

Three in a row for Vassallo

Alex Vassallo stood on the top of the podium at the end of the third round of the Brick & Steel Junior 1000 Ecosse Challenge. The Albar Kames Junior Rally took place at Kames in East Ayrshire on Sunday 13th July and 10 Junior crews had entered to tackle the twisty and very technical stages. The day started damp – which in Scotland means light rain – but started to clear later in the morning and ended in sunshine. In the transition the midgies came out for a feed!! Such is the micro climate of the region.

Adam Gould from the MSA Academy was on hand to observe and advise Junior drivers on their approach and technique and after a midway briefing all crews went away to make adjustments to their car settings to suit the changing conditions. Adam's presence was very much appreciated by all crews.

First surprise of the day was when leading challenger to Alex Vassallo – Dylan O'Donnell – pulled into the service area with a white and yellow Peugeot 107 on their trailer as opposed to the usual green Micra. They had purchased the ex Luke Barker car earlier in the week and after a short run in the car were ready to "settle it in" at Kames.

First Junior – Alex Vassallo in his Citroen C1 – left the start line at about 9.15 and after the first 4 stages there was a 1 second difference in his favour between him and a beaming Dylan O'Donnell. There were a few ragged moments on the first couple of stages as O'Donnell adjusted to the very different characteristics of the 107. Kames is not a place with a lot of room but O'Donnell got away with it. After 4 stages, Vassallo got his head down and managed to stretch his 1 second lead to 5 seconds. But O'Donnell came back at him over the 2 stages before the lunch break and clawed back 3 seconds. So they went into the break with Vassallo having a 2 second advantage over O'Donnell. This must be the closest gap we have ever seen in the Junior 1000 Ecosse Challenge.

But Vassallo "spoke to himself" over the lunchbreak and came out to add 5 seconds to his lead over the next 2 stages and then a further 2 seconds over the final 2 stages. And so at the end the gap was 9 seconds but what a battle we witnessed. But it could well have been a disaster for O'Donnell. Having commented on the amazing fuel consumption on his new car per his fuel gauge, he ran out just before the finish line and had to coast into the finish.

The top 6 Juniors were all in Toyota Aygos/Peugeot 107s/Citroen C1s. Following behind the lead tussle for the morning stages were Michael Robertson (Toyota Aygo) and Mikey Dickie (Toyota Aygo). These drivers were a couple of seconds off the lead pair on each stage and the positions at the lunch break were Robertson in 3rd, leading Dickie in 4th by 8 seconds. Disaster struck Dickie and co-driver Martin Forrest on the third stage after lunch when the Aygo left the road on a very fast section with a small kink and the car dug in at the front and rolled end over end. The event was stopped as the 2 crew were taken away for precautionary checks at the local hospital but were released later in the day. This unfortunate incident left Robertson a clear run into the final podium place .



Finishing in fourth and fifth were Brodie Balfour/Ian Nicol (Toyota Aygo) and Brandon Walsh/Ian Shiels (Citroen C1) Both drivers have unhappy memories of Kames and this probably tempered their aggression slightly. But Brodie was trying hard and the black tyre lines down the sills on his car reflected the fact that he was close to the pace of the front runners on a few stages. Brandon's car remained pristine – much to the relief of his parents.

The first Micra home was Harris Wilson/Craig Wallace in 6th place and only 8 seconds behind Walsh in the C1. Fitting some fresh rubber at the lunch break paid dividends for Wilson as he only dropped 3 seconds to Walsh on the final 4 stages. In order to raise funds for his rallying, Harris has a couple of summer jobs. Obviously sitting in his tractor for hours cutting silage has given him time to ponder his driving techniques. And he kept well out of the grassy bits!!

In 7th place was Finlay Retson/Fraser Jones (Micra) This was Retson's second ever rally and his first visit to Kames. It took him a few stages to adjust to the different nature of the Kames stages compared to his first event at Crail. At Crail it was wide open spaces with long stages but Kames is tight and the stages are very short. But the crew and Micra put in a very solid performance.

And the final Micra home was Cameron Russell in 8th place. Sitting in the "hot seat" was guest co-driver Ian McRae and he guided Russell round to a clean finish as he continues down the development path.

Apart from Dickie/Forrest, the only other non finisher was Dale Kelly/Peter Weall (Micra). Kelly had just returned from holiday in Mexico the afternoon before and was a bit jet lagged. This showed in his concentration and on stage 5 he paid the price for putting a wheel on the grass just before the stage finish beam and slid off into the tyre wall – taking the timing beam with him!! The car was not badly damaged but the family decided to sensibly call it a day.

The next event for the Junior 1000 Ecosse Challenge will be the Solway Coast Junior Rally on 10th August. This is the big event in our calendar when Junior crews from Scotland, England, Ireland and Wales will all compete on the same event. Exciting does not really cover it!!