



SQUARE LEFT

FEATURES

In conversation with Andrew Coley



How often is it you get to speak to somebody you look up to? This week I got the chance to chat with the man I listed as my favourite motorsport commentator or presenter in a recent Autosport Academy application form: Andrew Coley.

That's cute I sense you thinking, but what does the FIA World Rallycross Championship commentator have to do with Square Left and its UK rallying audience?

The clue's in the name. Rally-cross. Let it be no shock to you then that the voice behind WRX has a strong rallying background and was his first step in the door of the motorsport scene.

"I'd always watched motorsport as a kid but mainly F1, with the likes of [Nigel] Mansell and co," Coley explains.

"We went on to watching rallies, RAC/Network Q Rally GB etc, and I was hooked! I wanted to be World Rally Champion like Colin McRae, and with him and Richard Burns at the top of the sport I was fully inspired to go for it. I went for a day at a rally school for my 19th Birthday and that was it, I was destined to be skint thanks to motorsport for the foreseeable future!

"My first rally was the Abingdon Carnival Stages on an old RAF airfield in June 1998. I'd bought a Vauxhall Nova rally car for £3500. It had all the right bits but was tatty as hell!

"I still remember its registration plate: C746 JCW. I loved that car. We towed it there on a hired trailer that was big enough for a Sherman Tank on the back of a minibus we borrowed from the school my dad worked at.

"In the rally the handbrake jammed on, I drove on and blew the engine. Not a great start, but I learnt a lot about rebuilding it all with a friend who knew what he was doing!"

"Luckily things got better. We won class awards on tarmac and I ended up on one of the MSA's very first young driver schemes 'Fit to be Champion'. I was also lucky enough to

land a funded drive with a team called 22 Motorsport, which got me into the forests. The team stopped unfortunately, and I ran out of money, but I returned to competition in a 206 Cup car in 2007 and '08, enjoying some success on the loose which was a personal aim of mine."



After hitting one of his objectives, the next logical step would be chasing championships, right?

Wrong.

The next juncture in Coley's life would lead on to the position he finds himself in today.

"I was working as a motorsport instructor and always got asked to do the talking; driver briefings, filming work etc," he continues.

"I did one shoot with BBC3 and another with GMTV, and really enjoyed both, so when the recession hit the instructing industry hard in 2008 I thought there must be a reason it was always me that got asked to be the mouth!

"I put all my existing clips onto a DVD and approached Eurosport. The IRC was really growing and we had an interest in the UK with Kris Meeke, so I owe him really as that was how I sold it to the head of commentary.

"There was no budget for training so I went and observed others doing the job to learn, and am very grateful for the support of the commentators I worked with in my early years, Simon Hill, Carlton Kirby and Martin Haven. They were all really generous with their time and advice which I'll not forget."

This was how I and plenty of other rally fans first got to know Coley. His voice instinctive, passionate, and full of knowledge of competing, which helps massively when behind the mic.

"When you've gone through the process yourself, albeit at a lower level, you have a much more rounded idea of what goes into it all," Coley argues.

"That includes everything from preparing the car, to the logistics and to the process of the actual competition, with all the emotions and adrenaline that's involved.

"It helps you bring it to life, maybe tell the viewer what they can't see. It also helped me being a co-commentator as I was on the IRC before becoming a lead commentator.

"If I spotted something, I had a pretty good idea of what's going on from my own experience of driving, and knew what I would say if I was on co-comms. So then all you have to do is just ask the right question of the expert sat next to me, as that's who the viewer really wants to hear it from, even if you know yourself!"



Kris Meeke is the man that helped Coley achieve a commentary dream he didn't even realise he had, and is now of course one of two British drivers competing in the World Rally Championship along with Elfyn Evans.

But what does Coley make of our current stars?

"Having Meeke and Evans winning WRC events is brilliant, and is absolutely crucial for the future of the sport in the UK," he says.

"Hopefully they're inspiring younger drivers to take part as McRae and Burns did with me. They're both fantastic drivers; I actually sat with Evans in an R2 Fiesta once at a BRC open day, and was blown away by his finesse in damp conditions on tar, it was wonderful.

"It was a real pleasure for me to commentate on Kris' rise through the IRC too. I rate him very highly and hope he is given the tools to do the job. And that's the key really to being a champion in the making; you have to have the right equipment. I'm taking absolutely nothing away from [Sebastien] Loeb or Ogier, both are incredible drivers with ludicrous consistency. But you need the right car to win the championship too."

And the BRC?

"I always keep an eye on rallying, especially WRC and BRC as I have a genuine love for the sport, but I'm so involved in the World Rallycross Championship and the other series I commentate on that I rarely get to sit and watch something I'm not working on!

"I believe R5 was 100% the right way for the BRC to go. If you look at cost of ownership and the rebuild schedules they're comparatively cheap to run when compared to a WRC car for instance. I sat in an R5 and a DS3 WRC at Goodwood FOS on the rally stage one year; and yes you can feel the difference in the launch but the R5's ability to drive over any terrain is almost as impressive as the WRC. A lot of bang for buck."

Speaking of the R5 category, World Rallycross Champion and friend of Coley's Johan

Kristoffersson dipped his toe into the water on Rally Sweden last month behind the wheel of a Skoda Fabia R5.

We're getting slightly off topic here but I swear there are rallying connotations, as the main reason he did it was in order to hone his joker lap skills which feature predominantly loose and changeable surfaces.

"Kristoffersson was brilliant in Sweden wasn't he?! They won't seed him that low again that's for sure!" Coley admits.

"For rallycross, in my opinion the advantage of a rally driver is the ability to adapt extremely quickly to anything random. Racing drivers are better at hitting millimetre perfect braking points and apexes lap after lap.

"The joker is only driven one lap of each race, so 25% at best, and track conditions change from race to race, so the adaptability of a rally driver comes in very handy for that one lap, one corner, when you're desperate for tenth to take the position. Rain on the start-line is a good time to bet on the rally drivers too, although Kristoffersson is bloody good in the wet as well!"



Moving things back to the UK, triple British Rally Champion Mark Higgins has entered the British Rallycross Championship this year. With other former BRC winners Guy Wilks and Alister McRae making the world stage with varying degrees of success, what can we expect from 'Higgy'?

"Mark is a class act as a driver in anything he sits in, and in terms of pace he won't struggle at all!" Coley reckons.

"Rallycross race craft is the thing which takes a little learning, and of course the tactics of the joker lap, though a good spotter can take away a lot of that learning curve.

"Overtaking is as hard in rallycross as it is in most forms of racing; it's a very fine line between 'genius door rubbing ballsy move' and 'corner off the car visit to the stewards' room!"

"Whatever happens I know Mark will love driving the cars. Nobody ever gets out of a rallycross supercar for the first time without a massive grin on their face!"

Ok we have officially got way off topic now. To counteract, I start getting attacked for not having tried rallying before.

"Do it, it's an incredible rush!" Coley tells me.

"You have to have a go for the simple reason that there is nothing as exciting as driving flat out down a road you've never driven down before. Yes in some series you get a recce, but if you're running on organisers notes, doing a new rally for you, you'd better mean it when it says 'flat 6 left over crest!'

"And with a recce you'd better have got the 30mph pass right for the 90mph one. The other brilliant thing about rallying is the shared experience, crossing the flying finish line the first words out of mine or my co-drivers mouth were nearly always unprintable, and not always because we'd got it right!"

I'm convinced. I always have been. I just haven't got round to it.

It's not just about the driving, it's about the experience and the adventure that you go through, which just multiplies when it all comes together.

Somebody got some money I can borrow?

“Winning my class in MSA National Gravel in 2008, despite it admittedly being a small class! I was a bit scared of the woods in previous seasons but I conquered that fear, and we did it as a family team on a budget of bugger all, camping at any event we could, including snow for the Border Counties,” reflects Coley, interrupting my pathetic plea.

“I remember at the deciding event my dad was worried he wouldn’t be able to repair the car quickly enough with me as we were missing one of our regular lads. I reminded him that we didn’t have any spares so either I’d got the car back to service and we’d keep going, or he’d be bringing the trailer to pick me up!

“Seeing my mum and dad jumping up and down at the finish ramp when we won the championship at the last round is a brilliant memory. It’s the last rally I did, for now!”

“I’ve taken part in a few rallycross races in recent years, and had a blast learning something on every outing. I’ve raced a Lada, an RX150 buggy and a Super 1600 Car and loved all of them. I’m lucky enough to be trying another new class at Silverstone’s BRX round on March 17th so hopefully I’ll see a few new and few familiar faces there.”

Now that’s an offer I can’t refuse..

