

What a relief to have the first round of the 2011 TRITON SHOWERS South East Stages Rally Championship completed. Relief, because who knew what the future of rallying was to be this year in a country so utterly financially depressed and lacking in belief? The Galway International Rally was the first to bear the brunt of the economic woes and was a possible indicator of what was in store for the upcoming events. But Gloria hallelujah the Sean Conlon Forestry rally gave the indications that clubman rallying was surviving the recession and that there is hope for the "ordinary" competitors. The Birr Stages rally, the first round of the Dunlop tarmac championship is also boasting a healthy quality entry. **LONG LIVE THE CLUBMAN.**

The Sean Conlon Tipperary Forestry Rally had a massive 64 starters, many came late in the day but there appears to have been a lot of hard graft put in by the club and competitors to get the year off to a good (great) start. Valvoline are sponsoring the National Forestry Rally Championship and the pre season publicity has paid off. Long may the two championship trade off each other.

Andrew Fanning, the 2010 TRITON SHOWERS South East Stages Rally Championship victor, was well fired up for the challenge of his local event and having a crack at both championships. The Ford Ka got a power boost but his fears about the durability of the drives were well founded, resulting in a rare non-finish. Bang went his opening gambit and the pain of blowing his bonus round points. Ouch. His fellow competitors in Class 1 suffered the same non-finishing fate and coincidentally also blew their bonus points. So it's all even in class 1.

Class 2 had just two crews registered. Derek Butler / Diarmuid O'Shea, Honda Civic were the winners and used their bonus points to kick off their championship with 24 points. The ever competitive Mick Nevin / Michael Garahy, Ford Escort MK2 were second with 10 points.

Class 3 was won by one of the natural talents of forestry rallying Mick Cuddihy with former driver James Dunphy on the notes. The little Starlet fairly bucked it way around the stages to finish 11th overall. The bonus points are held in reserve so the haul was 15 points. Second were the Dublin based crew of Douglas Stewart / Billy Ryan in the Peugeot 206. Again the bonus points were not engaged so are on 12 points. Third in class are and from the well known Carlow motorsport family were Emmet Watchorn / John had in a Peugeot 106 on 10 points.

Class 4 was won by one of the longest and most regular competitors in forestry rallying, Ray Benskin / Peadar Walsh, Ford Escort MK2. They engaged their bonus points and are one of the joint leaders of the 2011 TRITON SHOWERS South East Stages Rally Championship on 30 points. Keeping the class honours in the family name were Sean W. Benskin / Joe Fitzgibbon also Ford Escort MK2 on 24 points. Third were the local crew of Paul Quinlan / Tommy Cuddihy

in a Talbot Sunbeam on 10 points.

Class 5, the power and exhibition of two wheel drive has to be seen to be believed in this class, mainly dominated by MK2 Escorts. Class winners and actually third O/A were Frank Kelly / Liam Brennan who made the long haul from Co. Tyrone. They wasted no time used their bonus points to co-lead the 2011 TRITON SHOWERS South East Stages Rally Championship on 30 points. Next up championship wise were another Cork crew, Ray Benskin (jnr) / Nicky Hegarty, Escort MK2 on 18 points. How many of the current rally generation can recall seeing Ed Colton / Claire O'Mahony in a Peugeot 306. Ed has been synonymous with this marque for most of his rally career and it was just great to see him back not only competing but also competitive. His 16 points also used up his bonus points. Actually second and third in class were James Coleman (12) and Shay Power (10) points.

Class 6 proves that there may be some prudent competitors about in rallying as it's the best supported class. First and second O/A also are first and second in the class. Owen Murphy / James O'Brien, Mitsubishi Lancer are co-leaders of the 2011 TRITON SHOWERS South East Stages Rally Championship on 30 points. John Reid / Enda Sheil in the Toyota Corolla are second on 24 points. A spectacular car to see on the forestry stages. Perhaps the one remaining WRC cars to be seen in the forestry rallies. Third are the Co. Monaghan crew, Vincent and J. P. McAree in a Mitsubishi Lancer on 18 points. All three crews used their bonus points so there will be no surprises from that trio. For the record Ian Cochrane / Ray Fitzpatrick, also in a Mitsubishi Lancer were third in class but hold fourth place with 10 points.

That's the state of play at the moment. Long may the clubman championships and events prosper in these uncertain times.