch during the season. Third in class went to Andrew Kernohan in his Clio who finished ahead of new comer Angus Johnston in his Vauxhall corsa.

Class 7 Modified Cars Specialist Production

Once again the car in front is a Hawthorne car. For the last 4 or 5 years the chuckle brothers David and Steven have been the men to beat in this class, and Saturday was no different. As usual both brothers swapped times with both of them leading the class at one point of the day however when it counted it was David who made it count with a blinding last run of 109.83 which set him 5th overall a mere 0.02 secs ahead of Steven who finished 6th overall. Steven now wishes he hadn't had that extra sandwich at lunch time. Third in class went to Davis Buick who had a fabulous run in his Reis Aero to finish only 0.47 secs ahead of Scott McMullan. Jimmy Dougan was the meat in a McMullan Sandwich in 6th with David McMullan seventh.

Class 8 Sports Libre cars Special Saloons

Jim Hutchinson had a lonely run in class 8 as he debuted his newly rebuilt RSR Escort. Jims pace was blinding all day as he finished up an impressive 3rd overall, despite reporting some ongoing issues. There are now at least 5 of these RSR Escorts in Ireland with rumours of at least another one coming so these cars are proving not only to be popular but also to be super-fast. Hopefully we will get to see Gerard O`Connell and Jim go head to head in their RSR Escorts as the season progresses as this will be one battle I really can't wait to see. Then when you consider the number of other eligible cars for this class such as Maguire Minis etc this class has the potential to be one of the best classes in the championship!

Class 9a Sports Libre cars Saloons and GT`s

Saturday saw the return of another Local Motorsport legend when Donaghadees David Francis returned with his unmistakable Escort Cosworth. David had a lonely drive to the class win on Saturday but was impressive none the less. David's best run of 110.69s put him 8th overall but when you look at the previous runs David was 5th overall after the first timed run, in greasy damp conditions.

Class 10 Sports libre Cars – small capacity Rally cars

Once again Alan Roddy took class honours in a class which he really has called his own. Alan had an untroubled run to class honours from Norman Harvey who was second and Malcolm Pedlow who finished third in class 10. When you check on Alan's times Alan was only 5.62 secs slower in his greasy damp first timed run, than he was on his fastest dry final run. This goes to show just how hard Alan was pushing in the damp.

Class 11 Sports Libre Cars – large capacity Rally cars

Class 11 should be called the returners class as it was made up of 2 returnees to the sport today. Wesley Patterson who is detailed in the main body of the report took an outstanding class win and finished 10th overall. Second place went to a stalwart of Larne motor club and another man of incredible family motorsport History Richard McCartney. Richard seems to be a bit of a rain scud when it comes to sprints, as the last sprint I remember him competing in was also a very wet affair and he competed in his father's Darrian. If I recall correctly Richard had a big moment that morning in the Darrian before he made it to the start line. Anyhow Richard set a great pace on Saturday and finished up second behind Wesley and 28th overall in his lovely little KA.

Class 12 4WD sports Libre Cars

Oliver Cormican once again was the man to beat in class 12, although today not only was he the man to beat but he was the only person in class 12. Oliver was out in his Mitsubishi EVO rather than his usual Polo. Irrespective of whatever car Oliver drives he does it to the max and today was no different. Oliver guided his evo to 7th overall and also set the fastest 64feet time with a staggering 1.88 secs which was faster than any of the single seaters.

Class 13 Formula Racing cars

Class 13 was an all Campbell affair toad with the father and son team of Henry and Ryan Campbell tussling in their Reynards. Ryan took the class and family honours with a 111.11 sec run which was 2.53 secs faster than Henry. Ryan also finished a commendable 9th overall as well. Ryan really is great to watch behind the wheel.

Class 15 large Capacity Racing Cars

Sadly there were only 4 entered in class 15 today, which was a day that saw Gerard Unveil his new Dallara World Series Car. The wet conditions made it difficult for everyone but especially those in class 15. Steven Gault took the early lead in the damper conditions but as the track dried Gerard used his power to take the lead and stay there, although Steven made him work very very hard for it. Third in class went to Ryan McGimpsey who was dual driving the family Mygale with his father Robert. Sadly both McGimpseys only managed 2 timed runs each so the results don't fairly reflect where they could've finished as they didn't get dry runs however Ryan still managed 4th overall and Robert 14th overall on a damp greasy track.

Class 16a Historic Road Cars

It was great to see a new name and car combo in 16a today with Andrew Blair. Andrew who is well known in racing circles for racing fiestas, and formula fords, was out in the family mini cooper. Andrew took a lights to flag class win on his debut in the min1 and proved to be untouchable in the class on Saturday. Second in class went to Trevor McIlroy in his Sebring sprite with Vincent Rodgers third ahead of Mervyn Getty in fourth. Vincent had a slight spin on his first timed run when he found himself catching the car in front who had spun. Vincent was trying so hard to catch this un

named driver that he spun himself in the process. This lead to plenty of banter around the paddock.

Class 16b Historic Saloons and Sportscars

Last, but by no means least is class 16b, which today was a lonely affair for the class winner Alan Jardine. Alan had a good run in his usual Escort BDA and managed to finish 27th overall. Alan, as you all know is a fast charger and proved this again at this event.