

E-Letter No 1, 2010
Vantage Aluminium Joinery New Zealand Rally Championship

Round 1, Rally Otago

Event - 2nd Overall

Heat 1 – 5th Overall Group N
Heat 2 – 3rd Overall Group N



Wow, What a start to the 2010 NZ Rally Championship! After a very busy week and build up to the first event in Otago it is hard to believe that the first round has come and gone already.

Starting the Championship with a new car we had a lot of extra work pre season to make sure the new car was tuned, prepped and set up for my driving style. Everything ran very smoothly though and we were able to fit in a couple of test sessions along with an official launch function in Auckland in the week prior to the rally.



Glenn and I travelled to Dunedin the Easter weekend prior to the rally to allow a very short time for some R&R and also some promotional opportunities in my home town. Peter McAuliffe from Rothbury Insurance Brokers organised a function for the Wednesday night before the event and it was great to get to meet some new faces and to show off the new car which looks super sharp in its new livery.

Thursday morning was spent at shakedown and then Thursday and Friday we took part in a one pass convoy recce of the stages. It was a huge event with over 268km of special stages, of which only 18km were repeated. This meant we had 250km of notes to write which is a huge amount. In comparison the Asia Pacific Championship, or in most World Championship Events, the most stage kilometres you write notes for is about 150km as a lot of the stages are repeated.

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Recce went very well but we became aware of how much at a disadvantage we would be with our seeding of number 3. The gravel was super thick and pebbly which meant that we would be running as a road sweeper for the cars further down the running order. Dust was also going to be a big problem as the weather was fine and sunny with absolutely no wind, which meant the dry roads of the North Otago area were going to be a real challenge.

The best way to explain the disadvantage of road sweeping is to imagine we were doing qualifying at a race track and the front cars are trying to set a fastest time on a fully wet track on dry tyres. As each car passes the line dries out till effectively they are racing a dry track – which gives each passing car an advantage over the front running ones.



Friday night there was a rally show/forum at the Otago Railway Station. It was a wonderful backdrop for all of the rally cars and a nice opportunity to meet the local fans and give out some of our new posters.

Saturday morning started with a long tour North of Dunedin to a short service stop at Weston before the first two stages. As predicted from recce the stages were super slippery and very dusty. There were only one minute gaps between cars so with the still Autumn air the dust would just hang and it made it very difficult at times to see the corners and braking distances.

We started a little too tentatively for the morning recording two 7th fastest stage times and in hindsight I think I was a little too slow to lift my game . Well....thats pretty obvious really as we were 9th fastest in the following stage!!!

The car was feeling great but I was just thinking too much about trying to be neat in the loose conditions. The trouble with thinking whilst driving is that it makes it a little too difficult to listen to the pacenotes as well. You then start second guessing or trying to remember what Glenn has said and things just don't flow.

Stage three was the famous Danseys Pass stage which is a pretty daunting piece of road with a steep ascent and then descent into the Maniototo Valley. Unfortunately our intercooler spray pump failed at the start which meant we were down on power and then halfway into the stage we came across a small herd of cows that were heading the same way as us but didn't want to get out of the road in

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any big hurry. After the completion of three stages we were in 9th place overall. Not quite the start to our National Championship campaign we were hoping for!

Stage four and we were still down on power with no intercooler spray but we definitely did a better job of driving and we were 4th fastest. I was starting to feel a little more at home in our new car and I decided to forget about neatness and just go for attack – it seemed to work.

The following stage was 30km long and had plenty of thick gravel and dust again. We were 4th fastest again and up to 6th place now. Stage 6 was a repeat of stage 4 and it had a small ford at the start at a spectator point. I thought I went in at a similar pace as the first time but this time the car got a mouthful of water and coughed and spluttered up the hill until it cleared about a kilometre later. It was a rather costly ford for a couple of drivers who seized and hydraulicked their engines after their cars also took a mouthful – I think we got off quite lightly!!



The last stage of the day was a 16km forestry stage on the outskirts of Dunedin. It started on heavily gravelled county roads before opening out into the forest. We had a fantastic run through with everything finally clicking and we won the stage. We had one short tarmac stage in the city which we also came close to winning but missed out by 0.2 seconds. It was a great way to finish our first day of rallying in the new car. We had finished 5th overall and 4th in Group N which was a good recovery considering how we had started and we were only 27seconds behind 2nd place. Chris West (Westy) who was leading the rally had done a fantastic job from 6th position on the road and was a minute clear of 2nd place.

There wasn't much to do to the car on Saturday night in preparation for Sunday. All that was needed was for Glenn and I to finish checking our pacenotes from our incar video from recce.



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We started day two determined to get a heat win and improve on our 5th position overall.

The regulations of our Championship meant that the start order for day 2 was done from the placings on day one. This meant we had a better road position of 5 on the road but unfortunately for us the stages on Day 2 were not as gravelly and the disadvantage to car 1 would not be so great.

The first three stages were all famous Otago stages that we have competed on previously. Whare Flat is a short 12 km stage close to the outskirts of Dunedin. We struggled with a lot of understeer through the stage but still managed 3rd fastest group N time only 4 seconds from fastest. Stage two went even better despite the dust and we finished 2nd fastest only 1.5 seconds behind first and we were now leading Day 2. This was more like it!



In The following stage in Waipori Gorge we also struggled with a lot of understeer again and only managed 3rd fastest time. We dropped to 2nd, 1 second behind Westy, and 4 sec clear of third. It was certainly tight at the top.

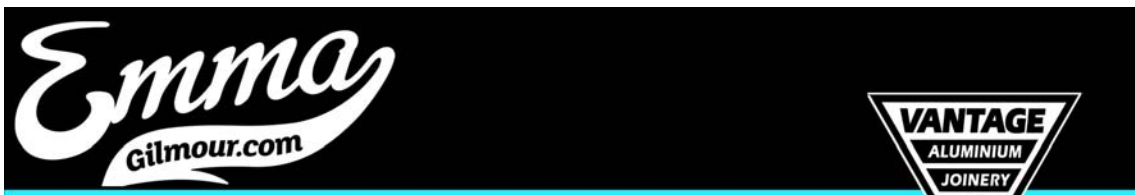
After a service in Middlemarch we headed into some new stages. All of the stages around Middlemarch are superfast and also quite gravelly. We had run out of our narrow tyre and now had to run our wider tyre with cuts which isn't ideal in gravelly conditions.



Our first stage out of service was a little average as my notes didn't seem to work to well. The stage was 13km long with the first 10km 2-3 lanes wide, fast with lots of crests. On recce it was difficult to drive the correct line with one pass, heavy dust and oncoming sheep trucks. But....I still could have done a better job and improved the notes. We were 5th fastest through here.

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Sufficiently fired up from this we headed into the next 12km stage determined to get back in front. It didn't get off to a good start when I overshot the first junction and almost came to a complete stop. Fired up even more we stormed through the stage to take our second stage win for the weekend.

The next stage at 18km long was even faster than the one before and was to become the turning point for the rally. Well...for us anyway! 6.5kms from the end we came over a flat left over crest into a "Don't Cut" flat right - the "Don't Cut" for a log stump that was sitting on the apex of the corner beside a firewood clearing area. We were doing about 150kmhr as we came over the crest and as I started to see the upcoming road I realized that the stump was now obliterated across the road so cut through the clearing instead - still with 2 wheels on the road, so not a huge cut.

Phew! We survived that near miss. Now it was a 70 metre braking distance to a medium speed left hander. No problem normally. But this time when I go for the brake pedal it feels like a clutch pedal and no matter how many stomps I quickly do on the pedal the brakes aren't coming back!!



Oh oh. Not good. I throw the car at the corner and thankfully we make it round. (Maybe I could have been going faster through it then after all!?)

We now have to drive the final 6.5kms with no brakes aside from the handbrake. We battle on and as we near the last series of corners before the final 500m straight I'm trying to pick my braking point when all of a sudden we are in thick, thick dust. I'm frantically trying to stop the car, see the corner and turn the steering wheel with one hand all at the same time.

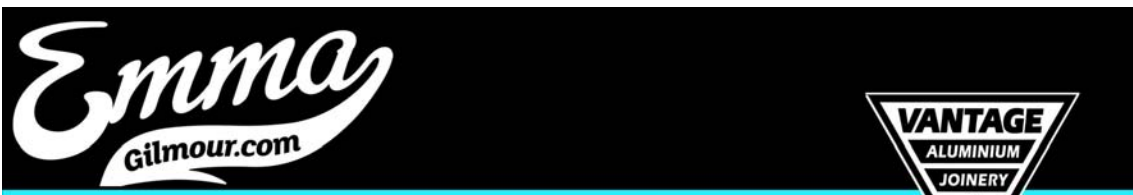
We had caught the ailing Mitsubishi of Andrew Hawkeswood that was now limping out of the stage after obliterating the tree stump. We made it past him and over the flying finish to finish the stage in 5th place, and record a high speed of 171kmhr in the speed trap at the finish - only 10kmhr down on the other group N cars.

Despite our problem and our obvious time loss we only slipped to 3rd place. I know that without the brake problem we could have won the stage. We lost 15seconds to Westy who we were battling with.

Luckily we now had a service to fix our brake problem. Which upon closer inspection proved to be a very unlucky thing to happen – no one has ever seen it happen before!

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For the interest of those mechanically minded I will try and explain. Bare with me here...Our brake caliper on the left hand side of the car had got damaged. The brake caliper has 2 pistons, which to me look like two small tubes the size of your thumb and finger joined together in an ok gesture. They are made of metal and hollow inside. When they are inside the caliper there is about 0.8cm of them that sticks out, yet is still encased within the caliper - so in theory - well protected. Well somehow a small stone or something got in there and dented the piston and this created enough of a gap for all of the brake fluid to run out leaving me with no brakes.



Luckily for us Matt Jansen from Christchurch had a spare caliper we could borrow, as due to the cost of the brakes (\$15,000) and the fact they never fail or get damaged we don't carry spares. We do carry a set of standard brakes that we could have fitted but with 2 stages still to do it wouldn't have been ideal.

So with 2 stages to go we were now in 3rd place for the day and 3rd overall for the rally.

The following stage was a repeat of the short one with average notes. We did a better job but didn't take any time out of 1st or 2nd.

The final stage of the rally was the 30km Nenthorn. It runs from Middlemarch out to the coast at Waikouaiti. It was always going to be a challenging stage with high speed sections mixed with steep twisty descents. The most challenging aspect was going to be the surface as it was rather gravelly and we only had wide tyres left.

Again it proved to be another tough stage. Our tyres definitely didn't work which then started to overwork our brakes which meant they weren't working effectively. We battled on and as we got to within 4kms of the finish we came across a broken piece of wheel in the road. This obviously meant someone else was having a worse stage than us! As we got to within a km of the finish we came around a hairpin and came face to face with Westy's car stuck into the bank across the road. (his wheel had broken and they had kept driving till eventually they got stuck on this corner when the steering arm broke.)

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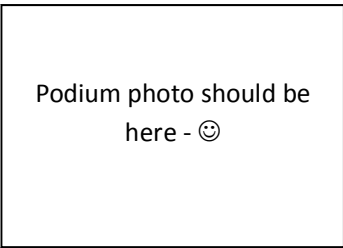
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We continued on with our brakes still average to the finish of the stage. We knew we hadn't done enough to win the stage but unfortunately Richard Mason came through from 4th to grab 1st place for the heat with a great run through the stage. Wests DNF aiding him to achieve this. Wests DNF also meant we still finished 3rd for the day despite our problems and 2nd overall for the weekend - 15secs behind the winner Dean Sumner.

We were very lucky the stage wasn't any longer as when we drove out of the stage we had a very bad vibration. This was due to the front left wheel that was about to come off - it only had finger tight, barely on wheel nuts. The wheels were newly painted and had been re-torqued by us between the 2 stages. We were very lucky to get to the finish and this was probably also part of the problem with the brakes.

So all in all it was a great result for the new car at our first event of the season. Due to the points scoring system of the championship and the two heat system we are now 4th in the championship but only 9 points behind 1st.

Disappointingly the event organisers did not promote the fact we finished 2nd in the rally so we got no champagne to spray and no podium photo. It was very confusing to the public and our sponsors who had gathered in the centre of Dunedin to watch us go over the finish ramp in 2nd place to see us barely get a mention when we eventually got to drive over after the televised ceremony and champagne spraying. To say we were a little frustrated is an understatement. Shame the fired upness had to go to waste on the tour to parc ferme - would have been great in a stage!! :-)

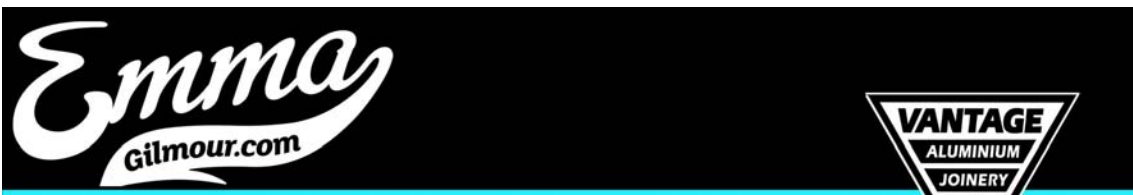


I would like to say a big thank you to our great team, Aaron, Al, Brad and Nathan. The team was slightly smaller than normal as Paul is awaiting the birth of their 2nd child, yet it was never a problem to the guys and the car ran faultlessly all weekend. Thanks also to Kent from SpeedSource in Warkworth, the engine felt great even after I tried to drown it In the ford - silly girl!!

I also want to thank my great team of sponsors who are all onboard again for 2010 - Vantage Aluminium Joinery, Subaru, Pirelli, Supercharge Batteries, Metalman, Castrol, Wurth, QBE Insurance, Yamaha, PPG, Rothbury Insurance Brokers, Vodafone, Interislander, Dunedin Casino, Pak'N'Save, NGK Spark Plugs, Mitchell & Mackersy Lawyers and Webdesign.

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Thank you to David Thomson and Geoff Ridder for our press release and great photos. You can find these on our website and my Facebook Fan Page.

We have a very busy month ahead in preparation for the next round of the NZRC which will also be a round of the World Rally Championship. We have won an award to compete as part of the Production World Rally Championship which is a fantastic opportunity.

I am also writing a blog for the NZ Herald online. You can find a link to it from our Website.

I hope you all have a great month.

Emma



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