

Junior 1000 Drivers Defy Hurricane Bertha.....

A group of 27 Junior 1000 rally crews gathered near Kircudbright on 10th August 2014 for a very historic motorsport event – the “**usedcarparts Solway Coast Junior Rally**”. This would be the first time that competitors from all 3 UK national Junior 1000 Rally Championships would compete on the same event. 40 miles over the military range roads of the Kircudbright Training Area would present a real challenge for the young drivers aged 14 to 17 years and on the 10th August they also had the tail end of ex-hurricane Bertha to contend with. Overnight rain had soaked the venue and left lots of standing water. And the rain continued to come and go during the day. But that did not suppress the enthusiasm of the youngsters and after 40 tough miles of driving, 17 of the 27 Junior starters crossed the finish line. Of the 10 who did not make it, 3 had minor “skirmishes” with the scenery and 7 encountered mechanical problems.



The full house of competitors after the Driver's Briefing

A total of 14 crews representing the **Brick & Steel Junior 1000 Ecosse Challenge** – the Scottish element of the national Junior 1000 scene - were on the starter's list.

Star of the day in first place overall and heading home the drivers registered in the Brick & Steel Junior 1000 Ecosse Challenge was Alex Vassallo (16) in his Citroen C1 with Michael Gilbey co-driving. Vassallo, who is in his third and final year of the Junior 1000 Championship has been a star performer since joining in 2012 at the age of 14. He came out of the first waterlogged stage on Sunday with a 20 second lead over his nearest rival and went on to build on this lead over the next 9 stages to complete the day 1 minute 44 seconds ahead of the rest of the field. An absolutely splendid performance.

Second Junior 1000 Ecosse Challenge crew home were Michael Robertson (17) and Phil Sandham in their Toyota Aygo. Reporting no major issues during the day, they recorded their best result so far in the Championship. Robertson has been third on 2 of the earlier Championship rounds. They will now move into a strong second place overall in the Championship.

And finally, in third Junior 1000 Ecosse Challenge place, delivering the promise he has shown since joining the Championship in 2013, was Sandy Fairbairn (17) in his Nissan Micra. He was accompanied by experienced and front running Scottish Rally Championship driver Callum Atkinson. But their day was not without drama. They returned to the pits from the first group of 2 stages with a rear shock absorber punched through into the boot area. But Sandy and Dad Warren soon had the Micra returned to full strength in a very short time. Sandy is a lad who loves wet and slippery conditions having done a lot of his training on ice lakes in Sweden.



Andy Struthers(16)/Andrew Falconer (Micra) kind of hogged 10th position overall for most of the day apart from after stages 3 and 4 when they slipped back to 12th overall. But they were lucky in stage 8 when an “altercation” with a bale rearranged the front of the Micra – slightly. But they also had to keep a close watch on Finlay Retson who had been closing the gap between them all day. Going into stage 9 it was Struthers in front by 3 seconds but they came out 5 seconds behind. But Retson had a spin on the last stage and dropped 30 seconds. So 10th overall and 4th J1000 Ecosse Challenger was a good reward for Struthers.

Two young drivers from Perthshire also took part. For Harris Wilson (14) from Pitlochry, this was his fourth ever rally in his blue Nissan Micra. He was accompanied by Craig Wallace from Kirriemuir. And Finlay Retson (14) from Blairgowrie would be competing on only his third rally in his Nissan Micra. He was accompanied by Fraser Jones from Edinburgh. Retson was seeded at car 18 and Wilson at car 20.

After the first 2 of the 10 special stages, Retson was in 15th place overall with an Irishman in front of him and an Englishman behind him. During the day Retson slowly crept up the leaderboard – 14th after 4 stages; 12th after 6; 11th after 8 but slipped back to 12th after losing time with a spin on the final stage which cost them 30 seconds and 10th place. But 12th overall out of 27 of the brightest young talents in the UK and 5th in the Scottish positions was a brilliant result for the youngster.

Young Harris did not have quite such a good day. 18th overall after the first 2 stages and 17th after 4 was pretty good but then disaster struck on the 5th stage when they had to stop and fix a problem with the fuel line. This dropped them about 3 minutes and they slipped down the leaderboard into 19th place. But they pressed on and were rewarded with 16th place overall at the end plus 8th in the Scottish positions.

Michael Dickie(16)/Martin Forrest (Nissan Micra) started as car 6 but finished 14th overall and 6th in the Scottish positions. This is not where this team would normally plan to be but after the spectacular end over end accident on the last rally at Kames, they were just happy to be out there in the Micra hired from Georgia Shiells for the day. The 2 lads have recovered pretty much from their Kames incident and their regular Toyota Aygo should be back to original condition for the next event.

Next up in 15th place overall and 7th in the Scottish points were Brandon Walsh(16)/Ian Shiels in a Citroen C1. Walsh was 3 seconds in front of Dickie after the first 6 stage but Dickie swept past into a 14 second lead on stages 7 and 8. Walsh put up a fight over the last 2 stages and clawed 5 seconds back. But it was not enough. But Walsh took his immaculate white car home in one piece and was happy with his position.

And rounding off the finishers were Cameron Russell (15) and Ian McRae in their ex Andy Struthers/ex Michael Robertson Micra. Russell was out for the second time with McRae and on his fourth rally. So a finish and more miles behind the wheel with no mishaps was their reward.

And what about the 5 non finishers.

First casualty was Dale Kelly (16)/Pete Weall (Micra) only a few corners into stage 1. Dale felt that the car was not behaving correctly and that the steering was “strange”. The end product was a straight on at the end of a short straight. The car was undamaged but with all wheels on the grass, they were not getting back on the road until help arrived. After checking the car, the team decided not to risk it and call it a day.

Craig MacIvor (16)/Paul Beaton in a borrowed Micra were next to go. This was MacIvor’s first run in a car since his big off at Kames back in April. But he suffered a broken driveshaft and an off in stage 4. Not too much damage but the team are looking forward to having their own reshelled Micra back out very soon.

After his strong showing at the last event in his new Peugeot 107, Dylan O’Donnell (17) was feeling pretty optimistic about a good result with Tom Middlemiss back on the notes. But it was not to be. Dylan found himself languishing 8th overall and 4th Scottish crew after 4 stages. And then the fuel pump stopped and that was the end of their rally.

Harry Chalmers (14) was next to go. With “guest” co-driver Steven Brown given the job of controlling the young charger for the day, it all went well until stage 5 when a drive shaft snapped and that was the end. But he was starting to settle back in after his last rally in the middle of June.

Brodie Balfour (15)/Ian Nicol were also having a bad day in their Toyota Aygo. Lying 6th Scottish crew after the first 2 stages, they started to slip down the order and then gear linkage problems on stages 7 and 8 hit their times – you need more than 1st and 3rd gears. Te service crew managed to fix the linkage for the last 2 stages but the Aygo stopped midway through stage 9 with no drive. When the car was recovered and examined, they found that the gearbox mounting had broken off the gearbox.

And the conclusion from everybody involved with the event was “What an amazing experience”. And to remind the prize winners that they won in Scotland on the first “UK Nations’ Junior Challenge”, each was presented with a small supply of Tunnocks’ products to munch on the way home.

