

Playing With The Big Boys



Paul Johns and Rory McNeile achieved a remarkable feat when they brought their Peugeot 106 home safely on their first ever crack at Britain's Network Q RAC Rally, Paul tells us what it was like from the navigator's seat...

I WASN'T convinced that I would enjoy competing on the 1995 Network Q RAC Rally; I was naturally looking forward to it with immense anticipation, but thought that by day two I would be glad when it was all over.

This was the culmination of my year's sabbatical from historics, rallying with the 'moderns'; Rory McNeile and I had competed in the BTRDA 'Gold Star' series of one-day forest stage rallies in his Group N Peugeot 106 during the year to gain the experience and licence signatures to enable us to have a serious bash at the RAC.

It was only really when I received the huge TNT delivered Jiffy bag containing four road books and four books of pace notes, together with all the various passes, stickers and other paraphernalia that I really began to appreciate the sheer scale of the event we were undertaking.

One of the first decisions to be made was what to do in the way

of a 'recce'. It was now possible to recce the entire route during the week before the rally. How much, if any, should we do and in what car? We initially considered covering the whole route and various options regarding suitable recce vehicles were considered before settling on using Rory's wife Debbie's shopping car; a diesel Peugeot 205 - what Debbie thought of the idea I don't know. Preparation consisting of fitting secondhand M&S tyres, removing the wheel trims and leaving the roof bars in place in case we rolled. We completed a worthwhile recce of most of the Welsh forest stages during the Tuesday and Wednesday before the rally. There was no way that we could expect to memorise the roads, but the ability to practice using pace notes was invaluable.

This was our only real opportunity to mingle with the 'big boys'. Despite a theoretical maximum speed of 30 mph, the works teams were taking the recce very seriously. Colin McRae and

Carlos Sainz apparently had three recce cars (full spec. white Group N Imprezas) available each and their service crews were waiting at the end of each stage to change tyres etc.. We were passed by both several times as we trundled around the stages in Debbie's 205!

The two days before the start were used for final preparation and 'PR' activities for our sponsors. By this stage I just wanted to get on with the rally.

The Sunday Spectator Stages are generally known as the 'Mickey Mouse' stages, but they must be treated with respect, causing the undoing of many top competitors in the past. They nearly had the same effect on us; we made a bad tyre choice (tarmac intermediates) causing a puncture on the very rough loose section of Tatton Park. The 'no external assistance' rule meant we had to run through Chatsworth without a spare before reaching the first service area at Chesterfield, which was rather unnerving. Following a change to forest tyres, we attacked the remainder of the day's stages with rather more gusto. Our rally very nearly came to and at Donington Park though...

The stage consisted of two

circuits of a very entertaining route, partially on the circuit and partially on the loose, including a high speed pass through the narrow tunnel under the circuit. The first time round was great and the second started even better, passing a Lada at about half distance.

About a quarter of a mile before the end of the stage, the car started to run very roughly and eventually ground to a halt completely. Panic! We vainly looked under the bonnet to see if anything obvious had fallen off while the Lada stormed past...

By this time a throng of marshals had gathered, who pushed us off the stage and into the service area for further investigation. The 'problem' turned out that we were lacking nothing for than fuel! We had an excuse though; the fuel gauge showed that we still had over a quarter of a tank - we'd covered less than 200 miles since the start, which for an essentially standard sub-1300cc car works out at pretty horrendous fuel consumption!

This little episode cost us 14 minutes, but we were still in the rally. Two more stages to the overnight halt in Leeds, where the Parc Fermé was one of the city

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centre streets, suitable fenced off and guarded.

I felt that Leeds was keener to make a big issue of the rally passing through than Chester, the start and finish venue; in Chester city centre, apart from the hundreds of people wearing overpriced Subaru Team 555))) rally jackets, you wouldn't have known that a major world championship sporting event was taking place.

On to day two, the day of SS8 - the dreaded 36.7 mile long Pundershaw stage in Kielder Forest. This was the longest stage there has ever been in a World Championship rally; this one stage was nearly as long as most of the rallies in which we had previously competed! A quick service halt at Croft was rapidly followed by the 'County of Durham' stage in Hamsterley Forest, memorable only for seeing one of the works Mitsubishi's (Makinen?) neatly parked a very long way off the road in the middle of a stream. Another long road section and finally to Pundershaw. To complete this stage was enough of a challenge, let alone the following two and half days.

As it turned out, it was one of the high spots of the whole rally. A superb flowing stage that was not too rough and was of sufficient length for Rory and I to really get into the rhythm with the pace notes. We must have passed two or three cars during this stage and our only slight mishap was to hit a rock on the inside of a bend, slightly bending a wishbone. The sense of elation at having survived 'the monster' was tremendous.

On to Broomlyn and Wauchope, notable for the very long and extremely bumpy run to the stage start. I am normally reasonably confident in my navigation, but at one point on the way to the stage start, when we were on a long straight in the middle of a Scottish forest and there were no other car lights to be seen, self doubt began to creep in... Fortunately, the stage start was around the next bend!

Another long run to the Lake District for the two Grizedale stages, the first and longest of which, Grizedale West, was unfortunately cancelled due to a spectator having died (from natural causes) on the stage. We were a little bit ragged on the final stage, but kept it together. By now, the front suspension had begun to

clonk alarmingly and was beginning to feel very loose. Our service crew had contacted the maker of the modified struts and he met us in the final service halt of the day at Ellesmere Port and fitted replacements. A long and tedious run down the M6 was required before this - I drove and it was all I could do to keep my eyes open.

Tuesday dawned grey and damp and another early start for a day of classic forest stages in mid and south Wales. We were entering slightly more familiar territory with the majority of events in which we had competed in during the year being run in Wales.

A most enjoyable day's motorsport was had by the crew of car 180 with the only serious problem being the encountering of an RS2000 (car 179) stuck on a badly cut-up hill on the Trawscoed stage. We couldn't get past, so stopped and helped to get them going. This resulted in us getting stuck, but happily, there were plenty of spectators to get us going again. We dropped another couple of minutes however...

The other major excitement occurred on Sweet Lamb Hafren. By this time it was dark and patchy mist had descended, requiring me to switch the auxiliary lights on and off as we entered and left mist banks. At one point, we were hurling down a longish straight at a rather high speed for the fast approaching 90 right at the bottom of the hill. Rory succeeded in hauling the car round in time, but it hit a bank on the outside of the bend sideways with a heavy thud, cracking the screen. It could have been a lot worse; there were an awful lot of shear drops!

Memories of the rest of the

day have faded into a blur, except for the very helpful RAC official at the Parc Fermé in Chester who volunteered to look after all the arrangements concerning the fitting of a new screen overnight.

The final day of the 1995 RAC; another day in Wales, but this time further north. I wasn't particularly looking forward to the Penmachno stages, as it was here I suffered severe 'mal de mer' on our previous rally. This had been an overriding concern for me throughout the event; with a full face helmet and only one pair of overalls for four days, to have suffered on day one would've been a nightmare... fortunately though, I didn't suffer the slightest twinge.

The highlight of the day and for me, the whole rally, was the final stage - Clocaenog East. The hundreds of spectators lining the route spurred us on and we passed two cars on the stage. By the end, I was completely overwhelmed by the sense of achievement in having finished on our first attempt and the adrenaline rush of that last stage... it was fabulous.

One more service halt and then back to Chester along the A55. After a half hour wait at a regrouping control on the outskirts, we were on the last lap to the finish at Chester Race Course. We were welcomed like conquering heroes by the hundreds of rally fans lining the streets. The traffic was solid, but now, timing was academic except that we had to reach the finish ramp in the right order.

We finally mounted the ramp and parked in the middle of the big Q shaped hole. Rory was asked some predictable questions by the interviewer and we ascended the blue carpeted steps to receive our

awards; two cups each for finishing fifth in class and the Gerards Trophy for being the first (only) crew from the services to finish. This was a very impressive looking lump of silver on a plinth that we assumed we would be able to take home. After a quick official photo, it was hustled away and enquiries revealed that we would have to prove we were sufficiently insured before the RAC would loan it to us!

That was the biggest disappointment about the whole rally. I have a video of the 1960 RAC Rally - that ended with an enormous party where Eric Carlsson's winning Saab appeared through the floor on a revolving turntable, but on the 1995 event there was nothing and despite a very good post-event curry, there was a real sense of anti-climax. I'm sure that the decline in the social aspect of modern rallying has contributed to the rise in popularity of historic events, where the social side is generally given a suitably high priority.

What plans for 1996? I may be asked to co-drive for Rory again, but as I am no longer in the Navy, I suspect he will try and find a new co-driver who is still serving. I intend to compete on a few historic road events, but the main aim is to progress with my various restoration projects, one of which is a 1965 Triumph Vitesse historic rally car... if asked, I would love to have another crack at the RAC, but would prefer to have a go at some good foreign events... anyone need a co-driver???

Pictures by Mark Writtle Photographic

