

Armstrong Dominates Snowman

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The Castle Douglas ace was in a league of his own - fastest through all five stages, in his Subaru Impreza to finish more than two and a half minutes ahead of Lanarkshire driver, Alick Kerr, also in a Subaru, who posted his best ever SRC result.

Last year's championship runner up Mike Faulkner took the final podium spot a further twenty seconds back in his Mitsubishi Evo 6.

Competitors were faced with a mix of snow, ice and gravel – at times all on the same stage – making tyre choice difficult.

There was no holding back Armstrong, however, who was determined to push for the win, having finished third last year – his first attempt at the Snowman in 19 years.

With co-driver Kirsty Riddick, he was 23 seconds up on Kerr after the opening Meall Mor test, and following what many acknowledged to be the most difficult stage of the day, Millbuie, had extended his advantage to more than a minute over last year's winner Reay Mackay, with Kerr a further three seconds adrift.

After SS3 Torr Achilty, the overall cushion was 1 min 32 secs, and by the end of SS4 Strathroy, Armstrong had an additional 20 second cushion, increasing it still further after the fifth and final test of the day, Scotsburn.

Said a jubilant Armstrong at the Hankook finish ramp in Inverness: "It's been fantastic – we were so close twelve months ago, and I thought there was no reason why we shouldn't go for the win, so it's all gone to plan. Compared to last year, the stages were actually more difficult by not having so much snow on them. There was more ice, and you were also going a lot quicker. But all in all, a great day, and it's set us up well for the season ahead – we need to nail the first two or three rounds".

Riddick was full of praise for her driver: "It's been a fantastic day, and Jock has just driven so well for the conditions. There's not been a "moment" all day - it was a great effort".

Kerr won plaudits on last year's Snowman when he finished eleventh overall in a 2 wheel drive Ford Fiesta ST before making his 4WD debut in a Subaru Impreza – a switch which saw him move further up the rankings as the season progressed..

This was his first rally alongside experienced navigator Neil Shanks, and the 21-year-old Bothwell driver acknowledged that his presence was a confidence booster on the challenging event.

Having opted for snow tyres, Kerr was quickly into his stride, and apart from a couple of overshoots on SS2, turned in a superb display, with three second quickest stage times to his name.

Said Kerr: "This has been a dream start to the season. I was targeting a top 5 finish, but to get onto the podium on what is always a difficult rally is fantastic. It's a great start to my partnership with Neil, and hopefully we can continue our championship challenge on the Border Counties next month”.

Earlier in the day, Faulkner had spoken of the difficulties posed by the changeable conditions and grip levels – with sheet ice followed by gravel on some high-speed sections. It was, he said, a "question of survival".

He opted for a snow tyre on the first stage – finishing outside the top ten - before switching to an ice tyre for the six miles of Millbuie, where he promptly set the second quickest time.

He was also second fastest on the final Scotsburn test, and with co-driver Peter Foy, was more than happy with the outcome.

"It's brilliant – we'd targetted a top five finish – ideally a podium – so it's just what we wanted to start the year off. We had a few heart-stopping moments, particularly the fourth stage where we had a big spin, but apart from that it's just been a case of reading the road and making sure we had a strong finish".

Dumfries farmer Rory Young and co-driver Allan Cathers, moved into fourth overall after SS4 Strathrory and held position – despite a string of punctures which meant they had to go into the final stage, Scotsburn, with a "flat" because he had run out of spare tyres!.

"After everything we've been through, we're pleasantly surprised by the result, to be honest," said Young, adding: "It's certainly been one of the most challenging days I've spent in a car, that's for sure. The five punctures were a bit demoralising, but we've survived and have a strong finish".

Non-SRC registered John Mackenzie from Thurso won the battle of the iconic Metro 6R4's to finish a superb fifth overall.

He praised "new" navigator Ian Macdonald for helping make the day a success, adding: "The car has gone well with no problems, and despite the conditions, we've not really had any hairy moments to speak of. The Metro has handled really well on the high speed stretches.. I've perhaps driven a bit more carefully today – not so rash, and it's paid off".

For local favourite Andy Horne, sixth place was a huge relief after failing to finish any of the eight rounds in 2009 behind the wheel of his crowd-pleasing DAM 4100 Gti.

Following a change of engine during the off season, the Inverness-based driver, alongside navigator Jim Howie, was determined to get his season off to a positive start – which was amply achieved, and included a third-fastest through the final Scotsburn test.

Like the majority of competitors, Horne found the conditions challenging:

"Surfaces changed all the time so you were never sure what was just up ahead. In all fairness, we could perhaps have gone quicker, but at the same time, we might have ended up in a ditch. My philosophy before the start was: "We ain't going to win any rally – we're going to go round as briskly as we can without taking any chances".

With last year's Snowman-winning Metro 6R4 off the road for an engine overhaul, Reay Mackay, with Robert MacDonald on the notes, was behind the wheel of a "recently"; Mitsubishi Evo 7.

It was their second competitive outing in the car, and their seventh overall – two seconds adrift of Horne and Howie - followed a sixth place finish on the previous weekend's Riponian Stages in North Yorkshire.

Walter Henderson and Jim Kinloch were fifteen seconds further back in their Subaru Impreza, after what the Lanarkshire-based farmer conceded had been "an eventful but enjoyable event".

"The first stage in particular we were a bit slow off the mark – I'd never driven the car in the snow before", said Henderson, "But once we got into our stride it went fine, and we had a fourth and seventh-fastest stage time, so it's been a good day".

Banchory-based Bruce McCombie – having switched during last season from a 2WD class-dominating Ford Puma to a Subaru Impreza – notched up a seventh and eighth fastest stage time on the way to ninth overall, alongside co-driver Michael Coutts.

The Dumfries crew of Davie Hughes and Bruce Harper rounded off the top ten in their Mitsubishi Evo 9, after what Hughes described as a "horrendous but good fun day" which started with a third fastest time on the first stage.

Remarkably, given the conditions, there were only 27 retirements out of the 120 starters. One notable “casualty” was one of the pre-event favourites, Lancashire based rally preparation expert Wayne Sisson, who got stuck in snow after sliding off on the second stage in his Mitsubishi Evo 9.

News of all SRC rounds can be found at www.scottishrallychampionship.co.uk

TOP 12 FINISHERS – WITH TOTAL TIMES

- 1 Jock Armstrong(Castle Douglas)/Kirsty Riddick(Castle Douglas) Subaru Impreza 51 min 11 secs
- 2 Alick Kerr (Bothwell)/Neil Shanks (Elgin) Subaru Impreza 53.43
- 3 Mike Faulkner (Kirtlebridge)/Peter Foy (Bingley) Mitsubishi Evo 6 54.03
- 4 Rory Young (Dumfries)/Allan Cathers (Carlisle) Mitsubishi Evo 5 55.22
- 5 John Mackenzie (Thurso)/Ian Macdonald Metro 6R4 55.37
- 6 Andy Horne (Inverness)/Jim Howie (Kilmarnock) DAM 4100 Gti 55.45
- 7 Reay Mackay (Fort Augustus)/Robert MacDonald (Fort Augustus) Evo 7 55.47
- 8 Walter Henderson (Lanark)/Jim Kinloch (Junglinster) Subaru Impreza 56.02
- 9 Bruce McCombie (Banchory)/Michael Coutts (Torphins) Subaru Impreza 56.46
- 10 Davie Hughes (Dumfries)/Bruce Harper (Dumfries) Mitsubishi Evo 9 57.11
- 11 Craig McMiken (Newton Stewart)/Christine Sanderson (Berwick) Evo 9 57.43
- 12 Dougal Brown (Inveness)/Allan Matheson (Inverness) Subaru Impreza 58.13

CLASS WINNERS

Class 1 James Aitken (Abernethy)/Alistair Dodd (Corwen) Nissan Micra

Class 2 Kenny Munro (Ose)/Doug Jeffrey (Dunvegan) Vauxhall Corsa

Class 3 Niall Inglis (Dunvegan)/ Chris Munro (Dunvegan) Vauxhall Nova

Class 4 Stewart Davidson (Aboyne)/ Breagha Dobney (Inverness) Proton Satria

Class 5 Neil Morrison (Dunvegan) Chris Ronaldson (Inverness) Talbot Sunbeam

Class 6 Andrew Morrison (Inverness) Michael Hendry Ford Escort RS

Class 7 Allan Smith (Inverness)/ Ian McIvor Ford Focus

Class 8 Malcolm Buchanan (Uig)/ Ian Nicoll (Forfar) Ford Escort Mk2

Class 9 Eddie O'Donnell Jnr (Salen)/Eddie O'Donnell Snr (Tobermory) Ford Escort RS

Class 10 Craig McMiken (Newton Stewart)/Christine Sanderson (Berwick) Mitsubishi Evo

Class 11 Scott Murray (Perth)/John Mackenzie (Mosstodloch) Mitsubishi Evo 6

Class 12 Andy Horne (Inverness)/Jim Howie (Kilmarnock) DAM 4100 Gti

Top Five Overall Drivers after Round 1

Jock Armstrong 30 points

Alick Kerr 28 points

Mike Faulkner 27 points

Rory Young 26 points

Andy Horne 25 points

Top Five Overall GpN after Round 1

Jock Armstrong 30 points

Rory Young 26 points

Craig McMiken 20 points

Shaun Sinclair 17 points

Dale Robertson 16 points