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MACDONALD VICTORIOUS IN SEASON OPENER

The 2016 Arnold Clark Jury's Inn Snowman Rally was all about road positioning and tyres, with varying conditions meaning the stages could change from gravel to snow to ice in an instant.

The rally was won by Inverness crew Donnie MacDonald and Andrew Falconer in their Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution IX. Despite not winning any of the five special stages, the local driver came out on top by just seven seconds from Dale Robertson and Stuart Loudon to take his maiden ARR Craib MSA Scottish Rally Championship win.

Even though he found the conditions quite difficult, MacDonald triumphed to take the lead in the championship.

He said: "It was a pretty tricky rally to be honest. But this is like winning the Champions League for me!"

Duns driver Dale Robertson came mightily close to winning his first ever SRC event in a similar Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution IX. Paired with experienced co-driver Stuart Loudon for the first time, he set two top 3 stage times which netted him a fine second overall and first in class.

He particularly enjoyed stage 4, commenting: "I was on opposite lock all the time. Great fun!"

At the end of the rally, he said: "In the first couple of stages I was rusty, but I picked up the pace and got into the swing of it. There was never a right tyre, but we were going for it!"

Completing the podium was Banchory's Quintin Milne in his Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution IX. Milne claimed the opening and final tests to take two stages wins and finish 30 seconds off the lead, even though he was running on pump fuel which put him at a 50bhp disadvantage.

Quintin said: "It was a lottery of a rally but a very good one, even though I ended up cleaning the road. The car has been absolutely spot on!"

Perhaps the unluckiest driver of the event was Mark McCulloch, who was cruelly robbed of victory on the very last stage with a puncture.

He and co-driver Michael Hendry had their Mitsubishi locked in battle with Bruce McCombie in the first loop of stages, with McCombie taking two seconds out of McCulloch on SS1, only for McCulloch to claim one second back in the next.



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He then won stage 3 and took the lead at the end of SS4, despite saying it felt as if he were “driving like he was going to get the shopping.”

Despite being “really disappointed” in losing the rally at the eleventh hour, he said: “I really enjoyed it today, the conditions suited my driving style. If I was offered this position at the start of the day we’d have been very happy.”

Coming home in fifth were Garry Pearson and Robbie Mitchell from Duns in their R5 specification Ford Fiesta. Pearson had never competed in the car prior to the event, nor did he have much experience of four wheel drive machinery but that did not stop him posting the fastest time on the second stage of the day, Millbuie.

However the day was all about learning for Garry and Robbie who suffered two spins in the treacherous stage 4 before deciding to take it steady through the final test.

Pearson said: “Very mixed fortunes today but we’re quite happy. I never dreamt of a top 5 finish this morning! In stage 5 we just needed to get through. Unfortunately we had no snow tyres.”

The sixth placed finishers were Jimmy Christie and David MacFayden in their Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution IX, who benefited from a favourable lower road position.

After finishing the first stage of the day in eleventh, his stage times gradually improved throughout the day with two top 4 stage times on stage 3 and 4. A steady run through the final test brought him home an impressive and unexpected sixth overall.

He too however bemoaned the tricky conditions Mother Nature threw up on the 2016 Snowman. Jimmy said at the end of the fourth stage: “Not an enjoyable stage. I can’t see where the ice is. There’s grip one minute, none the next.”

Reay MacKay and Robert MacDonald guided their Evo IX to an equally remarkable seventh place. The Fort Augustus crew kept it steady throughout the day, taking a great fifth place on the first stage. From then on in a consistent display was enough to ensure them of their position.

Just five seconds behind in the overall classification were Steven Ronaldson and Gordon Chalmers who put their local knowledge to good use. Eighth is a great result considering this was the pair’s first time in the car.

At the end of the fourth stage, Robert said: “Really enjoyable! Great stages. We’re breaking into a sweat!”



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Ninth overall were Bruce McCombie and Michael Coutts, who were fighting right at the sharp end after the first loop of stages. However, a mistake on stage 3 saw him drop close to 3 minutes to McCulloch and from then on he was playing catch up.

He summed it up well at the end: “It was a difficult Snowman. We threw everything at it. The last stage was unbelievable, with great flowing gravel and then six inches of snow. The car has been great, if it wasn’t for the mistake on stage 3 it could’ve been a podium.”

Rounding out the top ten was Scott McCombie in his Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution IX. Co-driven by Mark Fisher, the pair who are registered for the SRC Challengers put in a strong showing to finish just five seconds shy of Bruce.

Scott said: “It’s been really good, it got better as it went on. Looking forward to the rest of the season, with less snow!”

The top 3 seeds Jock Armstrong, Mike Faulkner and John MacCrone all had days to forget.

Defending champion Armstrong struggled with opening the road on the first stage even though he had snow tyres, sliding off the same corner as Bogie did last year. Further small errors meant he could only manage 15th.

Mike Faulkner was off the pace all day with tyres that weren’t suited to the treacherous conditions. The best he could salvage was 16th.

John MacCrone in his Ford Fiesta R5 dropped time before the first stage even began, in part because a sensor light came on but also to obtain a better road position.

However, a spin in the first test, a collision with a chicane in the second and incorrect tyres for the wintry conditions didn’t help his confidence meaning he finished down in 18th.

The next round of the 2016 ARR Craib Scottish Rally Championship is the Brick & Steel Border Counties Rally in Jedburgh on March 19.

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Ends

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ARR Craib MSA Scottish Rally Championship

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