



# SQUARE LEFT

FEATURES

## From racer to gamer



By now we are all familiar with the gamer to reality tale. Jann Mardenborough is the case-in-point, graduating from the Gran Turismo PlayStation game to a factory seat for Nissan in endurance racing.

But what about the reverse? Going from the real thing to the computerised version is unheard of. That was until Jon Armstrong came along.

The Northern Irishman has had a very successful rallying career to date, competing nationally and internationally in the British Rally Championship, the European Rally Championship and the World Rally Championship.

He wasn't always travelling afar though, first falling in love with the sport through his dad's local involvement.

"I caught the rally bug early on," Armstrong explains.

"My dad used to do some local navigating for his friend and I would go along to spectate events with him and my brother when I was little.

"I started competing at rally sprint events in the junior category when I was 13, and went on to win that championship three times. I then moved up to more powerful front-wheel-drive machinery which I won in too.

"Once I got my driving license I moved onto road rallying, starting with local events and the British Rally Championship which I did fairly well in, taking class wins but unfortunately no championship.

"In the ERC and the WRC I continued to improve my speed and impress people like DMACK Tyres who supported me after winning the DMACK shoot-out in 2015. My performances in the Drive DMACK Trophy in 2016 then lead to my prize drives in 2017 with the Ford Fiesta R5."



After the 2016 season where Armstrong had lost out on the title to Welshman Osian Pryce, he was awarded two prize drives in a DMACK supported car on Rally Germany and Rally Spain thanks to scoring the most points across two rounds in the R2 championship.

Faced with the chance to impress the world on two different events, Armstrong knew he would need to get the practise in.

With next to no experience of the Fiesta R5, the logical step would be to hire a car and get out and compete on some national events. But without a big budget, this quickly became infeasible.

“Basically, I don’t have much money,” says Armstrong, “and I couldn’t afford to rent an R5 for other events so I turned to trying to get sponsors and deals in place but that didn’t go to plan either.

Armstrong has a full spec simulator in his garage, and this quickly became the most logical way for him to prepare for his R5 outings.

“Using my simulator was the only training I knew I could do, so I made sure I did it properly and extensively,” he continues.

“It allowed me to learn that type of car and driving style.”

Armstrong’s simulator is hooked up to the popular rallying game Richard Burns Rally. Despite the fact it was released over 10 years, the game’s physics and handling model is still the most accurate to real life of any game past or present, with adding new cars and stages not an issue either.

“Richard Burns Rally has always been renowned as the best rally simulator, I’ve used it since I was 12 years old and still use it 11 years on,” Armstrong explains.

“It has an excellent community of modders [modifiers] who make new cars and tracks through their own passion for the game and then share them so others can use them too.

“It’s very close to how a real car feels to drive and I think my pace on Rally Germany can’t be explained in any other way as I had never driven a four-wheel-drive car in tarmac competition yet alone an R5 before.”

Armstrong netted five top-five times on the German asphalt including a stage win on the penultimate test ahead of tarmac expert Jan Kopecky on his way to 14<sup>th</sup> in class after an off-road excursion.

He went five better in Spain, grabbing two championship points for ninth in WRC2, driving less quickly than in Germany but setting a sensible pace and keeping out of trouble.

That would ultimately be his last rallying appearance in the WRC, but that wouldn't stop Armstrong competing at world level. It would've been a shame to waste those skills honed on the simulator, right?



"I got into WRC eSports as I saw the final last year and thought I could be competitive in it," Armstrong recalls.

"With the lack of sponsorship and backers I haven't been able to drive in real rallying so eSports has been the perfect back-up plan."

The World Rally Championship has adopted a popular trend emerging among various different sports and games. Its eSports championship runs alongside the real thing, seeing a load of talented gamers pitch themselves against each other on the sport's official video game, with last year's champion walking away with a real-life Hyundai i20.

Armstrong hasn't taken long to adapt, winning the second round of the 2018 series in Sweden. Although he is enthusiastic about the opportunity, the real thing is still where his heart lies.

"At the moment I am really new to the eSports world so I am just trying my best and taking it all in as I go, but it holds potential opportunities with great prizes to be won," he says.

"Of course the real thing is absolutely what I want to do but it's become all about money and it's even harder to get sponsors and deals which is making it really hard to compete in the real world."

Ultimately this means there are no plans for Jon Armstrong to be out in a rally car, but that hasn't stifled his passion.

"I have no plans at the moment. I know I'd like to be driving a full championship in BRC or WRC with an R5 car but the cost of that is easily £200k per year so it's really hard to come up with. But I will keep my hopes up!"