

RALLY NZ RISING STARS

Rally New Zealand tests the Jagger team

The 40th anniversary Rally New Zealand was held from 7 to 9 May and tested Ben Hawkins and I again this year. We had a pretty full-on build-up to the event with documentation held on the Monday, reconnaissance Tuesday and Wednesday, shakedown and promotional activities on the Thursday and then the rally itself on Friday, Saturday and Sunday!

We had some early mornings and late nights, especially during recce. We had to put a whole lot more time and effort into these two days as we wrote our pace notes from scratch, instead of using the provided notes for the first time. This allowed me to make the notes my own and create a system that is personal to me and give me more confidence in the car, and therefore more pace! Our notes worked really well and I was very happy with them so we will be writing our own from now on for all of the rallies.

The day one stages were looking really good and I was excited to be racing on the roads around home in Whangarei! Stage one was Waipu Gorge and first we had to get used to the control Pirelli tyres specified for this event as a round of the World Rally Championship. Then I was able to set a comfortable pace to achieve the 5th equal fastest NZRC time, which was 20th outright, an awesome start to our rally. Stage three came along and about 7km in, the input shaft in the gearbox let go leaving us with no drive at all and forcing us to retire for the day. It was very disappointing to lose a whole day of New Zealand Rally Championship (NZRC) points and miss out on our home roads!

Day two got underway with the first stage starting on about 8kms of tarmac, which was a lot of fun on the gravel tyres, but I got caught out by a tight corner on a fast section which had mud and stones all over it from the world rally cars cutting the corners. Unfortunately we hit the mud, slid wide and off the road into a drain. The damage was minimal but both left hand side tyres were popped off the rims and it bent one of the left rear suspension arms. We lost around eight minutes with Ben and me changing both the wheels on the side of the road so we could continue. The rest of Saturday's stages went really well and we had a reasonably trouble-free run for the rest of the day. We also had a lot of fun around Hampton Downs race track where we could put on a bit of a show for the 20,000+ crowd of spectators.

Day three was the best day for us with no substantial time loss and we managed to get some good stage times in. We had both Te Hutewai and Whaanga Coast stages repeated to make up the last four stages of the rally. Both times through Whaanga Coast we had two spins and one very close call where the rear of the car was hanging off the road brushing through some scrub! Some of the blame was driver error but it was a bit of a challenge driving with the rear suspension arm bent.

So after a very long three days we made it back to Auckland and crossed the finish ramp to complete the event. A lot of people didn't get there and we were very close to not getting there either! So I would like to thank Dad and the service crew, Paul, Kevin and Cade for doing a wicked job on the car, especially getting the gearbox all back up to scratch with the help of Kayne Barrie after our bad luck on day one. Also to Rally New Zealand and my loyal sponsors and supporters, Seed Force, Valtra, Speedy Signs Whangarei, Imperial Panelbeaters, Bream Head Coast Walks and Whangarei Heads Automotive Technicians.

Now we have the big job of getting the car all ready and looking new again for the 2010 National Field Days held at Mystery Creek Events Centre from 16 to 19 June where it will be on display with Seed Force, so don't hesitate to drop on in to our site. Following that will be my home rally – International Rally Whangarei from 3 to 4 July.

Now that we have had a bit of experience in the car I will be looking to extend the lead I have in the New Zealand Junior championship. That's about it from me for now; hopefully see some of you at the Field Fays, if not then Whangarei it is!

Cheers, Ben