

Oliver's delight at Nutts Corner Season Opener

Saturday 29th February saw the first round of the SW Adair Tyres Northern Ireland Sprint Championship take place at a cold and Windy Nutts corner Circuit. With this year's leap year adding an extra day to February, this event started the season unusually early in February, but none the less the North Ulster Car Club managed a very respectable entry of 65 competitors. Amongst the 65 starters were a lot of new drivers, and some new driver and car combinations. By Saturday morning the championship had a whopping 115 registered competitors, of which there are a lot of new names and faces. This is great to see and bodes for a superb season ahead.

The morning started off, fresh but dry and with drivers reporting a shortage of grip in the first practice runs. However the elusive grip seemed to appear as the day went on and practice went off relatively smoothly, although there were a few drivers who reported some uncharacteristic mistakes.

Due to the weather conditions, and fears of snow and rain being forecast for the afternoon the Clerk of the Course Richard McFaul decided early on that he would start first practice and not stop until the last car had completed their third timed run. This proved to be a great decision by the CoC and his team of marshals who kept the event rolling on like the Portrush Flyer at full steam.

With both Practice runs completed in the dry, and with reports of Mr Grip making an appearance it was straight into the first timed run. With some drivers keeping a close eye on the weather there was a huge queue of cars in paddock assembly all jostling to get as early a run in as possible before the , now thick black clouds, decided to give the area what for.

Oliver Cormican Managed to make a real advantage of the changing weather conditions and left the line like a man on a mission. Oliver's level of Commitment round the bottom of the circuit where I was spectating from had to be seen to be believed as he literally drove like a demon in pursuit of a good run. For Oliver this paid off and he managed a 111.5 sec run which wasn't to be beaten all day. Steven Gault lined up in a now damp circuit to complete his first run and managed a belter run of 112.52 secs a mere 1 second behind Oliver who had 4 wheel drive to assist him as opposed to Steven and co who were trying to get a lot of power down through the rear wheels only. Last year's Overall Sprint Champion Adrian Pollock didn't start his season off as planned and was third overall after the first timed runs. A mere 0.7secs behind Steven.

After the first timed runs the weather changed and as well as some rain we had snow, more wind and temperatures plummeted even further. Some competitors, for various reasons opted not to complete a second timed run and when you see the times the second run was slower for all bar 5 drivers. The most interesting of these was David Hawthorne who managed to take almost 5 seconds out of his first time run in the wet second run. For those of you who know David, this is not surprising as he drives to the limit no matter what the conditions, so much so in fact that sometimes I don't think he knows it's raining, cold, slippery, greasy or whatever the current conditions dictate.

With it all to play for in the third timed run Oliver Opted not to run, obviously quite happy that his class winning run was not going to be beaten, and not expecting to be so far up the leaders list. Steven Gault had all to play for and boy did he commit to the challenge. Steven blasted his Reynard to his fastest run of 112.41 secs a mere 0.86secs behind Oliver Cormican. With Adrian Pollock not completing a second timed run, he had a lot of time to do whatever Adrian Pollock does when the pressures on, and he lined up to start with only 1 thing in mind. He left the line fantastically and was well on the way for another of his blinding last run times until he managed to slide off the circuit and that was that.

So after a superb but cold day Oliver Cormican took his first ever outright win in the sprint Championship. This was an extremely popular win amongst the drivers as Oliver is a very popular member of the paddock who can always be relied on for a bit of craic and a very witty comment. Second went to Steven Gault in his Reynard with Adrian Pollock taking third in his Dallara.

Afterwards I contacted Oliver to congratulate him on the win, and he suggested that the rest of the season should be cancelled due to Corona Virus, and if so he'd be delighted to host his championship winning Season Awards party in his garage!!

As well as the main event there are also 5 other sub categories which were fought so hard for on Saturday. I will start with the Modified Category. Oliver Cormican of course was fastest modified car and had a mere 3.8 sec advantage over local rally man Drew Stewart. Drew, as many of you will recall is no stranger to the sprint paddock after having a successful sprint career in a Maguire mini before deciding to join the dark side and go rallying where he has also had some success of late. I suspect that after Saturday you may see Drew out again at future events. He also hinted about bringing the Mini out so watch this space.... Third in the modified battle went to Alan Roddy who never fails to drive the life out of his lovely little saxo. Alan finished a mere 0.06 secs behind Drew so it was close. Had Alan not had that extra sandwich at lunchtime it may have made all the difference?

The road going class, as always was a battle royale with Crawford Ewing topping the timesheets in his little clio. Crawford is also listed as fourth overall in the time sheets with a run of 113.61secs which is a fabulous result for him. Second in the timesheets for the road going category went to local man Andrew Robb who once again steered his BMW round the circuit in 117.53 secs in similar style to Ken Block but with a heck of a lot more speed. Sadly his father Alfred Robb wasn't out to compete at this event but I did hear a funny story of him going to hospital and spending more time trying to convince a surgeon to come sprinting than he did listening to what the surgeon was saying. Once a sprinter, always a sprinter..... Third in the Roadgoing battle went to Adrian Mulholland who debuted his new RS2000. Adrian's run of 121.18secs was is only 3.61secs behind Andrew.

In the new for 2020 Specialist Cars Category David Hawthorne once again proved to be the fastest Hawthorne as he took category honours by a mere 1.08 secs from fellow class 7 man Paul Hamill with Steven Hawthorne taking third in the category a mere 0.84 secs behind Paul. Interestingly the top 3 of this category were separated by only 1.92 secs which shows how close this will be at the end of the year.

Also new for 2020 is the Heaslip Ladies Challenge Trophy. This award was donated by Jimmy Heaslip who took 3rd in class 10 in his Escort. Jimmy, obviously isn't competing in this award so he left it to the Ladies to battle this one out. This award is scored to reflect how the ladies compete in relation to their class peers rather than against each other. This way it will not necessarily go to the girl in the fastest car. After a fine battle on Saturday Sheryl McBride takes early bragging rights and a 6 point haul to the top of this award table. Emma Campbell is second with 5 points and Olivia Coulter finished 3rd with 4 points after having an awful day. Of the 3 females competing Olivia Coulter was actually fastest with a 144.1 sec run, Emma was second fastest with a 148.6 sec run and Sheryl third on a 155.85 sec run. With Kathy McDade and Catherine Donnelly both opting to avoid this event the scores are fairly close at the minute and I predict that it will remain close as the season progresses, right to the end.

The last completion on Saturday was the unofficial Fastest Mini in the West competition. John Golden takes the honour in the Midas finishing 1.11secs ahead of Karl Johnston in the mini. Gary Milligan was a lonely third 9.65 secs behind Karl. For those on Facebook, check out the video posted on the NI Sprint Championship facebook page of Karl exiting the horseshoe in the mini!!!! Well worth a watch and fair play Karl!! Sadly Gerry McGarrity was unable to compete on Saturday so was unable to mix it amongst the mini men and torture them all with banter throughout the day. Get well soon Gerry and we all can't wait to see you back out. The paddocks mighty quiet without you!!

The next and second round of the S W Adair tyres Northern Ireland Sprint championship takes place on 14 March at Kirkistown Circuit. This event will also be part of the Irish Speed Championship with the Irish Speed Championship hosting 2 rounds at Kirkistown that weekend on the Saturday and the Sunday. This event promises to be a bumper weekend with the fastest cars in Ireland congregating at Kirkistown for bragging rights. Rumour has it that Paul O'Connell will be bringing his World Series Car to play. For those who are interested the Circuit Restaurant will be open for food after the event and into the evening and the bar will also be open with some form of Entertainment as well.

Now for the class battles:

Class 1 – Road Cars up to 1700cc

Stephen Wishart had a fabulous day in his little Peugeot 106 his fastest first run of 125.31secs saw him finish 28th overall and 8.05 secs ahead of his class rival Alan Wallace in his little Honda Delsol. The class championship reflects today's results.

Class 2a – Road cars over 1700cc

Crawford Ewing, as mentioned above topped the class results and is listed fourth overall with a time of 113.61secs, which is seriously impressive going in a clio!! Andrew Robb finished second with a 117.53 sec run with Adrian Mulholland third on a 121.18sec run. Adrian's new RS2000 simply has to be seen to be believed as its undoubtedly far nicer finished than when it came out of the factory, it's a real credit to him, and in my mind he should be told to go a bit easier in it as its too nice to be

raced. Apparently that defeats the purpose of building a race car, so I suggest you all have a look at it and make your own minds up... In terms of the championship Andrew Robb takes an early 1 point lead from Tom Lawther with Aaron Vance third. The Roadgoing category is also a mirror image of the class 2 standings.

Class 5 – Road cars specialist Production cars

Richard Munnis Had a lonely run to class 5 honours with a 132.01 best time. Interestingly this was set on his second timed run, which was the wettest run, so but with Richard setting all 3 of his runs within a 1.4 second window it shows just how committed Richard was. Richard tops the class 5 championship.

Class 6a Modified Cars – Series Production cars 8v

Local rallymen Andrew McGaffin and Matthew McGaffin dual drove their Mk 2 Escort in this event to put some miles on the car and to get used to it before the upcoming Bishops court stages rally. Andrew took class honours by 1.93secs and bragging rights for being the fastest McGaffin from Brother Matthew who finished second 1.45 secs ahead of third placed Karl Johnston in his mini. The class 6a championship sees Karl Johnston top the class from Johnny Strain and Gary Milligan third.

Class 6b Modified Cars – Series Production cars 16v

Ken Colbert, who also had an interesting day took class honours as well as 10th overall in his Lotus Sunbeam with a time of 117.75. Ken only completed 3 runs (2 practice and 1 timed) and each of them was eventful in his own right. Having caught a car on his first timed run Ken got a re-run which he duly did. However because it was a re-run he wasn't carrying just as much petrol as he maybe would have liked so with the car hesitating badly before eventually running out of fuel Ken still managed to set a whopping Run of 117.75 secs. So not only did he win the class, but he was tenth overall despite running out of fuel. It just makes you wonder just how much faster he would have been... Another superb performance saw second placed Colin Dines finish a mere 0.98 secs adrift of Ken Colbert with Dara Fay finishing third on 120.15secs. It was great to see Hugh McAvoy debut his new Clio on Saturday as he took fourth in class. This little car is superb to watch and is an ex Clio Cup car from the TOCA Support package. Ken Colbert heads the class championship from Colin Dines with Hugh McAvoy third.

Class 7 Modified Cars Specialist Production

David Hawthorne proved to be the fastest Hawthorne brother on Saturday as he piloted the family Westfield Megabusa to class honours a mere 1.08 secs in front of second placed Paul Hamill. David's fastest run was actually his third run of the day as he simply got faster and faster no matter what the weather. It did however take David until the third run to beat his brother Steven who finished third in class a mere 1.92 secs abreast of David. Class 7 proved to be a superb class on Saturday with 8 competitors and only 10.35secs separating all within the class. It's also great to see Rudy Tate step up to class 7 in a Locost Megablade which he co drives alongside Andrew Straney. Rudy was the fastest of this pairing on Saturday by 3.02secs from

Andrew Straney. This class has the potential to be a super competitive class as the year progresses and hopefully Paul Hamill will do more events to keep the chuckle brothers on their toes. David Hawthorne leads the class championship from Steven Hawthorne with Rudy Tate third.

Class 8 Sports Libre cars Special Saloons

John Golden had a lonely run to class honours in the little Midas which he steered to a 124.66sec run. John, sadly isn't championship registered as he was only out for a day's craic but he did have the honour of being the fastest mini from the West.

Class 9a Sports Libre cars Saloons and GT's

John Murphy debuted his new Ford Ka and stormed right to a class win with a cracker first run of 131.33 secs. This is another of the cars in the paddock which is immaculately turned out and really is almost too nice to be racing. Emma Campbell took second in class with a 148.6 sec run on her way to second in class and second in the ladies Challenge award. The class championship shows John Murphy ahead of Emma Campbell by 1 point.

Class 9b Sports Libre cars Closed wheel sports racers

Sheryl McBride had a lonely run to class honours as no one else came out to play in class 9b on Saturday. Sheryl battled with the track to take a best run of 155.85secs. Sheryl left Nutts corner not only leading the class 9b championship but also leading the Heaslip Ladies Challenge.

Class 10 Sports libre Cars – small capacity Rally cars

Alan Roddy took class honours as well as 6th overall and second placed modified car with a best run of 115.45 secs. Alan was followed home by David Christie in his Mark 2 Escort who set a 118.23sec run and Jimmy Heaslip was third in another Mark 2 with a 130.05 sec run. Jimmy who was running in a newly rebuilt bottom end in his engine was struggling to get the set up just perfect but still managed a successful day and brought a trophy home to boot. Alan Roddy leads the class 10 Championship.

Class 11 Sports libre Cars – large capacity Rally cars

Class 11 had one of the largest entries I've seen in a long time on Saturday when 5 cars ran in the class. Drew Stewart was fastest with a 115.39sec run which saw him finish 5th overall in his Mark 2 Escort. Local man Daniel Campbell finished second in class by 1.40 secs with a 116.79 sec run which saw him finish up 7th overall and 3rd placed modified car. ROI Competitor Mike Dunnion brought his beautiful Chevette HSR up and finished 3rd in class with a 131.72sec run. Daniel now leads the class 11 championship.

Class 12 4WD sports Libre Cars

Oliver Cormican took class 12 honours with a fantastic time of 111.57 secs which also, by the way, was the fastest time of the day. Oliver also was fastest modified car

so leads the modified category along with class 5 championship. Second in class 12 went to Adrian Kielt who is making a welcome return to the sport and Adrian also made good use of his 4wd to set a 123.31sec run, which sees him second in the class championship as well.

Class 13 Formula Racing cars

Ryan Campbell took class honours on Saturday with a masterful run of 125.90secs which was 4.44 secs ahead of his father Henry. John Whitley was third in class with a 170.49 sec run. The class championship is now a mirror image of the class results.

Class 14 Small Capacity Racing Cars

The event entry list showed that this was going to be one of the biggest classes on Saturday, but with only 4 cars finishing the event it proved to be smaller than anticipated. Interestingly none of the class 14 drivers did any more than 1 timed run with Ryan McGimpsey making his 121.06 run count. Not only did it give him the class win but it was also 2.08 secs faster than second placed Trevor Roberts who was plagued all day with clutch issue. Third place went to hard charging George Stevenson in another Jedi who managed a 126.57sec run. Within class 14 the craic and camaraderie is so good that 1 of the more experienced competitors gave another less experienced single seater owner a lot of very helpful advice on tyres and what to purchase. Another competitor went home have given his spare parts to a fellow class competitor to get them out racing again. Where else would that happen? In the class championship Ryan McGimpsey now leads the way from Trevor Roberts with George Stevenson third and Thomas Corey fourth.

Class 15 Small Capacity Racing Cars

Syeven Gault took class honours from Adrian Pollock by .83 secs after a day which proved to be difficult for everyone in a single seater. Steven Gault was heard to say that he had to drive very Gingerly, almost like he was driving a diesel, in order to keep his red rocket pointing in the right direction. Steven now has a 1 point lead over second placed Adrian in the class championship.

Class 16a Historic Road Cars

Terence Dillon hit the ground running in his beautiful Hillman Avenger GT and took class honours with a 127.76sec run. He finished 4.39 secs ahead of second placed Vincent Rodgers who steered his MGB GT a mere 0.36 secs faster than third placed David Johnston. Robert Coulter and Richard Beattie completed the class run down in that order. Vincent now leads the class championship from Robert Coulter and Richard Beattie is third.

Class 16b Historic Saloons and Sportscars

Steven Nevin is another competitor who has an escort which really is too nice to be abused and raced however this doesn't seem to slow him down as he steered his beautiful example to a 117.01sec run which saw him 8th overall in an historic spec car. Second in class went to Alan Jardine in another Mk1 Escort with third place going to

Olivia Coulter in her Ford Anglia. Olivia finished up the day as the fastest female competitor on the day. The class 16b championship sees Stephen Nevin first with Alan Jardine second and Olivia Coulter third.