

RALLY NZ RISING STARS

Hello everybody,

Welcome to my Rally of Otago run-down for 2010.

Richard (co-driver Richard Ellis) and I headed away with the crew last week [not last week now...] to Dunedin for the first round of the Vantage New Zealand Rally Championship 2010, the Rally of Otago.

The crews were greeted with beautiful sunshine, warm temperatures, grouse roads and blind crests!

Being my first outing in the Rally New Zealand Rising Stars Ford Fiesta and with a new navigator, Richard and I paid special attention during reconnaissance on Thursday and Friday before the weekend's event to ensure the safety notes were absolutely correct.

This was to be a very fast rally and even the slightest mistake on these roads could end in disaster at high speeds.

With scrutineering complete and the final finishing touches made to the car on Friday night, the crew made sure they had an early night.

Day one's morning stages took us as far north as Oamaru and, after what I considered to be slow and steady first two stages, we were surprised to learn we had a 30 second lead in the Group N 2WD class. Thick hanging dust and heavy gravel over most parts of the opening stages made conditions very tough for my debut in the Fiesta. We weren't surprised to hear of severe carnage in front of us with some top contenders having big crashes.

Richard and I grew more and more confident as the day went on and we settled into a good consistent pace for the rest of the afternoon, eventually having a great battle with the 2009 Rising Stars Scholarship winner Ben Hunt, driving an identical Ford Fiesta in the final stages of the day. We won the opening day by nearly a minute over Ben, then Dermott Malley further back.

The opening stage on day two happened to be the one and only stage I managed to complete the previous year and I decided to 'have a crack' at setting a good time for Ben to chase down. It worked and we beat the 2009 Fiesta record by 9 seconds in this short 12 km stage.

My confidence in the car and Richard calling the pace notes kept growing and for the morning's two stages we were setting times that Ben was struggling to match. With the car running faultlessly all weekend and a conscious effort to keep a neat and tidy driving style, our lead grew to over a minute.

After heading to Middlemarch for a midday service and into the afternoon's stages, Ben started to apply pressure. Again we were having a cracker battle with only tenths of seconds separating us both over some lengthy stages. We had to try a bit harder to keep the other Fiestas at bay by this point and I reached a new level of commitment to cornering speed over the many fast blind crests that this rally is so well-known for.

One stage to go and a debut win now within reach, we heard Ben had a loose steering wheel on his Fiesta. We could afford to back off to ensure we reached the finish and earn the maximum points haul for the opening NZRC round.

This was a great result for the team! My boys Todd, Sam and Alfie all worked well with Kayne over the weekend to make sure the car was in tip-top shape. Although my win was rather unexpected by many, it has to be said, I didn't think I would take very long to get to grips with driving style of 2WD again. So I am very happy and can't wait to get into it again at the next round of the Vantage New Zealand Rally Championship, which is Rally New Zealand running from 6 to 9 May from Auckland.

Until then, regards

Stephen

