

2023 Cookstown Tyre Safety Centre Targa.

Locals Take Top Honours at TSC Targa Rally.

After a day of 24 excellent Targa Tests in the Cookstown area, local Father and Daughter crew Philip and Kim Hunter came out on top in their Toyota MR2 at the Tyre Safety Centre Targa Rally.

Clerk of the Course, Niall McKenna, ably assisted by Austin Burnett and a large team of volunteer marshals, ran a superb event and overcame a couple of tough challenges on the day. The time clocks proved difficult at times, and heavy rain during the fourth running of the tests left many of the competitors and marshals working their way through deep water.

The rally was based at the premises of Kildress Joinery, where 56 crews of varying levels of experience gathered for four loops of six tests, all of them close at hand. With Experts, Semi-Experts and Novice Classes split into under and over 1400cc, it was no surprise to find most competitors in the "Over 1400" classes. In fact, there were no Expert drivers in cars under 1400, and just one among the Semi-Experts.

Nevertheless, the action was gotten underway by top seeds, Robert Woodside and Bruce Drummond in their Mazda MX5, one of 19 MX5s taking part. Immediately behind at number two came Eamonn Byrne and Daughter Zoe in a Toyota Yaris, and at number three were the eventual winners, Philip Hunter and Daughter Kim in a Toyota MR2. The anticipated battle between these three took a turn on the very first test, for while Woodside and Hunter tied for the fastest time, the Byrnes had difficulty spotting the exit from one of the manoeuvres and were down in 30th place.

Up with the early leaders were the Ballygawley pairing of Niall Donnelly and Stephen O'Hanlon in a Toyota MR2, and they would top the leaderboard several times during the day. Unfortunately for Niall, a 20-second stop/go penalty on test 3 would leave him with a mountain to climb, and he almost managed it! He would finish the day just two seconds behind the winner.

Several local teams fell foul of that hard-to-see exit on test one, including Chris Nelson and Malcolm McQueen (MX5), Dougie and Glen Millar (VW Golf GTI), and Ronan Cox and Joe O'Neill (Ford Puma), leaving them all playing "catch up" for the rest of the tests. An impressive recovery drive by Chris Nelson would see him bring his beautifully prepared Mazda from 54th place up to 14th by the finish.

At the end of the first loop of the six tests, four crews had already fallen by the wayside. In the lead however was Philip Hunter with Robert Robinson's Toyota Yaris in second ahead of a recovering Niall McKenna. A little further down the list, local driver Harry Barr was having an unbelievable run and had himself inside the top 10. Ominously, Robert Woodside was only in 6th place and hearing nasty sounds from the transmission. Sadly, the next test would be their last and the car was put on the trailer for an early trip home with a broken drive shaft.

On the second loop of tests, nobody was fooled by that hard-to-see exit on the first test, but a rare rough spot near the end of test 10 caught out Norman Ferguson and John Nicholl and a deep pothole damaged a wheel on their Peugeot 106 GTi and they were out. Ironically, the same spot would put an end to Harry Barr's excellent run when he too hit the same hole and ended up with a damaged sump a couple of loops later. With a class win looming, this was a bitter pill to swallow.

Over that second loop, Hunter, Donnelly and Robinson were swapping the top three places, and with Niall Donnelly in the lead after 12, the trio were now joined in 4th place by another Donnelly, this time Novice driver Ché Donnelly partnered by Rebecca McKenna in yet another Toyota MR2.

In another terrific recovery drive, Eamonn and Zoe Byrne had fought their way back from 30th place to 7th, and to most onlookers surprise, the top ten now included several other Novice crews. Robin and Caleb Cuddy (MR2) were in fifth place, first time Targa competitors Ian and Jack Lowry (MX5 Mk3) in eighth, and Donaghmore's Michael Faloon/Jonathan Hayes (MR2) in ninth.

Now that everybody had completed two runs over the tests, the running order had pretty much settled down, but the sting in the tail came with a terrible downpour as the fourth loop got under way. This played havoc with some of the timing equipment, and the poor marshals got a drenching they hadn't anticipated.

By the end of the event, 18 cars had fallen by the wayside in one way or another and were classified in the non-finisher category. Half of these were Novice crews, but of those Novices who stayed out of trouble, Ché Donnelly/Rebecca McKenna really impressed with the over 1400cc class win and a terrific 4th place overall. In the under 1400cc class for Novices it was Darren and Niamh O'Gara in their Seat Ibiza.

In the Semi-Experts Classes, Gerard and Paul Hughes took the over 1400 win, just 10 seconds ahead of Martin and Raymond McKernan, both in Mazda MX5s. Robert and Peter Haslett took third place in their Toyota Yaris a further 14 seconds adrift. In the under 1400 class, John Henderson and Albert McClelland were the sole entrants and claimed the top prize in their little Nissan Micra.

All the Experts were in the over 1400cc class and a close finish saw Philip and Kim Hunter just pip Niall Donnelly and Stephen O'Hanlon (both in MR2s) by two seconds, and thus take the premier award as overall winner. Robert Robinson and Ronnie Griffin upheld the front-wheel-drive honours with a fine third place, ahead of Eamonn and Zoe Byrne, making it four Toyotas in the top four places in the class.

Clerk of the Course Niall McKenna and Chief Marshal Austin Burnett are to be congratulated on their running of a compact, and smooth running event. With 24 tests, this was a packed day of driving with minimal circling of pylons "Autotest-style", and plenty of driving challenge in farm lanes. There was a widespread view that this was a great day's club level motorsport.

Tyre Safety Centre (Cookstown) Targa Rally 2023

RESULTS

Overall:

1. Philip and Kim Hunter (MR2) 32:37;
2. Niall Donnelly/Stephen O'Hanlon (MR2) 32:39;
3. Robert Robinson/Ronnie Griffin (Yaris) 32:57;
4. Ché Donnelly/Rebecca McKenna (MR2) 33:20;
5. Eamonn and Zoe Byrne (Yaris) 33:31;
6. Ian and Jack Lowry (MX5) 33:32;
7. Robin and Caleb Cuddy (MR2) 34:14;
8. Gerard and Paul Hughes (MX5) 34:29;
9. Martin and Raymond McKernan (MX5) 34:39;
10. Robert and Peter Haslett (Yaris) 34:43

Class Winners:

- Class 2 - Niall Donnelly/Stephen O'Hanlon
- Class 3 - John Henderson/Albert McClelland
- Class 4 - Gerard and Paul Hughes
- Class 5 - Darren and Niamh O'Gara
- Class 6 - Ché Donnelly/Rebecca McKenna