

EVANS WINS NENAGH RALLY TO TAKE EARLY LEAD IN DUNLOP CHAMPIONSHIP

A new season of the Dunlop National Rally Championship got underway with the Abbey Court Hotel Nenagh Rally that was won by Welsh ace, Mel Evans (Subaru WRC) and his co-driver, Patrick Walsh.

At the finish of the six-stage rally, Evans/Walsh were 22 seconds ahead of the Subaru pair of Derek McGarrity/Willie McKee. Kevin Kelleher/Adrian Deasy (Mitsubishi) were some 21 seconds further behind in third. The Modified category was won by Mike Quinn/Grainne McEnery (Escort) and Stephen Cullen/Seamus O'Grady (Subaru) won Group N.

On the opening 20km stage, where the competitors found the roads frosty and slippery, Evans set the pace and finished the stage some eight seconds ahead of the Subaru of Derek McGarrity, who was driving the ex-Eamon Boland Subaru S12B. The reigning Northern Ireland Rally champion was on his first real outing in this car in terms of driving it over narrow stages. Meanwhile, Donegal's, Manus Kelly, in his Mk2 Escort, set a terrific pace and occupied third spot - just two seconds further behind. Niall Maguire and Kevin Barrett, both in Subaru WRC's, shared equal fourth place with sixth placed, Kevin Kelleher, the reigning Paterson's RallyNews Group N champion, leading Group N in his Mitsubishi Evo9. The top ten was completed by Trevor Mulligan (Escort), Aidan Bourke (Mitsubishi), Mike Quinn (Escort), the reigning rally.ie champion and Tom Flaherty (Escort). Daniel McKenna (Escort) lost considerable time with transmission woes and ended the stage down in 92nd place.

Barrett punched in the best time for the second stage and it was enough to promote him into second spot - ten seconds behind rally leader, Mel Evans (Subaru). Tyre choice was proving the decisive factor with Evans reckoning that he could have done with more grip.

Maguire was only three seconds behind Barrett as Kevin Kelleher (Mitsubishi) slotted into fourth some three seconds ahead of Derek McGarrity, who spun and lost valuable seconds.

Local ace, Aidan Bourke reckoned his Mitsubishi lacked grip in the conditions - due to his selection of a hard compound tyre.

Manus Kelly (Escort) moved into the lead of the Modified category when Mike Quinn lost time with a broken suspension link. Their fellow rival, Trevor Mulligan crashed out. The final places in the top ten were occupied by Tom Flaherty (Escort) and Alan O'Callaghan (Subaru).

Patrick McKenna, who finished the stage in third gear, made up twelve places to occupy 80th. in general classification.

On the repeat of the two stages, Evans punched in a pair of fastest times and opened up an impressive 33-second lead. Barrett maintained second although he had a slight overshoot on the fourth test. Maguire was six seconds behind but only a second ahead of a charging Kevin Kelleher, in his Group N

Mitsubishi. The reigning Patterson's RallyNews champion, lost a few seconds when he spun at a left-hand junction. McGarrity, who admitted he was still learning the characteristics of his Subaru, was three seconds behind Kelleher.

Quinn regained the lead in the Modified section - aided when Manus Kelly lost time with a puncture on S.S. 4. Ed Synan (Escort) in eighth place, experienced some electrical woes. The Subaru pair of Alan O'Callaghan and Pat Kelly rounded off the top ten. Aidan Bourke (Mitsubishi) and Tom Flaherty (Escort) both retired. Meanwhile, Daniel McKenna (Escort) moved up 39 places to 41st. in general classification. Barrett retired just after leaving the final service halt when a wheel nut sheared off one of the front wheels of his Subaru. Out on the stage, McGarrity set a blistering pace to move into second - 37 seconds behind Evans and two ahead of Maguire. Kelleher and Quinn retained the lead of their respective Group N and Modified categories.

Evans did enough on the final stage to secure victory and maximum Dunlop points. McGarrity took second, he was fastest on the stage while Kelleher clinched third after Maguire's Subaru blew the turbo.

Kelleher had an anxious moment when the steering column dropped into his lap on the final stage, however, he jammed it back into position and completed the stage.

Quinn got the defence of his rally.ie Modified crown off to the perfect start, he was also fifth overall - ten seconds ahead of rival, Manus Kelly. Alan O'Callaghan (Subaru) was seventh overall while Washington James, who struggled during the morning stages, finished eighth overall. Pat Kelly (Subaru) and Jason Roche (Escort) rounded off the top ten.

Meanwhile, Daniel McKenna (Escort) battled his way back from 91st on the opening stage after to finish 22nd. overall, he was the recipient of the inaugural "Driver of the Day" award. McKenna was the fastest of the Modified drivers through S.S. 3, 4 and 5.

Kevin O'Connor/Donal Balfe (Citroen C2R2) won the opening round of the new Dunlop Junior Championship.

1. M. Evans/P. Walsh (Subaru WRC) 1h. 02m. 16s.
2. D. McGarrity/J. McKee (Subaru WRC) 1h. 02m. 38s.
3. K. Kelleher/A. Deasy Mitsubishi) 1h. 02m. 59s
4. N. Maguire/B. Goodman (Subaru WRC) 1h. 04m. 19s.
5. M. Quinn/G. McEnery (Ford Escort) 1h. 05m. 21s.
6. M. Kelly/D. Barrett (Ford Escort) 1h. 05m. 31s.
7. A. O'Callaghan/C. McGrath (Subaru) 1h. 07m. 46s.
8. W. James/L. Jones-Davies (Darrian) 1h. 08m. 06s.
9. P. Kelly/N. Lambert (Subaru) 1h. 08m. 29s.
10. J. Roche/D. Fleming (Ford Escort) 1h. 09m. 34s.



Top 2 Wheel Drive Winners Mike Quinn & Co driver Grainne McEnery, With Richard Talbot (Chairman Dunlop National Rally Championship), Bill Ryan COC, & Laura Furey (Dunlop NRC Registrar). Mike Quinn/Grainne McEnery



Frank Sweeney/Seamus O'Connor



Daniel McKenna receiving the Dunlop NRC Drive of the Rally award from NRC Chairman Richard Talbot.