



# SQUARE LEFT

OPINION

## MSA Asphalt Championship simply can't fail



It doesn't matter which way you look at it: the Protyre MSA Asphalt Rally Championship simply can't fail.

Whether that be relating to its imperative need to hit the ground running after its sabbatical last year or whether that be your viewpoint as to how the 2018 season is shaping up, both ring true to me.

The season kicks off with the Tour of Epynt in two weeks' time, and all the ingredients point towards a fantastic year of rallying.

You need only look at the series' bigger brother, the British Rally Championship, to realise that things are heading in the right direction.

First let's deal with the whole issue of the sabbatical.

The BRC stepped back in 2015 after a disastrous 2014 season where the on-stage battle didn't receive the hype it deserved and the off-stage stuff just doesn't even bare discussing.

What it did do though was give the championship time to assess and rebrand itself. Gone were the unexciting R3s and in came the R5s and a return to four-wheel-drive machinery.

The jury is still somewhat out on how successful the BRC has been over the last two years, but there can't be any denying it's an improvement on what we saw from 2012 and '14.

The circumstances were slightly different for the Asphalt series. The retirement of long-time series co-ordinator Andrew Hail was a blow, compounded with the ongoing uncertainty around asphalt rallying in the UK following the events of the 2014 Jim Clark, and it was decided the championship would be rested for a year.

Instead of running a series that would be ok but not amazing, the MSA and the BTRDA mutually agreed to take a year out and make sure the championship is as good as it possibly could be this year.

Now it's back, and I fully expect to see that objective not just achieved but smashed. Don't believe me? Take a peek at the entry list.

Attracting multiple champion Damian Cole back is a huge coup, while the addition of Jason Pritchard is also creating headlines. Over 100 crews will start the opening round, a lot of them fairly new to asphalt competition.

The calendar will undoubtedly have been a big draw.

Beginning with the tough test over the Welsh military ranges, the series takes in just about everything else thereafter, heading to the fearsome Isle of Man, crossing the Channel for a Belgian blast before a visit to Northern Ireland, another round in Wales and the finale in the Cheviot Hills.

For a lot of the series' former competitors, the Motorsport News Circuit Rally Championship has become their new tarmac rallying fix, but could they be tempted back with such a strong calendar in place? It really does have it all.

With a strong television package and a championship sponsor in Protyre that is both eager and willing to give back to the competitors, everything looks to be in place. There can be no underestimating how important 2018 will be to series organisers in ensuring they get it all right, but on paper it looks as if they have done that.

The precarious thing is: paper doesn't always cleanly translate onto tarmac.