



SQUARE LEFT

OPINION

Why Elfyn Evans is Britain's best hope in the WRC



The numbers don't add up. Five wins to one; 11 podiums to five; 71 stage wins to 32... need I go on? Kris Meeke's WRC record certainly favours Elfyn Evans', yet I'm trying to claim that he's stronger than Kris Meeke?

But now for the big statistic: points.

Sebastien Ogier proved that points make prizes, and Evans has accumulated more of them across his three seasons in the WRC. The Welshman edges his Northern Irishman here by a slender 18 markers, despite finishing behind his rival in the championship in both 2014 and '15.

After two rounds of the 2018 season, Meeke is however ahead with 17 points to Evans' eight.

Last weekend's Rally Sweden was fairly inconclusive, but the opening round of the 2018 World Rally Championship – Rallye Monte-Carlo – also appears to suggest that Meeke is the United Kingdom's greatest hope of WRC success. Or does it?

What's peculiar is the Citroen and M-Sport Ford swapped places in delivering what we would have traditionally expected from each of them: Meeke consistent, Evans fast. Both men were victims on Thursday night's opener, with Meeke spinning and dropping his C3 in a ditch and Evans pulling over to replace a punctured tyre.

The gap after that first test between the pair stood at two minutes and four seconds. Fast forward three days and Meeke has just surprised everyone by winning the Power Stage to take the C3's first scratch time of 2018, but the gap between him and Evans has shrunk. It's just 11 seconds.

There's much more to comparing these two drivers however than an analysis of one specific rally.



The first one is perhaps the most obvious: age.

At 29 years of age, Evans is a full nine years younger than Meeke, but has only started around 20 rallies less.

Meeke had been on the sport's periphery for a number of years having won the Interncontinental Rally Challenge in 2009, and receiving what seemed like his big break with Mini in 2011.

Evans meanwhile was progressing through the career ladder. Winning the WRC Academy in 2012, he stepped up to WRC2 and claimed second behind Robert Kubica, earning him a full-time drive with M-Sport alongside Mikko Hirvonen in 2014.

Meeke had been handed a couple of one-off drives in 2013, which were enough to convince Citroen to sign him for 2014, meaning the 2014 season was the first full blown WRC campaign for both men.

Since then their careers have followed very different trajectories.

Evans claimed a brace of podiums in 2015 but was demoted to national level the following year, winning the British Rally Championship and performing well in WRC2 to elevate him back to the world stage.

Driving for the DMACK World Rally Team, the Welshman performed well all year to net fifth in the world championship and seal a historic maiden win at home on Wales Rally GB.

Meeke stormed to a debut win in Argentina 2015 before Citroen pulled its resources into 2017, leaving the Northern Irishman with a bit-part campaign in 2016.

That wouldn't hold him back though. WRC win number two came in Portugal before a sensational win on Rally Finland truly marked his card as one of the world's fastest.

The sky was seemingly the limit in 2017, but it turned out the limit was the C3 WRC's capability. An ill-handling Citroen and a campaign marred with mistakes still yielded two victories but saw Meeke benched for Rally Poland.



And this is where Evans begins to look like Britain's brighter prospect.

Age is in many senses just a number, so to suggest Evans has a brighter future just because he is younger is naïve. Just look at how Evgeny Novikov's career panned out for example.

However youth is by no means a hindrance, and couple it with a clear rate of progression that Evans has shown makes it hard to ignore Evans as not just Britain's brightest star, but one of the best prospects in the entire championship.

The Welshman really came of age in 2017, in many ways justifying Malcolm Wilson's decision to drop him for 2016. The change in mental approach and attitude from Evans

in 2017 compared to Evans in 2015 was remarkable. He was barely recognisable from his old self.

The situation for Meeke is a little more complex. It's clear that he's fast: he knows that, his team know that, and his competitors certainly know it. What so far is yet to be proven is his consistency, and there will certainly be added emphasis on delivering immediately given he is in the autumn of his driving years.

For Evans, he still has a good few years ahead of him to have a proper crack at the World Rally Championship title but for Meeke, realistically, he only has another two or three.

This makes each season all the more important, which inevitably leads to extra pressure both internally and externally, and most crucially within his own mind. Does he have the mental temperament for this?

There was a clear shift of approach in Monte-Carlo, and it didn't come naturally to him but it was a very mature drive. Sweden was an incredibly unlucky rally for Meeke, but he is still within a rally win of championship leader Thierry Neuville.

He will have a favourable road position for Mexico like he did last year when he won, so is by no means out of the running. How he will deal with being in straight combat for the biggest prize in rallying remains to be seen however as it's a situation he has never been in.

Neither has Evans, and he is even further behind Meeke in the title race after lacking luck on both of the opening rounds. But he has the advantage of learning from his multiple world champion team-mate and biding his time.

Meeke is the team leader at Citroen, and is expected to deliver the big points for the team week in week out. That can definitely affect the way you drive.

However if you were to ask me today, who has the better chance of lifting the 2018 World Rally Championship, I would tip Meeke over Evans.

Contradictory? Perhaps, but I don't think 2018 will be either of their years'. Sebastien Ogier, Neuville and the Toyota's of Jari-Matti Latvala and Ott Tanak are emerging as early favourites.

Meeke looks to be in the stronger position just now, but with the talent around him I genuinely don't see him taking a world title in his career.

Evans is still learning and learning fast, so who knows what the future could hold for him?

I wouldn't be surprised to see Meeke edge Evans in the championship this year if his consistent approach materialises across the whole season, but there's always that question mark about his ability to keep it on the road and the longevity of his career.

And it's that ability to further improve across a number of years that marks Elfyn Evans out as the United Kingdom's brightest prospect in the World Rally Championship, even if Meeke does beat him this season.