

Gallangowan Nov 2011

Having taken part in several Targa events over the last 2 years and being a class winner for the 2011 Australian Targa Championship, Ian (Fettes) and I decided to try our hand at Forest Rallying for a change. The car at least had the pedigree for forests having been a class winner in the South Australian Rally championship in 2006, so it was well prepared for these events. Apart from a few checks, all the preparation required was to raise the suspension travel by about 25mm.

The Gallangowan Rally, organised by the Brisbane Sporting Car Club (BSCC) was held over the weekend of the 25/26th November in the Gallangowan State Forest some 250km north of Brisbane. So remote is the event that the last 45km of access road (a public road) was a dirt road and with no sign of human habitation – no driveways, entrances or fields, just natural forests either side of the road.



The car all prepared and loaded and then at the other end, parked and ready for action

Once we arrived at Gallangowan we discovered that it was a small “hamlet” with perhaps half a dozen houses, several dongers, a social club, tennis court and a State Forestry Office – forestry is the only industry here. The tennis court and social club were in the centre of what was called the oval – a cleared section of land. The tennis court was derelict and the social club...well, hygiene was perhaps not the highest topic on the agenda, but it did have, and, importantly dispensed, sufficient internal and cold lubrication for the rally crews.

The Friday was a Come and Try Day for new comers (non-prepared cars were allowed) or a Test and Tune opportunity for others. Initially 2 separate routes/stages had been planned but due to the numbers it was combined into a single stage of 6.5 km.

The come and try was for newcomers to get into the stage rallying lark without necessarily having a prepared car to do so with. The test and tune was precisely that – so that you could tweak the car or settings. We entered the test and tune event, and hoped to understand the performance of our 6 year old used rally tyres, as well as getting to grip with forest stages.



Some foliage attached to the car - proof that we had been taking a tight line on corners and the Parc Ferme at the Oval

Not content to driving on old rally tyres, we decided to enter without having a workable gearbox – the box had jammed in reverse again the previous weekend and despite taking it out 3 times during the week, and working each time on the bench, as soon as it was back in the car it would not engage reverse. So that put a restriction on things as I, being the navigator, had no intention of trying to push the car out of a ditch having been spun there by the driver!

The Come and Try route consisted of a start on bitumen, then immediately into an uphill gravel section with a blind left hander. It, like so many corners for the next 1.6 km, had negative camber past the apex of each corner – just to add to the interest. Once at the top of the hill, there were 2 x 90 degree corners and one 125 degree corners. In between those, lots of other corners, negative cambers, deep ruts and big rocks. Ian ran the circuit 6 times and I did the last 2 runs. Our times were fairly comparable, and I certainly was holding back, but the hard right corner was great for a handbrake slide while the other two were left foot braked.

On 3 or 4 of the runs, the engine cut out momentarily and each time in roughly the same spot – the end of a long straight where we were hitting about 120kph and lots of big rocks. But our problems were nothing to those of one of the Come and Try competitors in his Toyota Landcruiser. He lost it on the sharp right corner, rolling the vehicle and making a big mess of every panel. At least, and despite no windscreen, it was driveable back to Brisbane.

Saturday. The big day. Plenty of time to get sorted as the event did not start until lunchtime. The temperature was hot and getting hotter. Just ideal for wearing those rally suits, balaclavas and helmets. You see pictures of the WRC teams in hot places just after they have completed a stage and being interviewed – sweat is pouring off them. Well, that was us, but at the beginning of the stage!

At 11:00am, all the cars had to be in Parc Ferme – well the centre of the oval to be precise. At 12:00 we began to leave at 1 minute intervals to go and run the Prologue. A short 6 km stage which would determine our starting times and running order. This stage was only about 4 km from the oval – pretty rough with many dips and dry creek crossings, plus reports of cattle in the middle. Our times were not too bad considering everything. No point in going large and planting the car into a tree at this time of the event.

Then it was back to the Oval for re-grouping and waiting for our start time. We were well down the list. In fact we were 3rd last of 41 cars.

The cars were leaving at 2min intervals which meant we had a long long wait, but at least time for some lunch. The early starters were returning to the Oval before we had even left! Stage 1 had a transport section of 19km – mainly gravel roads, before turning off it and onto the dirt road for the stage. Most if not all of the route was run on closed public roads, although by the state of them you would not expect them to be public. Road signs in obscure places were the giveaway to that though.

The stage was 26 km long. 2 big dips and water splashes in the early section and then just lots of dirt tracks to follow – several forks in the road, some left or rights and lots of twists. Although most of the early part of the stage was wide enough for 2 cars carefully to pass (it is a public road after all), the 2nd half was very narrow and full of humps and dips. But the car took this well with the suspension soaking them all up. Every so often there were groups of spectators, which as always gives a hint of a good corner approaching. And finally we were through the stage. Pulled up at the control only to see that the following car was right behind us. They must have enjoyed the drive in our dust cloud! But that meant that they had gained almost 2 minutes in that stage!! (Note to driver: – must try harder!). In fact if we could increase the speed by just 1 second per corner we could have held our own.



The water crossing

One of the problems as the nav, I have found, is getting used to different organisations pace note descriptions. From the Targa events where we had 1 – 10 for the severity of the corners and every deviation of the road noted, on this event there may have been several hundred meters or more between calls and even then it was just hard right, veer left, dip etc. But then the timing was more specific – timing to the minute before entering parc ferme.

Form stage 1 to stage 2, we drove just a couple of km's on the main road to the start. Same start as the prologue but a longer stage, this time. When signing in we were notified of more cattle in the stage and a car off. Not to worry, we would see the car and hopefully not encounter the same problem.

Off we started, Ian getting more confident and placing the car on a better line for the corners. And yes a dayglo green Mazda RX7 was parked half way up a tree. Oops! But crew were both OK.

Lots more corners, a few sharp ones, and no sign of attempts to use left foot braking or handbrake from the driver, but that will come later. Then we were back onto the section familiar from the prologue and the speed increased, but before we knew it the end was in sight. Result was still slow but not as slow as on stage 1.

Back to the oval for another re-group and long wait. Stages 3 and 4 started somewhere in the hills but the route came down and through the oval, so while waiting we managed to see some of the cars going past with lots of dust!

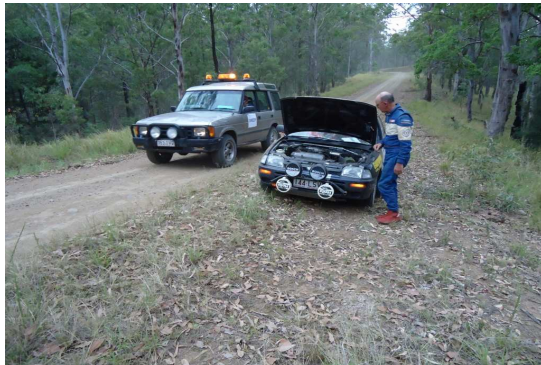


Action as seen from the Oval – this section was then run again before being reversed for the night stages.

And then it was again our turn to leave the Oval. We had moved down the start order now – 2nd last, but only because of a couple of retirements, to be honest. Nothing to do with our speed.

After a 10 minute transport section with opposing rally traffic we came to the start of Stage 3. Would we get through the stage without using the spot lights? Going to be touch and go, I reckoned. Anyhow, we started well. Ian was getting the hang of it. From the start it was a long straight with a short left hander at the end. As we were going into the corner I looked up and glanced a rock in the road. Bang! We hit it and my first thoughts were that it would have shredded the tyre, but Ian instead pointed to the rev counter. The engine had died. As we were now going downhill, there was plenty opportunity to try jump start it but to no avail.

Was this the same problem as encountered on the test and tune? Well it appeared to be so – a loose connection in the expensive aftermarket ECU. All that money spent and the wretched thing failed us. I was not best pleased, to say the least, and images of Carlos Sainz throwing his crash helmet through the rear window of his Celica having just lost the world championship title 200m from the last stage of the rally of GB, were sort of going through my mind. Not that I would do that.



The end! Charade all quiet at the side of the stage and the competition – A Detomaso Charade

One of the closing cars towed us back to the stage start and abandoned us there. We had to wait another 30 mins or so for another car to take us back to the Oval where we immediately collected the trailer and returned to recover the car. On our return it was straight into the bar for a few refreshments, well quite a few really, and then were able to watch the cars on later stages going past the Oval at night.

Next task will be to find out why the reverse gears are jamming. The joys of a rally car.

So of the 41 starters, only about 21 finished – 2 of the retirees were the result of encounters with the undergrowth, the rest due to mechanical failure, including the other Charade. A fairly high attrition rate really, but then Gallangowan is recognised as a rough terrain.

Unfortunately by the time of writing this, the next event at Kenilworth has been cancelled due to the rain, but there are a few more events in the offing. So we shall be back, and with a working gearbox as well.