

Nutts Corner 02 March 2019 Round 1 Review

Saturday 02 March saw the first round of the SW Adair Tyres Northern Ireland Sprint Championship at Nutts Corner and boy did the championship kick off in style.

The word of the day was "greasy" and the phrase of the week in sprinting circles is "its like driving on ice" however it is safe to say that everyone who left Nutts corner on Saturday afternoon did so with a wry smile on their faces knowing that they had taken on treacherous driving conditions and won.

The day started off dry but cold as first practice began. The North Ulster Car Club who were hosting the event had endeavoured to get both practice runs and at least 1 timed run done before the forecasted rain would reach Nutts corner. They had a fair crack at it and managed both practice runs before the heavens opened but unfortunately mother nature beat them to the timed runs.

With the rain falling on the first timed runs It was Stephen Gault who mastered the conditions and set the early pace, whilst John Morgan scored a no timed run. John Morgan who fought tooth and nail last year with Adrian Pollock then pulled a blistering run out of the bag during the second timed runs and went ahead with Joe Courtney third in his Dalara F308. As conditions worsened, with a heavy rain shower, it was down to the final run of the day. With Steven Gault Lined up behind John Morgan on the line, John suffered a gearbox issue which meant he couldn't start the third timed runs leaving Steven the option of settling for second or having a go for his first ever event win. This was a challenge which he relished as he set a blindingly fast final run of 112.85 seconds to take the lead, the event win and fastest time of the day. John Morgan took second with Gerard O'Connell putting in a fantastic third run to take third overall in his Escort Mk1 which was 6.621 secs faster than his previous best time.

Yesterday marked the start of Steven Gaults 20th year of competing during which times he has campaigned mini`s Peugeots and the Saxo everyone knows him best in. During this period he has set numerous class records, some of which still stand, and has several roadgoing and modified championships under his belt. It was this experience which Steven used to guide his immaculate Reynard to his first ever fastest time of the Day and event win.

The wet and greasy conditions favoured the brave as those in saloons reaped the benefits of a roof and windscreen. Gerard O'Connell put his beautiful Escort MK1 firmly on top of the Modified Saloon Championship with a third overall finish. Oliver Cormican kept his momentum up from last year and stormed his Mitsubishi Evo to a whopping 5th overall and 2nd place in the Modified Saloon Category . Sixth place overall and 3rd modified saloon was taken by David Strain in his flying class 6a Peugeot 205. David Strain who has competed for several years put in a very committed run in atrocious conditions. David's Peugeot was easily instantly recognisable on the circuit as it sounds divine as it accelerates away from you.

In the battle for Roadgoing honours Andrew Robb set a blistering second run time of 125.72 secs to take 15th overall as well as the category and class win from last year's road going champion Chris Rogan. This was a blistering run from Andrew Robb when you consider that he was driving his powerful BMW M3 on road tyres in such wet and greasy conditions.

In the hotly contested battle for the Fastest mini in the West Gary Milligan who started his 33rd season of motorsport in the same car took the honours from Karl Johnston in his midas. Sligo's John Golden, who is a newcomer to the battle took third. The main protagonist in this award, Gerry McGarrity wasn't out yesterday but rumour has it that he has purchased a lightweight mini as he has set his sights on winning the 2019 fastest mini in the west title. Gerry still hasn't announced which size of tyres he will run the new mini on but with him being adamant that his smaller 10" wheels were a disadvantage to him last year I'd expect to see the new mini on 14's or maybe even 15's as he tries to catch the flying Gary Milligan.

The 2019 Championship looks set to be a classic with Steven Gault now well and truly throwing his hat in the ring. 2018 Champion Adrian Pollock still hasn't got his car completed after a winter rebuild but he will be returning to the series with the intention of retaining his title. John Morgan is also keen on winning this year's championship to add to his previous 2013 title. Joe Courtney who has won 3 Irish Hillclimb championships has purchased a new Dalarra F308 which he double drives with Rory (Grandad) Stephens has also registered for this year's championship as has former 3 times Sprint and 2001 Hillclimb Champion Simon Woodside. Of course Gerard O'Connell is also in the mix as well, and as was seen at Nutts corner it doesn't matter what car he drives Gerard will be quick and he is also keen to add more titles to his existing Sprint and Hillclimb championship wins.

Its also great to see an influx of new names on the entry list as well such as Emma Campbell, Brain Hutton, Thomas Lowry, Jonathan Strain and Stephen best. Hopefully this is a sign of things to come.

In terms of the classes

Class 1. Roadgoing up to 1700cc . After a year out Richard Beattie returned like a rat up a drainpipe and took a 3 second class win from Andrew Straney in his Mazda MX5. Andrew is well known on the local Rally scene and has decided to enter this year's championship in the mazda which he'll double drive with Rudy Tate. James Schofield, in only his 3rd event took third in class in his Honda Jordan Civic with Rudy Tate fourth despite him leading the class after the first run. This is typical of Rudy who goes flat out right from the off.

Class 2 Roadgoing Over 1700CC – Andrew Robb obviously hadn't been told that the track was wet and greasy as he steered the big BMW M3 to class and category honours as well as 15th overall. Chris Rogan initially lead the class after the first timed runs but had to succumb to Andrew's second run time to finish second with Stephen Donnelly third a mere 0.16secs behind Chris.

Class 5 Roadgoing Specialist Cars. Kenny Wylie Debuted his new Lotus having only purchased it last week. Despite taking an early class lead he had to depart early and only managed 1 run. Richard Munnis took advantage of the slightly dryer second run conditions and leapfrogged Kenny to take the class win, with Gardiner McIlwaine taking third. Gardiner hasn't been used to having company in the specialist production car class over the last number of years so its good to see some more cars entered this class

Class 6A – Modified Production Cars 8v. This was the biggest class of the day with 9 competitors and 2 newbies. It was also one with the most surprises too. The class was won by David Strain in his Peugeot 205. David however hadn't received the memo about the rain and set 5th overall fastest in

the first run. That is incredible going for him in his little 205 gti. He then went a further 1.99 seconds faster in the slightly drier second run and ended up 6th overall. Championship Co-ordinator David Evans had a similar giant killing day in his little 205 gti but not without problems. David had a spin in his first timed run then set a blinding second timed run which put him 13th overall and second in class. With the sniff of a top 10 finish as a possibility he went all out on his last run and ended up in the gravel trap much to the disgust of his father. Third in 6a went to newcomer Jonathan Strain in his stunning 205 gti who narrowly pipped Gary Milligan by a mere 0.36 seconds. Gary put every one of his 33 years experience to good use and was 1 of only a handful who went faster on their last run. Gary did however secure the bragging rights as fastest mini in the west.

Class 6B – Modified Series Production cars 16v . Colin Dines set the initial pace in the class in his Clio before the improving conditions of the second run allowed Jonathan Babb to sneak into the class lead with Colin demoted to third behind Steven Robb. Steven however had other ideas and took 1.05 secs out of his previous run to steal the class win on his third run from Jonathan Babb and Colin Dines. This class also saw 2 more new faces in Stephen Best and Brian Hutton. Both 6a and 6b are showing healthy entries and good competition so will be great to watch as the season continues.

Class 7 modified Specialist Production – Alan Davidson, who is best known for his giant killing drives in the Formula Ford racing set an early lead in the damp conditions and wasn't to be caught despite the best efforts of many. Scott McMullan had a blinding drive to be 0.01 secs off Alan in his first run. This was brilliant for Scott who has literally only driven the car 2 or 3 times before today. However it was the Hawthorne twins who were to fight for second and third. Steven was the faster of the twins all day and there was never more than 1.26secs between them with Steven getting the nod over David by a mere 0.26 secs at the end. Scott McMullan didn't get a second run to take the fight to the Hawthorne's but he did finish a fabulous 4th in class.

Class 9a Sports Libre Saloons. Gerard O'Connell dominated the class all day in his Escort Mk1. With no one else in his class to play with he decided to go and play with the single seater drivers instead and with a breathtaking last run he took third overall in his beautiful Escort Mk1 and he stayed dry in the process.

Class 10 Small rally car class – Alan Roddy took the class win from newcomer Phillip Gault. Alan whose steady controlled style allowed him to chip away at his times as the day went on. It was great to see Philip debut his new Nova although spins and poor conditions prevented him from getting totally to grips with it. There is definitely a lot more to come from this little car.

Class 11 Larger capacity Rally Cars. Thomas Lowry took the class honours in this class from Regular Competitor Daniel Campbell. Sadly Daniel had issues which meant he only managed 1 timed run however Thomas made full use of his 3 runs and consistently chipped away at his times to secure the class win.

Class 12 – 4WD Libre Saloons – Oliver Cormican took a comfortable class win on his way to 5th overall and 2nd modified saloon. Oliver was a joy to watch as he threw the Evo about like an autotest mini round the bottom of the course. It was also great to see Oliver's new livery as he supports the Friends of The Cancer Centre charity this season. Second in class 12 went to Bill Arbuthnot in his Subaru with Basil Barnes having mechanical issues in his evo during practice.

Class 13 Racing Cars – Andrew Blair and his father Bill joined this class today in their Reynard Formula ford “for a bit of craic” and Andrew took class honours from class stalwart Henry Campbell. Henry who is a rain maestro just couldn’t match Andrew Blair who took class honours by 3.52 secs from Henry. Another newcomer to this class, Willie McKee took third in class in his Van Diemen with Ian Maple a mere 0.72 secs further back in fourth

Class 14 Smaller racing cars class. Trevor Roberts swapped his leathers for nomex and took the Jedi to class honours and 7th overall ahead of Catherine Donnelly. Trevor is a multiple Kart champion at Irish, British, European and World level so he has no lack of knowledge when it comes to driving a lightweight powerful vehicle in the wet. Trevor’s experience shone brighter than the sun yesterday as he hustled the little Jedi round Nutts corner like it was a dry day. Catherine also had a great drive on slick tyres to take 37th overall in her delta. Catherine is still gaining confidence with every minute in the seat and will be in the mix for class honours at the end of the season.

Class 15 All other racing cars. It was Stephen Gault who mastered the conditions and set the early pace, whilst John Morgan scored a no Timed run. John Morgan who fought tooth and nail last year with Adrian Pollock then pulled a blistering run out of the bag during the second timed runs and went ahead with Joe Courtney third in his Dalara F308. As conditions worsened, with a heavy rain shower, it was down to the final run of the day. With Steven Gault Lined up behind John Morgan on the line, John suffered a gearbox issue which meant he couldn’t start the third timed runs leaving Steven the option of settling for second or having a go for his first ever event win. This was a challenge which he relished as he set a blindingly fast final run of 112.85 seconds to take the lead, the event win and fastest time of the day. John Morgan took second with Joe Courtney third.

Class 16a Historics John Golden took class honours as well as third place in battle for fastest mini in the west. John had a lonely drive to the class win but finished a very respectable 41st overall.

Class 16B Non Roadgoing historics. Alan Jardine took class honours in this class today in his Escort Mk2 ahead of Stephen Strains beautiful Mk1 escort. Stephen was fantastic to watch as he drifted his escort round all day. He spent so much time looking through the side windows of the car that he didn’t even need to turn his wipers on in the rain. If ever you wanted a demonstration of drifting and car control Stephen yesterday was the thing to watch. Third in Class went to North Ulster Car Clubs Mervyn Getty who narrowly pipped Vincent Rodgers by a mere 0.44 seconds in the car they double drove. Vincent is better known at the North Ulster Sprint events for doing paddock control and can frequently heard telling people to “stay behind that cone until I wave you forward”. I was speaking to him at lunchtime and he laughed and told me that he now sees why we love this sport so much and that the club need to find a new paddock marshal as he intends to do more sprints.

A massive thanks needs to go to North Ulster Car club for running the event and especially to all the marshals, officials etc who stood out in such horrendous conditions at times so that we as competitors could enjoy a days motorsport.

Round 2 of the SW Adair Tyres Northern Ireland Sprint Championship takes place at Kirkistown on 16 March. Please get your entries in as soon as possible. Entry forms can be found on the ANICC website and don’t forget that in order to score championship points you must register for the championship on www.rallyscore.net the day prior to the event at which you wish to score championship points, and display championship stickers on your vehicle.

