

Robert Reigns Supreme at Challenging Kirkistown Sprint

Kirkistown on Saturday 14 March saw the Second round of the SW Adair Tyres Northern Ireland Sprint Championship being hotly contested. This event which was hosted by the 500MRCI was also round 1 of the Irish Pack and Pallet Hillclimb and Sprint Championship. This meant that some of the fastest sprint drivers in Ireland descended on a cold Kirkistown.

In order to run through the starting entry of a staggering 93 competitors first practice was completed as a procession lap which meant that second practice started circa 9.45 am. Four timed runs then followed. However the local weather came into play and only the first timed run was completed in the dry and then halfway through the second timed run, the heavens opened.

Robert Dwane driving a 1.3OMS Suzuki set the early pace and set a blistering run of 86.65 secs which was to remain unbeaten all day. Alan Cassells debuted his new 1500cc turbo charged OMS Suzuki and set a very respectable 88.4sec run in what was literally the first time he had driven the car. Adrian Pollock was third a 1.21 secs behind Alan Cassells in his 2.0 Dallara F301 and Downpatrick engineer Eamon Matheson was fourth with a 93.24 sec run in his 2.2T MM3.

Sadly the rain started mid-way through the second timed runs and the vast majority of competitors were unable to beat their first timed runs. As the rain got heavier the vast majority of competitors decided not to risk an accident and opted not to run again. As the afternoon progressed those who continued to sprint saw that the rain eased off considerably for the fourth timed runs allowing times to again drop however with the track still wet no one was going to be able to better the times set in the first dry run.

With the inclusion of the Irish competitors there was a hugely varied entry of cars including some which turned out to be a lot faster than you would've thought. With the Irish round continuing on the Sunday to form round 2 of the Irish Pack and Pallet Hillclimb and Sprint Championship there was a certain buzz around the paddock which hadn't been felt in a long time. It's safe to say that Sprinting is booming in Northern Ireland this year and I know that there are a lot of new cars and new drivers arriving on the scene which is good to see.

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 was, once again the fastest modified driver with a 106.94 sec run that he set during the second timed runs, just before the rain really came on hard which saw him finish an incredible 14th overall. Oliver is rumoured to be interviewing for a job as a UTV weatherman as he seem to be able to read the weather like a book. Second modified driver home was Garry Campbell in his Toyota Starlett with a 108.82 sec run which was 1.88 secs adrift of Oliver but 1.55 secs ahead of his son Daniel who was third Modified home in his starlet. Interestingly I watched both of the Campbell's do their third timed runs in the wet and Daniel was far more flamboyant than his dad in the wet and was also faster. I jokingly told Garry that he needed to get lessons from Daniel on getting the tail out as Daniel was great to watch.

The road going category was, like so many recent events, all about Andrew Robb. Andrew Robb pedalled his BMW M3 to 28th overall with a run of 111.84. Second road going car home was James Heaslip in his class 3 Subaru Impreza with a 115.6sec run which was a mere 0.16 faster than Conor Hamil who steered his V8 BMW M3 to third in the road going category.

In the new for 2020 Specialist Cars Category Gerard O`Connell made a welcome return in his newly re-liveried Escort Mk1 Gerard finished an astounding eight overall with a 99.16sec run which was 5.53secs ahead of David Hawthorne who once again proved to be the fastest Hawthorne. Third in the Specialist cars category went to returning Graham Boyce in his 2.0 Dax Honda. Graham showed that despite a year out of the seat that he hasn't lost his pace.

In terms of the Heaslip Ladies Challenge Trophy Sheryl McBride was the fastest of the 3 ladies competing with a 4.92 sec lead over Kathy McDade and third fastest of the females was Emma Campbell who's fastest run was a 136.53 secs. As this challenge is not scored on fastest times, but instead is scored based on where the ladies finish in comparison to their class rivals, Emma and Sheryl both took a 5 point haul with Kathy earning 1 point. Emma has now closed the gap to Sheryl to 1 point after 2 rounds so this battle is only hotting up.

The last completion on Saturday was the unofficial Fastest Mini in the West competition which this time went to the returning Gerry McGarrity. It was great to see Gerry back in the paddock again, where he continued to dish out banter like there was no tomorrow. I actually had a really enjoyable chat with Gerry and Bill Adair later where they reminisced over some of the antics that the two of them got up to in the past. Gary Milligan was second in the competition with Karl Johnston third today. I also had a great chat with Bill Blair who was out in his beautiful historic Mini. Sadly Bill, who hails from the northern half of the country doesn't really count in the fastest mini in the west competition however after speaking to the "Westy" mini drivers they have agreed to adopt Bill as a "Temporary Westy" to allow him to fight out this great unofficial battle. Fair Play fellas!

The next and third round of the championship was scheduled for Nutts Corner in April however with the recent Motorsport UK announcement on Covid 19 no one knows for sure when the next round will be. If the current Motorsport UK guidance is unchanged then the next round will be in Kirkistown on 16 May Hosted by Larne Motor club, depending of course on whether or not Motorsport UK re-instate the issuing of permits from 01 May. All I can advise is that everyone watches the ANICC website and I will keep you all posted.

Now for the class battles:

Class 1 – Road Cars up to 1700cc

Stephen Wishart continued on his class winning spree in his little Peugeot 106 with a class winning run of 124.27secs which was a mere 1.2 secs ahead of second placed Alan Wallaces Honda Del sol. Robert Savage drove his little Honda Civic to third in class. The class championship reflects today's results.

Class 2a – Road cars over 1700cc

Andrew Robb returned to the top of the Road cars podium with a blindingly quick 111.84 sec run which saw him 28th overall. Conor Hamill who is a regular hillclimb competitor manhandled his beast of a BMW M3 V8 to second in class with a 115.76 sec run which was a mere 1.24 secs ahead of Michael Clarke. The sound of Conor Hamill's BMW as he gives it full throttle is something that needs to be heard and is on a par with the purr from fourth placed Tom Lawthers Rover SD1. Can you tell that I love the rumble of a V8?? Championship wise Andrew Robb has a 4 point lead from Tom Lawther with Conor Hamill third, 2 points adrift of Tom.

Class 2b – Road cars over 1700cc – Mazda MX5 Challenge

It was great to see 2 Mazda MX5`s out today with Paul Magill and Gerard Larkin both entering. Paul Magill took a solid class win from Gerard Larkin and now leads the class 2 Championship challenge. Paul managed a very impressive 124.80sec run which saw him finish 67th overall so well done Paul.

Class 3 – Road cars series Production cars 4WD

To coin an old phrase “like busses they all come at once” class 3 today had 4 competitors which is great to see after no one ventured out in class 3 at the first round. Jimmy Heaslip hit the ground running in his Subaru Impreza and took a superb class win with a 115.6s run on a dampening track. Second in class went to Barry Griffin who also used the superior traction of 4wd in the damp to go fastest in his second run. Third in class 3 and the fastest Grady on the day was Tony Grady who's run of 127.41secs was 2.2secs faster than Paul Grady's. The class 3 championship standings reflect today's results.

Class 5 – Road cars specialist Production cars

Richard Munnis was once again out in his usual Westfield but informed me that he is getting bored of always winning his class. As a result Richard was in fact last in class 5 today, however he still gains the vital class win and 5 points as he was alone in the class. Richard is also last in the class 5 championship with a lonely 10 points.

Class 6a Modified Cars – Series Production cars 8v

Jonathan Strain finally found his mojo again on Saturday and took a superb class win with a 114.88 second run that put him 38th overall ahead of some seriously fast machinery. David Evans finished second in his 205 gti with a 119.68 sec run after getting caught in the damper second run conditions. Third in class went to Gary Milligan who, as ever, drove the wheels off his mini to secure a 121.55 sec run pipping fellow mini driver and the winner of the first round Karl Johnston in his mini. Jonathan Strain's win today now gives him a 2 point lead over Karl Johnston in the class championship points standings with Gary Milligan 1 point adrift of Karl in third.

Class 6b Modified Cars – Series Production cars 16v

Dermot O`Hagan again returned to the series with his Honda Civic. Unfortunately for the civic and the rest of the class 6b drivers, Dermot was still as fast as ever as he took a 2.04sec advantage over second placed Ken Colbert. Dermots time of 112.69secs saw him finish 33rd overall and 5th fastest modified car. Kens run of 114.73secs saw him finish 37th overall. Third in class went to the hard charging Colin Dines who lead the charge of the clio brigade in his Renault clio finishing a mere 1.8 seconds ahead of 4th placed Graham Dines after a superb family battle all day. Ken Colbert is still the King of class 6b with a 2 point led in the championship over Colin Dines with Dermot O`Hagan third 2 points behind colin.

Class 7 Modified Cars Specialist Production

Class 7 was another big class with 8 competitors. David Hawthorne once again lead the way and was fastest of the class 8 chargers as well as remaining the fastest Hawthorne, although Stephen would disagree with that. David fastest run was a 104.69ses run a mere 0.61secs ahead of returning Graham Boyce in his Dax Honda. Third went to Steven Hawthorne who claimed that he was knobbled by David Hawthorne after an oil pressure warning light came on after David disconnected it and failed to tell him. The joys of brotherly love. Steven Hawthorne`s first timed run was only 0.2 secs off Graham Boyce so the top three were split by only 1.19 secs. Championship wise David Hawthorne has a 3 Point advantage over Steven Hawthorne and Graham Boyce is third.

Class 8 Sports Libre cars Special Saloons

This event saw 2 new to class eight cars competing in class 8. Due to the off season regulation amendments Gerard O`Connell in his Escort was now running in class 8 instead of class 9 where he previously ran. Stephen Best also debuted his beautiful wee 1.6DFR Mini in the class as well. This space framed mini is an absolute cracker and in fairness if there was an award for the best looking car on Saturday then it probably would have gone to a class 8 car. Anyhow, down to the official stuff Gerard O`Connell placed a huge TOC Utilities stamp on class 8 and set a class winning 99.16sec run which also gave him 8th overall. Eight is obviously Gerard`s lucky number. Stephen Best was second with a 122.16sec run which is highly respectable for his first run out. There is obviously a lot more to come with this car so watch this space. Gerard now leads the class 8 Championship.

Class 9a Sports Libre cars Saloons and GT`s

Having checked the results for class 9a I have also been forced to check the class regulations to see if it is only open to drivers called Campbell which it thankfully isn`t. This is because class 9a only attracted 2 entrants on Saturday, both of whom were called Campbell and are, to the best of my knowledge unrelated. Garry Campbell was out in his stunning Toyota Campbell and took class honours as well as 17th overall with a class winning run on 108.82secs. Emma Campbell who lies second in the Ladies Challenge was second in class in her little Peugeot 106. Despite being the second fastest Campbell in class 9a on Saturday Emma still has the upperhand in the class Championship which she now leads by 3 points.

Class 9b Sports Libre cars Closed wheel sports racers

After a lonely run at Nutts Corner which saw Sheryl with no one to play with Eamon Matheson rolled out his stunning 2.2T MM3 to contest for class 9b honours on Saturday. Interestingly both Eamon and Sheryl seemed to avail of the same paint offer as both cars are nearly identical in colour. Green is clearly the colour to be in order to be successful in class 9b. Eamon's run of 93.24 secs left him 4th overall and taking class honours however Sheryl left the circuit once again 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 once again rolled out his Citroen Saxo, and like Richard Munnis in class 5, Alan managed to finish in 2 positions in the class. Alan not only was last in class 10 but he also managed to win it as well! Alan had a blinding 114.04sec run which saw him finish 35th overall and safely securing the trophy for the class win. It's a shame that so many of the other Rally cars choose not to run in class 10 as Alan is starting to feel lonely on his own. With 2 or 3 more cars entered it has the potential to be a great little class. Alan Roddy leads the class 10 Championship

Class 11 Sports libre Cars – large capacity Rally cars

Class 11 was also a bit short of entries on Saturday with only Daniel Campbell and a returning Neil Dugan entered. Neil needs no introduction amongst the speed competitors as he is well known to be a seriously fast eejit. After a season running a pinto in his RWD Peugeot 205 which is one of the world famous Ken Colbert built RWD 205's, Neil finally had a trusty Cosworth back under the bonnet. Sadly Neil had a slight technical issue when a core plug blew out as he headed for the finish line on 1 of his runs. After realising that his weekend was over he scratched heads with Robert McGimpsey and between them they found that a hammer shaft was the same diameter as the core plug (don't ask). After a bit of old school engineering, a new and improved core plug was machined in the paddock and Neil continued to compete not only on Saturday but on Sunday as well!! Daniel Campbell posted a cracker first time run of 110.37 secs to pip Neil to the class by 1.37 secs. Daniel now leads the class 11 championship.

Class 12 4WD sports Libre Cars

Oliver Cormican aka the weather man is another competitor who managed to fill 2 places in his class. With a stonking second timed run time of 106.94 secs Oliver finished both first and last in class 12 as well as being 14th overall and fastest modified. Oliver now has a 6 point lead in the class championship and is still second overall in the overall NI Sprint Championship. Anyone who sees Oliver dancing in the paddock from now on will know that he's doing a rain dance and that it's time to get to the startline before him and the rain!

Class 13 Formula Racing cars

Class 13 was another family affair and was a mirror image of the previous round when Ryan Campbell took family and class honours over his father Henry. Ryan's fastest run of 107.65 secs was 1.73secs faster than Henry's. John Whitley made the

long trip North to Kirkistown and earned third in class again. The class championship is now a mirror image of the class results.

Class 14 Small Capacity Racing Cars

Again History repeated itself in Class 14 after 1 of the main class contenders suffered engine issues resulting in not setting a timed run. The same thing happened at Nutts Corner however thankfully not to the same driver. Also in similar fashion to the first round of the season no one in class 14 did a second run due to a rain shower and again, like the first round Ryan McGimpsey put the cat amongst the pigeons with a blinding run to well and truly mix it with the big boys. On this occasion it was the unfortunate Trevor Roberts who suffered mechanical issues and which is unfortunate as it will be a great race when all of the class 14 competitors finally get to have 3 timed runs against each other. Ryan won the class with a 94.67 sec run which put him 6th overall and 5.31 secs ahead of George Stevenson. Thomas Corey was a very competitive third in class in the Reynard SF80 which many people will recognise as the car John Donnelly has been so successful in. Thomas seems to be getting more relaxed and more confident in the car at each event which is great to see. Ryan now leads the class championship by 3 points from George Stevenson with Thomas Corey third.

Class 15 Large Capacity Racing Cars

After keeping everyone guessing what he had bought Alan Cassells rolled out his new car a 1.5t OMS Suzuki and despite having never driven it before Alan took class honours and second overall in the car. Alan's fastest run was a 88.44 sec run which was 1.79secs off Robert Dwanes FTD but 1.21 ahead of Adrian Pollock who still hasn't managed to get into his usual rhythm so far this season. Third went to Christopher Houston. Sadly first round winner Steven Gault suffered a rare mechanical issue in what has to be one of the best prepared cars in the paddock. After Saturdays result Adrian now leads the class championship as well as the overall Sprint championship ahead of Steven Gault and Alan Cassells. This class will be well worth a watch as the season continues.

Class 16a Historic Road Cars

Gerry McGarrity returned to the paddock amongst a stream of laughing, practical jokes and banter all the way. It's hard to see where Gerry found the time to compete but he did and he managed to take class honours by 3.01secs from Terence Dillon in the Avenger. Vincent Rodgers was third ahead of Robert Coulter and the newly adopted "Westy" Bill Blair in his mini. After Saturdays results Terence Dillon still leads the class from Robert Coulter with Gerry McGarrity now third in class.

Class 16b Historic Saloons and Sportscars

Steven Nevin is another competitor who shouldn't be driving such a beautiful car so fast. His escort really is beautiful but its also very very fast. Steven, who had no one to play with in his class this time out set a 111.64 sec run which saw him 25th overall and first in class. Steven also now leads his class championship battle.