



SQUARE LEFT

OPINION

Could 2018 be the best SRC season yet?



Champions missing; new cars appearing. Old hands returning and young guns blazing: the opening round of the 2018 ARR Craib Scottish Rally Championship had it all.

Trust me, I was there.

If any sports fan wants anything from their favourite series, its unpredictability.

The night before the event, simply nobody could predict what was going to happen. But even within those brave enough to suggest a certain driver, did anybody really pick Andrew Gallacher as their winner come late Saturday afternoon?

I certainly didn't see it coming, and therein lies the potential beauty of the 2018 Scottish Rally Championship.

Ever since 2009, three men have dominated the SRC. David Bogie won the championship five years on the bounce from 2009 and '13, with Euan Thorburn and Jock Armstrong taking two a piece in 2014 and '17 and 2015 and '16.

Bogie is focussing on the British Rally Championship this season, Thorburn hasn't made his intentions clear and Armstrong is banned for a mishap when marshalling on an event last summer, meaning no previous champions lined up to tackle Inverness' Snowman Rally.

Add to that the fact that pre-event favourite Garry Pearson was missing through injury and you begin to realise just how open the rally was.

And so it proved. Six seconds separated Gallacher and second placed man Quitnin Milne, while across the six different stages there were six different stage winners.

Mark McCulloch and Gallacher tied on the season opener, while Reay MacKay, Donnie MacDonald, Milne and Steven Clark all later powering on to record scratch times.

Only 45 seconds separated the top six which included John Wink as McCulloch's R5 debut began to unravel, with talents like Bruce McCombie having to settle for a spot outside of the leading gaggle.

Gallacher's performance was as sublime as it was surprising. The event was a real lottery with mud, frozen mud and ice composing a real mixed bag for the competitors, but Gallacher was never away from the leading times in his Ford Focus WRC.

Maybe we shouldn't have been surprised though. The Hurlford driver was very quick on September's McRae Gravel Challenge, while his father Drew is a two-time Snowman winner and a quadruple Scottish Rally champion.

Not to deny Gallacher's talent, but would he have won if one or all of Bogie, Thorburn, Armstrong or Pearson present? Probably not.

Pearson is set to return to the series for the next round in March, but hasn't done a rally since April last year and that was the only event he would ultimately do all year.

And having missed the Snowman, his dropped score has already been used, so if he wants to become the 2018 champion he needs to avoid any non-scores.

So he is very beatable. But it won't just be Gallacher challenging him for honours. MacDonald showed a real upturn in pace at the weekend, notching up his first podium finish in the SRC with the Fiesta R5, which has now been upgraded to an R5+.

Then there's Milne, who took 14 seconds out of Gallacher in six miles at the end of the rally. More time in that car and he's a certain winner.

And what about MacKay? The Focus WRC pilot was a real dark horse as he took a fine fourth place, while Hyundai R5 driver Wink is getting faster and faster in the ex-Kevin Abbring machine.

McCulloch must also be considered. The Dumfries driver secured a late deal to pilot a Fiesta R5 while intending to drive a Mitsubishi Mirage. With no seat time prior to the rally, a fastest time on the opening stage was incredibly impressive. He was waylaid with an engine misfire and power steering failure.

Then there's Michael Binnie. The Cornhill driver was side-lined with a broken hand but has been mega since switching to John Wink's old Evo IX, and could be a real dark horse for success with esteemed co-driver Claire Mole alongside.

Are you starting to get the picture? The SRC has long been one of the most competitive championships in the UK with an incredibly hot pace – an SRC driver won the Wales Rally GB National from 2013-2016.

Now though, the series is more unpredictable than the Euro Millions draw, and long may it continue.