

Hello everybody,

We have now completed the third round of the Vantage New Zealand Rally Championship, the International Rally of Whangarei, with mixed results but still maintaining our championship lead in the Fiesta class.

For us the rally started off with reconnaissance on the Thursday prior to the rally. Like Rally New Zealand, Whangarei was an international event (part of the FIA Asia-Pacific Rally Championship) so we were able to do a two-pass recce, rather than the one pass recce we get at a non-international event.

It was a long day of recce, so long in fact that we completed the final stage in the dark, but by the end of the day, my co-driver Richard and I were confident that we had a good set of pace notes to work with.

Friday was a quite laid-back day in comparison. After a brief radio interview (along with several other competitors) I took a young girl that won the Rally Whangarei colouring competition to school in the rally car. Following that, we did recce and then shakedown around the Pohe Island super special stage, cleaned up the rally car and got ready for the ceremonial start of what I consider my home event.

After getting off to a good start on the first two stages and opening up a lead of over 25 seconds over our Group N two-wheel drive rival Ben Hunt, we were caught out by a slippery right hand corner and we side-swiped a power pole, which caused us to break a steering arm. Although I managed to temporarily repair the arm with a ratchet strap, it failed on the following touring stage and we were forced to retire for the day. The corner was definitely tricky and we were one of about half a dozen cars to come to grief over the two passes of that stage.

The crew did a great job repairing the car for the second day and the Rising Stars Ford Fiesta looking almost as good as new.

The beautiful weather we had on Saturday was completely different to the heavy rain and wind on Sunday. Having scored no points the previous day, it was crucial that we made it to the end of day two to salvage something from the weekend.

On the first couple of stages, we eased our way back into it, but by the end of the third stage we were only half a second behind Ben. The fourth and final stage in the loop for the morning included Ruarangi road, a ralliesprint stage that I remember and enjoy from my time growing up in Whangarei. Despite a moment on a slippery bridge, we went from half a second behind Ben to 50 seconds ahead. Over the afternoon, we continued to open up our lead for the day, which ended up at just over two and a half minutes.

Despite taking maximum points on day two, the loss on day one has seen our championship lead cut from 52 points to 23 with just two rounds remaining. Next up we head to Ben's home turf, Rally Nelson, on August 21-22.

I must thank the boys, Todd, Sam, Alfie and Kayne along with Warren at Imperial Panel & Paint and Murray Jagger, without their hard work we wouldn't have been able to run again on day two.

Until next time,

Cheers

Stephen

