

CARLOW'S CAPACITY CALL

The return of the Triton Showers-backed Motorsport Ireland National Rally Championship to County Carlow on Sunday next after a lapse of six years is greeted by a capacity entry of 150 crews with no fewer than another 55 crews on a reserve list, thus illustrating the huge popularity of the eight round series.

Sunday's Sheehy Motor Group Carlow Rally that is based at the Seven Oaks Hotel in Carlow town, will consist of two stages repeated three times. It marks the mid-point of the series where reigning champion Monaghan's Josh Moffett remains unbeaten following start to finish victories in Mayo, Birr and Monaghan.

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Winner of the last rally (in 2018) that was organised by the Carlow Motor Club, Ryan Loughran (Ford Escort) will have the number one decals on the doors of his Mk. 2 Ford Escort. However, Moffett in his Hyundai i20 R5, will run first on the road as he continues his quest to claim the magnificent Vard Memorial Trophy.

With the best six scores to count, Moffett's immediate title protagonists Armagh's Darren Gass and Dubliner Robert Barrable are still very much in the equation, however, they need to stop Moffett's winning streak. Both are still on a learning curve with Gass adapting to his Citroen C3 and Barrable getting to know his VW Polo GTi R5. Last time out (Monaghan) Gass finished third behind the Moffett brothers Josh and Sam with Josh taking maximum points (21 including a point for the best time on the Power Stage) while Barrable was fourth – he was third until a puncture cost him time.

While Gass has competed in all three rounds to date and is second in the series - 14 points behind Moffett, Barrable is 28 points off top spot. "Unfortunately, I had to skip the Birr Rally but with the best six from eight scores to count, there's a long way to go yet. I think it will take me a bit longer to get up to speed in the VW Polo. It was always going to be difficult in Monaghan, Josh (Moffett) has great pace this year and it was his home event. Now, that it's out of the way I am looking forward to the rest of the championship including Sunday in Carlow."

Former triple national champion Donegal's Declan Boyle will campaign his Ford Fiesta WRC, he missed the opening round and was second in Birr but problems in Monaghan meant he missed out on the major points, essentially, he cannot afford any non-finishes to ensure he stays in the mix.

Glengormley's Derek McGarrity will pilot a VW Polo GTi R5 and is unlikely to register for the series. Meath's Tim McNulty, who made a return to rallying earlier this year and who won the national series in 2011, will campaign his right hand drive Ford Fiesta R5. As he aims to move into the top four in the series, he's acknowledged that the pace at the top is at a very high level. Another former champion Peadar Hurson (Ford Fiesta WRC) makes his first appearance in this year's championship and it will be interesting to see his turn of pace.

Louth's Brendan Cumiskey (VW Polo GTi R5) and Maynooth's Paul Barrett (Ford Fiesta R5) complete the top ten, the latter secured his best finish of the season (seventh) in Monaghan where he gained in confidence on each successive stage following his crash in the previous round in Birr.

Meanwhile, the array of R5 cars continues outside the top ten and includes Kilkenny's Enda O'Brien (VW Polo GTi R5) and Tyrone's Gareth Sayers (Ford Fiesta R5). Frank Wray (Subaru WRC) and Aidan Wray (Ford Fiesta R5) are next on the seeded lists.

DUBLINER Aaron MacHale, who won the national series in 2007 that included the Carlow Rally, makes a return to sport after an absence of some three years, on Sunday, he will debut a right hand drive VW Polo GTi R5, his performance will be watched with interest.

Cork's Cal McCarthy (Citroen DS3 R5) is seeded behind MacHale, ironically, in the car previously owned by the latter.

Elsewhere in the top twenty, there are places for Limerick's Keith Lyons (Ford Fiesta R5), Monaghan's Michael Carbin (Mitsubishi Evo VIII) and Cavan's Gary Kiernan (Ford Escort).

Kiernan leads the Mk. II Trophy section of the Triton Showers-backed Motorsport Ireland National Rally Championship, currently, he is a point ahead of Monaghan's Arthur Kierans with Limerick's Ed O'Callaghan three points further behind in third.

The event incorporates the Carlow Mk. II Challenge and along with the aforementioned, the likes of Carlow's David Condell, Monaghan's Gary McPhillips, Cavan duo Jonny Pringle and Chris Armstrong, Tyrone's Frank Kelly, Donegal's JF Shovelin and Tyrone's Adrian Hetherington, will all be seeking victory in this category.

Armagh's Jason Black and Donegal's Declan Gallagher, both in Toyota Starlets should have an interesting battle and along with Donegal's Kevin Gallagher (Darrian T90 GTR) all are aiming to dominate the two wheel drive category.

One interesting entry is that of English driver Jim Harrison, the Macclesfield driver, who last competed in Carlow in 2007, won several Irish national rallies from 2002 to 2007. He will campaign a Skoda Fabia R5 and will be co-driven by Limerick's Anthony Nestor, who competed with him in Carlow in 2004 - finishing fourth overall.

Aside from David Condell, other Carlow drivers to look out for are: No. 64: William Nolan (Toyota Corolla); No. 70: Philip McDonnell (Honda Civic); No.110: Paul Doyle (BMW Compact); No.116: Colin O'Toole (Proton Satria); No. 117: Francis Kelly (Vauxhall Nova) and No. 121: John O'Rourke (Opel Adam).

The first of the day's six stages gets underway at 10.00am.

Seeded Top 10:

1. Ryan Loughran/Gareth Doherty (Ford Escort)
2. Josh Moffett/Keith Moriarty (Hyundai i20 R5)
3. Darren Gass/Noel O'Sullivan (Citroen C3 Rally2)
4. Robert Barrable/Paddy Robinson (VW Polo GTi R5)
5. Declan Boyle/James O'Reilly (Ford Fiesta WRC)
6. Derek McGarrity/Graham Henderson (VW Polo GTi R5)
7. Tim McNulty/Paul Kiely (Ford Fiesta R5)
8. Peadar Hurson/Damien Connolly (Ford Fiesta WRC)
9. Brendan Cumiskey/TBA (VW Polo GTi R5)
10. Paul Barrett/Kevin Reilly (Ford Fiesta R5)

Rally Headquarters:

Seven Oaks Hotel, Carlow (Tel: 059 913 1308)

Event Schedule:

First Car Away: 08.42

S.S. 1, 3 & 6 (Drumfea - 19.10km): 10.00; 12.34 & 15.08

S.S. 2, 4 & 6 (Ballintemple - 17.40km): 10. 40; 13.14 & 15.48

Service (Tullow Mart) 09.27; 11.16 & 13.50

Finish Ramp (Seven Oaks Hotel) Carlow: 16.44

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