



SQUARE LEFT

OPINION

My new favourite rally championship?



Rallying should be about three things: competition, passion and spectacular action.

The Motorsport News Circuit Rally Championship has all these in abundance, and then some!

Last weekend was my first experience of circuit rallying, a discipline that has been quickly dismissed by some. 'It's just car park rallying' some cry, 'they're just micky-mouse stages' others shout. Clearly these people have never been down to watch a round of the MN Championship, a series that crowned its third ever champion in Chris West at the weekend.

First of all there's the strength and depth in the competition. Granted, my trip to Cadwell Park was certainly spiced up by evolving weather conditions that did nothing but deteriorate and the fact there was a championship on the line, but the battles were truly enthralling.

The names and the cars speak for themselves too. First of all you've got John Stone, a renowned asphalt expert in the UK; then there's Chris West who co-driver Keith Hounslow reckons "is one of if not the best drivers I've sat with in 35 years," as well as previous champion Ian Woodhouse and eventual event winner Mark Kelly to name just a few. These four are regularly seen trading stage times across all the best circuits the United Kingdom has to offer.

As for the vehicles; digest this statistic. Stone, West and Woodhouse don't just compete in different cars but they are span two different classes and all have different transmissions. Stone's Class E Fiesta S2500 is four-wheel-drive, West's Class D 306 Maxi front-wheel-drive and Woodhouse's Class D Escort Mk2 rear-wheel-drive. Diversity is well and truly alive in the MN Circuit Championship, and best of all you have older, much revered machines such as Escort Mk2s not just fighting at the front but regularly

winning overall events. Show me another championship where that happens in this country, I dare you.



Admittedly, if adventure is your thing you're going to be left disappointed.

Part of the appeal in rallying to many is its nomadic nature. The service area acts as the main hub, and from there the action can head up to hundreds of miles in the forests or lanes of the region. This is where it differs from circuit racing, and I have to admit I love rallying all the more for it.

You see amazing sights you would never otherwise see, and it is an element that circuit rallying lacks as cynically, it is just circuit racing without the racing. As it's still a rally the

cars are timed so aren't actually competing against each other for track position but instead against the clock.

But there's a counter-argument to both those points. Adventure may be absent, but there's something to be said for convenience. I was in the privileged position to be covering the event for *Motorsport News*, and the format of circuit rallying gave me a succinct advantage. I was covering the top 10 in the event, but because the service park is literally 100m up the hill from where the track is I was unable to watch the drivers through tackle the tests which was both entertaining for me and useful as I had a better idea of what to ask the drivers as if they made a mistake (as pictured below) I already knew about it.



And onto that second point, the spectacle was better than I was expecting. Because each car does at least two laps (varies from stage to stage) of the designated course, there is always on-track action. With cars starting at 30 second intervals you can have drivers racing on the same piece of track at the same time, but if not there is always something happening in front of you. Viewing points are also more flexible than with forest rallying, as all you have to do is walk further down the track for a fresh perspective, as opposed to running back to the car and driving to a different section of woodland.

To further strengthen the point, do you remember those key ingredients I threw at you at the start? The particular event I attended had all three in the space of 30 seconds. Stone lost the rear of his Ford heading down the one of the many narrow linking sections of Cadwell Park, with West coming into the same corner seconds later in his Peugeot. The champion-in-waiting made the same mistake as his rival and clattered into the side of him, doing damage to both cars. Stone retired as West limped on, with West furious in the service area as he fought to get his car repaired for the remaining stages.

All things considered, I can't sit here and pretend that this is proper rallying, because in truth, it isn't. But what might surprise you is I'm not convinced it's any worse.

Not sure? Go give it a try. I'll certainly be back.