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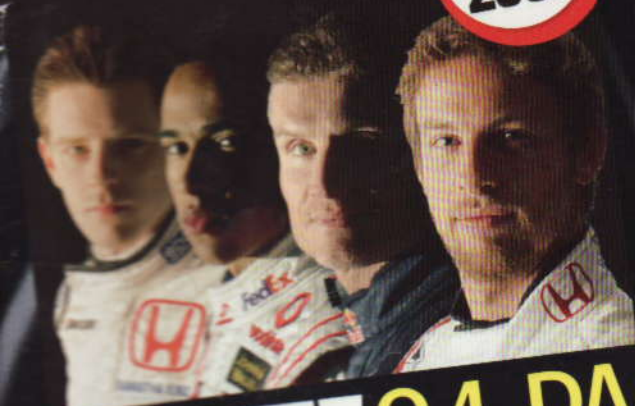
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McRAE HEAPS HIGH PRAISE ON NEW CAR

FORMER WORLD champion Colin McRae has said that the first test of his new R4 rally car has surpassed all his expectations.

The 1995 title winner drove the naturally aspirated, four-wheel-drive car for two days in Scotland last week. By the end of the session, McRae said he couldn't stop smiling when he stepped from the machine which he and DJM Race Preparation have spent more than a year building.

McRae said: "It has been pretty frustrating recently, just waiting to get in the car. The first time out, it was fantastic. It's the type of car which makes you smile. It gives you so much confidence, it's really easy to drive — which is just what you want from this kind of car. To be honest, I had an idea of what I wanted from this first test, but this goes way beyond that."

The car completed 60 miles, with one day of running on asphalt and another day in the forest. Further testing is planned in the immediate future, but McRae remained tight-lipped on a precise release date.

"I realise that we haven't done a lot of miles in the car yet. We have some extended running and durability tests to come, but given that this car doesn't have one standard production part in it, I'm really happy with what we have achieved. It's usually the same the first time you test any kind of new car, whether it's a WRC team or not; I expected to have to make some changes after we drove the car last week, but we don't have to. It really inspires confidence.

As for when it will be out, we don't have a definite date set yet. I would like to be on a rally in the first half of

the season, but I'm not going to start setting dates at this stage. We've had a great deal of interest in the car but we now have to look at the production side of things, the last thing I want to do is to start missing delivery dates for people."



McRae was delighted with the R4's first run

CAVE HITS THE SPOT IN LATVIA

FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD British rally driver Tom Cave has just returned from a successful first event in Latvia.

Cave was invited by the Latvian Federation (LAF) to tackle the Sarma Rally, so the organisation could appraise him against its own juniors. Cave, who had former world championship co-driver Gemma Price navigating and driving the road sections between the stages, finished third overall in a Group N Honda Civic.

Cave's father, Peter, said: "We're being very low-key about this. The LAF invited Tom to do the event and we're very grateful to them for doing that. Yes, Tom finished third, but that shouldn't be misinterpreted. Because he's a junior, he was at the front of the field on a full stud in the snow conditions. The main field was using a button stud."

Cave had only tested rally cars on private ground before his Latvian outing and may be invited back by the LAF.

NEWS IN BRIEF

HIGGINS SIGNS UP FOR BRC
Mark Higgins has confirmed his deal for this year's British Rally Championship. The triple champion will defend his title at the wheel of a Stobart-backed, TEGSport-run Subaru Impreza. The Manxman tested the car for the first time when he ran as course car on Saturday's Malcolm Wilson Rally. His team-mate, running a sister Stobart-decaled Subaru, will be Welshman Wyn Humphries.

FINNISH STAGE REINSTATED
Arguably Finland's most famous stage, Ouninpohja will be returned to its former glory next season. The classic stage, so good Colin McRae named his racehorse after it, was chopped in half after Petter Solberg broke the bogey time for the stage, taking the test's average speed higher than was recommended. There have been slight changes to Ouninpohja to slow the cars down, but the 20-mile stage will be run twice on Saturday in a route which features 46 per cent new roads from last year.

MEXICO IN RECORD BOOKS
This week's Rally Mexico will be the shortest World Rally Championship round in the sport's history. The total mileage the crews will complete on the fourth round of the series is 527.91, with the 20 stages on the Leon-based rally comprising 227.46 miles of that. The previous shortest event was last year's Mexico at 577.90 miles. The saving of 50 miles, on what is the WRC's westernmost event in the calendar, has come largely thanks to the completion of the San Felipe highway, a main road on the way from Leon to the stages.

FORD PAIR BACK ON GRAVEL
Ford drivers Marcus Gronholm and Mikko Hirvonen had their first test on gravel since Rally GB at the start of December, more than three months ago, last week ahead of this weekend's Rally Mexico. The pair completed a five-day development test in northern Spain and focused on trialling new parts for the evolution version of the Focus RS WRC 06, which is due to debut on Rally Finland in August. Hirvonen drove for the opening three days with Gronholm taking over for the last two days.

AMERICANS HEAD SOUTH
Six American drivers will be making the trip south of the border for this week's Rally Mexico. Stunt bike superstar and US rally champion Travis Pastrana will start with Subaru USA team-mate Ken Block in the sister Impreza WRX. Karl Sheible, Brian Street, Wyeth Gubelmann and Craig Studnick are the other drivers.

SUBARU'S SEASON ON TV
Fans of the Subaru World Rally Team will be able to watch the first in a six-part, fly-on-the-wall documentary of its 2006 season (below) on Monday March 12 at 2200 on Discovery UK. Subaru's Stephen Webb said: "Last season wasn't the most successful in Subaru's distinguished WRC history, but it certainly made for compelling viewing. Teams have shied away from allowing this sort of access in the past, but we wanted to bring the excitement of the WRC to a wider audience and I think that's just what the series has achieved."

VIEWING FIGURES SOAR

ACCORDING TO the latest statistics from International Sportsworld Communicators (ISC), 807 million people watched the World Rally Championship last season, a 46 per cent increase since 2002.

The statistics, compiled on behalf of ISC by specialist

TNSSport, also reveal 8522 dedicated WRC broadcasts, a 27 per cent rise, translating to 4544 hours of coverage — a 155 per cent rise in five years.

Terrestrial channels in key markets, such as France TV and RTL in Germany, have all renewed their contracts. The

sport remains on ITV in Britain, although reports are no longer screened on a terrestrial channel and viewing figures for the early rounds of the series shown on ITV4 have been as low as 10 per cent of the highest figure registered for ITV1's coverage last season.

HIRVONEN CAUTIOUS FOR MEXICO

RALLY NORWAY winner Mikko Hirvonen is down playing his chances of a repeat of his Scandinavian performance on this week's Rally Mexico.

Despite the 26-year-old beating Marcus Gronholm and Sebastien Loeb in a straight fight for the first time in his career, the Ford man said his feet remained firmly on the ground ahead of round three.

"I'm eager to get started, but I admit I don't know what to expect," he said. "After beating Marcus and Sebastien Loeb in Norway, I'm unsure what will happen in Mexico. I'm not expecting to challenge them both on gravel immediately. I think it will take a few more rallies to get onto their pace, but you never know. The last two rallies were on snow, which required a different driving style. It takes a while to get back into the rhythm of driving on gravel."



Fiat conducted an extensive testing programme to prepare for the Safari

SAFARI OPENS IRC

THE INTERCONTINENTAL Rally Challenge starts with the Safari Rally in Kenya tomorrow.

Just two factory Fiat Punto Super 2000s make the start in Nairobi, but a decision from Mitsubishi Ralliart Italy to register for the IRC means any Lancer driver will now be eligible for points. Series organisers have pointed to the tough nature of the Safari Rally, even though it will be run on closed roads and in a much-diluted form, compared with that of its heyday, for

the low turnout on round one. IRC motorsport development manager — and former Safari winner — Jean-Pierre Nicolas is happy to see the African classic back on a global motorsport calendar. He said: "The Safari remains one of the most challenging events in the world. The countryside and the light is simply breathtaking. My win — in 1978 — is something I will always remember as the Safari is an event where the driver makes a bigger difference than usual.

I am very pleased IRC has chosen the Safari to start the season."

Fiat's leading driver Andrea Navarra said he was confident his Punto would last the course, even though it had never contested an event of this nature before. "The car has already proved its reliability. It will be difficult, but it is an emotional experience to start the Safari in a factory car."

Eurosport, backers of the series, provide extensive coverage — see Autosport listings.

