

The Loudon-clear guide to... Circuit of Ireland

When I did the Circuit of Ireland with Robert Barrable a couple of years ago, there was a real feeling the event was growing; the legend had definitely been reborn. And now? Well, there's no doubting the fact that its back. Granted, it's not the full, five-day, north-south tour of the Seventies and Eighties, but the organising team – led by Bobby Willis – has worked wonders with this event and the profile is arguably higher than it's ever been.

And that profile is reflected in the event's standing as a shining light in three major series - the British, Irish and European Rally Championship - for the first time since 1991.

The cream of European rallying will gather in Belfast with an astonishing field of almost 40 top-line R5 cars. And before them lies some of the best asphalt rallying in the world. Stages like Hamiltons Folly and Torr Head are part of the fabric of our sport – they're fantastic to watch and even better to drive.

Growing up with a family involved in rallying, there were some fantastic stories about Jimmy McRae on the Circuit of Ireland. It's still an absolute treat to listen to a tale or two about his seven wins – even if I was just about getting ready for my first birthday when he and Rob Arthur took victory number seven in 1989!

It was those kind of stories, and the knowledge that this rally has been running since 1931, that made it so special when I finished third with Rob in 2014 (in a Ford Fiesta R5). In the future, I'm really looking forward to coming back to this event in the future to try and take one or, hopefully, two steps up the podium.

It's about time Lanarkshire was represented on the top step again!

The rally ahead...

MSA British Rally Championship round 2/7

FIA European Rally Championship round 1/10

TROA Irish Tarmac Championship round 2/8

Date: April 7-9

Based: Belfast

Service: Belfast

Stages: 14

Competitive distance: 209.56km (130.22 miles)

Liaison distance: 597.82km (371.48 miles)

Total distance: 807.38km (501.70 miles)

Longest stage: SS3 The Glens 31.21km (19.39 miles)

Shortest stage: SS6 Newtownards TT 2.30km (1.42 miles)

Sunrise: 0641

Sunset: 2012

Itinerary

Thursday April 7

Ceremonial start – Lisburn 1845

Friday April 8

SS1 Cairncastle 21.02km (13.06 miles) 0951

SS2 Knockboy 1 11.87km (7.37 miles) 1043

SS3 The Glens 31.21km (19.39 miles) 1144

Remote service Ballymoney 1358

SS4 Knockboy 2 11.87km (7.37 miles) 1505

SS5 Glendun 14.83km (9.21 miles) 1606

Service Belfast (Kings Hall) 1804

SS6 Newtownards TT 2.30km (1.42 miles) 1950

Parc ferme Belfast 2032

Saturday April 9

SS7 Bucks Head 1 14.24km (8.84 miles) 0918

SS8 Hamiltons Folly 1 16.95km (10.53 miles) 0958

SS9 Bulls Brook 1 12.19km (7.57 miles) 1047

SS10 Banbridge 1 14.85km (9.22 miles) 1152

Service Belfast (Kings Hall) 1244

SS11 Bucks Head 2 14.24km (8.84 miles) 1414

SS12 Hamiltons Folly 2 16.95km (10.53 miles) 1454

SS13 Bulls Brook 2 12.19km (7.57 miles) 1543

SS14 Banbridge 2 14.85km (9.22 miles) 1642

Finish Belfast (Queens University) 1807

Top 10 entries

1 Craig Breen/Scott Martin DS 3 R5

2 Elfyn Evans/Craig Parry Ford Fiesta R5

3 Kajetan Kajetanowicz/Jaroslaw Baran Ford Fiesta R5

4 Alexey Lukyanuk/Alexey Arnautov Ford Fiesta R5

5 Keith Cronin/Mikie Galvin DS 3 R5

6 Alastair Fisher/Gordon Noble Ford Fiesta R5

7 Tom Cave/James Morgan Ford Fiesta R5

8 Robert Consani/Max Vilmot DS3 R5

9 Fredrik Åhlin/Morten Abrahamsen Ford Fiesta R5

10 David Bogie/Kevin Rae Skoda Fabia R5

Stuart Loudon's key stage:

The Glens, got to be. Or is it Hamiltons Folly? No, let's stick with The Glens; this is the one everybody's talking about, the combination of Glendun and Torr Head. Both of these stages are fairly typical of rallying in Ireland, but they're very different in nature. Glendun's your hard-to-read moorland stage, which is really quick in places. Then you get to the coast and the road will get a bit more technical as it traces the coast north. Anybody who's new to Irish rallying will know what it's all about after these 30 kilometres.

Stuart will be watching... #1 Craig Breen/Scott Martin DS 3 R5

It's impossible not to get caught up in Craig's enthusiasm for this rally. He loves it and he loves everything that goes with it – especially Frank Meagher and Michael Maher's win in 1992. Back-to-back wins for Craig and Scott would be a real achievement given the quality of opposition and the fact that they've not been in an R5 car on asphalt for something like six months. Kajetan Kajetanowicz ran them close last year and he'll be in the mix again this time. And then there's Elfyn Evans, who will be keen to continue his electrifying start to the season. But it's Craig and Scotty that I'll be keeping the close eye on.

Weather with you:

Sunshine and cloud for the recce on Wednesday (April 6). More cloud on Thursday, drop of rain Friday and possibly some wet sleet or snow early doors Saturday. Temperatures between 3-11 degrees.

Media details

Media centre (and accreditation) location:

The Octagon Building, King's Hall, Lisburn Road, Balmoral, Belfast BT9 6GW

Media contacts:

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TROA Irish Tarmac Rally Championship: Kevin O'Driscoll +353 86 2866256

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The media week:

Thursday April 7

0700-2200 media accreditation open

0700-2000 media centre open

0930-1100 free practice (for FIA ERC1/2/3 drivers), Tardree

1251 qualifying stage (for FIA ERC1/2/3 drivers), Tardree

1430-1600 shakedown stage for non-priority drivers, Tardree

1830-1900 autograph session for invited drivers, Lisburn

1845 ceremonial start/BRC press conference, Lisburn

2100 start list published for leg one

Friday April 8

0700-0000 media centre open

2200 start list published for leg two

Saturday April 9

0700-2100 media centre open

1800 podium ceremony, Queens University, Belfast

1900 post-event press conference

2000 final results posted

Stuart's restaurant recommendation:

Not so much a restaurant this one: The Crown, 46 Great Victoria Street, Belfast. Once a Victorian gin palace (and gin in all its forms still features heavily in there), now the best place in town for a pint. Great place, great atmosphere. Food wise... bag of chips on the way home?

Recent winners:

2005: Derek McGarrity/Dermot O'Gorman (Subaru Impreza WRC03)
2006: Eugene Donnelly/Paul Kiely (Toyota Corolla WRC)
2007: Mark Higgins/Rory Kennedy (Subaru Impreza WRC05)
2008: Eamonn Boland/Damien Connolly (Subaru Impreza WRC07)
2009: Eugene Donnelly/Paddy Toner (Škoda Fabia WRC)
2010: Derek McGarrity/James McKee (Subaru Impreza WRC07)
2011: Derek McGarrity/James McKee (Subaru Impreza WRC05)
2012: Juho Hänninen/Mikko Markkula (Škoda Fabia S2000)
2014: Esapekka Lappi/Janne Fern (Škoda Fabia R5)
2015: Craig Breen/Scott Martin (Peugeot 208T16)

MSA British Rally Championship stat centre

Rounds run: 1 (Mid Wales Stages, winners Elfyn Evans/Craig Parry)

Stages completed: 6

Accumulated winning time: 1h08m14.3s

Accumulated competitive distance completed: 68.02 miles (109.46km)

Accumulated liaison distance completed: 165.23 miles (265.91km)

Accumulated total distance completed: 233.25 miles (375.37km)

Longest stage of the season so far: Hafren/Sweet Lamb 15.89 miles (25.57km)

Shortest stage of the season so far: Myherin/Pike's Peak 7.81 miles (12.56km)

BRC fastest stage times

1 Elfyn Evans GBR/Craig Parry GBR (Ford Fiesta R5) 3

= Fredrik Åhlin SWE/Morton Abrahamsen NOR (Ford Fiesta R5) 3

BRC stages led

1 Evans 5

2 Åhlin 1

Junior BRC fastest stage times

1 Gus Greensmith GBR/Alex Gelsomino ITA (Ford Fiesta R2T) 3

2 Sindre Furuseth NOR/Goril Undebakke NOR (Renault Twingo R2) 2

3 Mattias Adielsson SWE/Andreas Johansson SWE (Vauxhall Adam R2) 1

Junior BRC stages led

1 Greensmith 5

2 Furuseth 1

Standings

MSA British Rally Championship standings (after round 1/7)

- 1 Evans 50
- 2 Åhlin 15
- 3 Tom Cave 10

FIA European Rally Championship standings (after round 1/10)

- 1 Alexey Lukyankuk 38
- 2 Kajetan Kajetanowicz 29
- 3 Luis Monzón 25

TROA Irish Tarmac Championship standings (after round 2/8)

- 1 Keith Cronin 32
- 2 Sam Moffett 26
- 3 Josh Moffett 22

Stuart Loudon is a semi-professional co-driver who has started 60 rallies, 18 of which are rounds of the World Rally Championship and one of which was with an Ashes-winning English cricketer. He makes biscuits in the family business when he's not working towards his dream of becoming a factory co-driver in the WRC.

Pictures courtesy of Abu Dhabi Total WRT/British Rally Championship

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