



SQUARE LEFT

FEATURES

Paul O'Neill on his new love for rallying



Paul O'Neill is a name familiar to most UK motorsport fans, with the Cheshire-born racer competing in the British Touring Car Championship for a number of years.

But rallying? It's not something you could ever associate the 38-year-old with.

"I grew up watching Formula 1, British Touring Cars and Rally GB," O'Neill recalls.

"I've always liked the hustle and bustle and the close contact of spring racing. I've just been engaged by it more than anything else. Single-seaters never interested me either to be honest.

"I remember watching the BTCC on the TV, I think it was Thruxton 1995, and I sat back after the race and thought 'that's what I want to do, that looks awesome.'

And that's exactly where he ended up. Making his debut in 2001, O'Neill took two race victories in his early years before bowing out of the series in 2012 and '13 with some one-off appearances.

The lack of a racing programme has left a void in his life, and he has turned to rallying to get his competitive fix.

"I'd never given rally a look in, ever," he explains.

"I got offered a couple of things but I never bothered with it, I just thought it looked so boring, I wanted other cars to be involved with. But as soon as I did it last year, I discovered the competition and the focus and the teamwork and everything that's good about motorsport is just all rolled into one in a rally and it just absolutely captured my imagination.

"There aren't too many things I really look forward to these days but now I've done it once, I just can't wait to do it again."

Quite a turn-around for a man that once considered rallying to be “boring,” but in truth the events he has done aren’t too dissimilar to the circuit racing he is used to.

The Motorsport News Circuit Rally Championship launched three years ago, and uses the UK’s race tracks for rallies. This provided some similarity for O’Neill, even if his debut didn’t exactly go to plan.

“I did one two years ago but we only got out the start-gate,” he says.

“The gearbox broke so I didn’t really compete in it. Last year was my first proper go where I got round the first few corners and finished the rally.”



O’Neill’s second event, the Neil Howard Stages at Oulton Park, went much better.

"We nearly won our class! We were two seconds I think from the lead which Jack [Benyon, co-driver] said was pretty cool as the competition was really high so I was really pleased with that. It was all we could do, I didn't leave anything on the table and I didn't crash so that's cool.

"I find a lot of the rally guys are just committed to throwing the car and driving through the corners completely crossed up. As soon as a car lets go of its grip, to me that's slow. With the rallying, it's all about forward momentum as it is with the race car so I find it the same actually, it wasn't a difficult transition it was just weird having somebody sat next to me."

O'Neill's weapon of choice is a potent Mazda MX-5 run by Paul Sheard. The former BTCC man has shown his prowess behind the wheel making it easy for him to jump back in should he choose to.

"I just speak to Paul Sheard now and again and he says if you want a go just give me a shout," O'Neill says.

"Then I speak to Jack and ask what he can do, and we just go from there, so it's just now and again."

It may just be now and again, but since our phone call he has announced he will be taking on the Lee Holland Stages this weekend at Anglesey.

O'Neill will once again be partnered by Motorsport News' National Editor Jack Benyon, who won the rally two years ago as a co-driver.

"I trust Jack absolutely 100%," O'Neill says, "more than I trust myself!"

The pair are looking to win their class this weekend after coming so close on the opening round of the season, but once the event is done there are no more events currently in the pipeline.

O'Neill isn't ruling anything out though, not even a trip to the forests.

"Forest rallying interests me now, it never used to, so I'd be up for that," he admits.

"We did a little stage at Oulton Park which was all forest and I enjoyed that, it was quite cool because it makes you hold your breath a bit and that's quite a cool thing."

Rallying was never part of O'Neill's career plans and nor will it ever be. But it has offered him the chance to get into a competitive setting again, something he has missed since leaving the BTCC.

"I'm happy in my own skin but I miss nothing other than the competition and the nature of being against the clock, and the going three-wide into Turn1," he says, reflecting on his previous years of racing.

"I don't miss the politics, I don't miss the bullsh*t that goes with it and I miss nothing about trying to find sponsors. I regret nothing, but as I say I do miss bits and bobs, but that's natural, and that's why I still do rallying or race in a club championship whenever I can."

The rallying world is lucky to have him.