

Tuesday, 11 May 2010

E-Letter No 2, 2010

*Vantage Aluminium Joinery New Zealand
Rally Championship*

Round 2, Rally NZ

Event - **17th Overall**
 2nd PWRC
 4th NZRC

Heat 1 – 3rd Overall Group N

Heat 2 – 4th Overall Group N

Heat 3 – 2nd Overall Group N



What an event! Almost 400km of special stages and 1200km of touring has left me feeling a little bit tired – needless to say MMMMS is probably feeling a little tired too. ☺

I was really looking forward to Rally NZ this year. After its absence from the WRC last year, it was great to have the event back and to also be back in Auckland after 3 years in Hamilton. Although it can create a few logistic dramas being based in the middle of NZ's largest city – the fantastic media coverage and exposure far outweigh any small negatives.

We were lucky enough to be awarded a wild card entry into the NZ round of the Production World Rally Championship (PWRC). Run as a part of the World Rally Championship the PWRC runs at 6 rounds of the WRC. They use the same tyres and fuel as the World Rally Cars but are production cars like we compete with here in NZ. Being part of this Championship for the NZ Round is a great way to get International exposure.

Glenn and I had a big couple of days doing recce over the stages before the event. Unlike our NZ rallies, International events allow us two passes of the stages which makes it a lot easier for writing pace notes – the first pass to write them and the second pass to check them.



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On Thursday we had Shakedown in the Auckland domain. The stage was a short tarmac stage that would be used on Friday night in the dark. With no expensive spotlights to add to our car on Friday night I used the shakedown as a good opportunity to learn the road and to spot any potential traps! A couple of our competitors found the major trap, which was a corner that tightened up onto a slippery narrow piece of concrete with big kerbs. Both received badly bent rear rims and damaged suspension!

That night we had a ceremonial start in the Auckland Harbour Viaduct before we got an early night in readiness for the start the next morning.

Friday morning wasn't too early a start. We left the service park at Queens Wharf and headed north to stages just south of Whangarei.



Glenn and I were feeling confident heading into the rally as we were competitive at the first round of the NZ championship in Otago and with an improved brake setup things should have been even better. With three heats counting toward our championship at Rally NZ it was going to be important to finish each day and get as many points as possible.

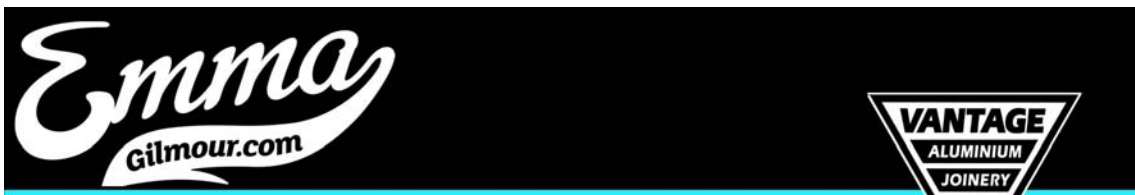
Special stage 1 is a famous NZ stage – Waipu Gorge. It starts with a 300m drag straight up a steep hill before running through flowing farm country and tightening up as it enters the gorge.

3-2-1-Go! And we are on our way. Unfortunately it is only 2 corners into the stage when I comment to Glenn that the car feels very slow. I am struggling to work out which gear to be in as the car doesn't seem to be pulling itself out of corners. About half way through the stage the clutch fails, and I immediately start worrying that our rally might already be over at the end of the first stage! ☹

We finish the stage with a time that is surprisingly 'ok' considering our dramas. Having no clutch is not really a problem in a stage as we can change gears without a clutch. But with my driving style I still use the clutch quite a lot so it was going to require a little adaption to try and get ourselves through the next 3 stages before service. The biggest problem is commuting or starting as we need to start moving by just turning the car on in gear. This would be a big problem if we had any uphill starts or worse yet if I stalled the car somewhere in the stage.

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The other concern was that even if we made it back to the midday service we didn't have a spare clutch in the car to fit. The WRC Rules in force at Rally NZ meant that for the remote midday services the team can only fit parts that are already carried in the rally car. We were already loaded up like we were going on holiday with spare brake pads, tie rods, steering arms and the like. We would have to go the whole day with no clutch.

Thankfully prior to the start of special stage 2 – our clutch came back! ☺ We started the stage knowing that it probably wasn't going to last so when it did go again – it didn't catch me by surprise this time.

With a little bit more time before the next stage Glenn was able to locate the problem. On the exhaust just behind the engine there is a sensor that fits inside a small hole. This sensor is used for tuning but got changed over before the start of the rally. Unfortunately it had fallen out before or at the start of the first stage. This meant all of the hot air coming out of the engine was now escaping back into the engine bay and was right underneath the clutch fluid cylinder which was boiling the fluid – hence the reason the clutch would return once it cooled down.

We didn't have a spare sensor with us to fit so had to battle through the next two stages and 50kms of stages with no clutch. Luckily the boys were able to fix the problem at the 15min service in Whangarei. We were now in 6th place in the NZ champs for the day – certainly not the start we had planned on – but we were still going!



The repeat of the stages in the afternoon went pretty well and we worked our way back to 3rd. I wasn't overly happy with how I was driving as I seemed to be overdriving to try and keep our speed up. The new brake package felt great but I was still driving like I had the old brakes in the car it was just taking a little time to get use to the new setup.

After a long drive back into Auckland we had the short super special stage around the Auckland Domain. There was a huge crowd there to cheer us on, and it was a lot of fun driving on tarmac on our gravel tyres. We finished day one of Rally NZ 2nd in PWRC and 18th overall.

Saturday was an early start with a quick 15min service before heading 80km south to the stages. The first stage was a little unusual as it started with 9km of tarmac. The tarmac can be challenging to

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drive on as the World Rally Cars take big cuts and spread gravel and dirt across the road. It is really important to stay on their line or else you end up losing control on the loose gravel that they have pulled onto the road and sliding off road.

We were 5th fastest which I wasn't too impressed about.

The following stage started well until a medium speed right hander over a crest which tightened. We had made a small error with our pacenotes which made me think we had a bit more distance before it tightened. When I realised this it was already too late and we had too much speed and we slid wide hitting a bank with the rear of the car. We carried on for the remaining 12km and I thought that something must be bent as the car was super tailey on right hand corners. As we got closer to the end of the stage the handling deteriorated and we finished the stage almost a minute down on fastest.

When we got out of the stage we surveyed the damage to see that we had knocked the tyre off the bead, which had caused it to go flat and we had also knocked the alignment out. We had one more 30km gravel stage to go. With the alignment knocked out it kept me pretty busy trying to keep the car inline and not spinning. Before the midday service we also had a tarmac super special stage around the new Hampton Downs racetrack.



The laps around the race track were a lot of fun. There were huge crowds there – supposedly over 25,000 – and it was strange heading into the first corner and not being able to see it as the leading WRC cars had cut across the grass and basically covered the race track in dirt and grass. After we had finished they had to get a tractor in with a blade to scrape it off as the street sweeper couldn't keep up!

We arrived at the midday service in 6th place similar to the first day and once again the boys did a great job and managed to straighten the alignment as best as they could.

Back out to a repeat of the stages and we had a very good run although I was slightly disappointed with some of our stage times when I felt we had done a good job throughout the stage. We

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managed to make our way back to 4th place, only missing out on 3rd for the heat by 0.1 of a sec. Again....I wasn't too impressed by this!! ☺ We are still lying 2nd in the PWRC and 20th overall.

On our tour back to Auckland Glenn and I were discussing our lack of pace. We felt we were doing a better job than the times were showing. We made a plan with the team to get the engine tuner to check our data and to see if there was anything that could be done to improve response. For Rally NZ we had to use the FIA fuel (a requirement because of our wildcard entry into the PWRC). Unfortunately our engine tuner didn't get much time prior to the event to get the tune 100%. He changed the tune slightly overnight in an effort to try and get more response out of the engine.

On Sunday morning as we drove south 160km towards Raglan and we were hoping that we might have a little more pace for the last 4 stages of the rally.

Stage 1 and we're not off to a very good start. The car still feels a little slow as we take off up the hill, although the response out of corners does feel a bit better. We finish the first stage in 3rd place which is a little surprising as it didn't feel very good and we ran wide and touched (driver speak for hit) a bank.



The next stage is another famous Rally NZ stage – Whaanga Coast. At 30km long the stage starts fast and flowing through farmland before tightening up as it heads along the coast. The stage never seems to end as it keeps getting tighter and tighter. Certainly not an easy stage and a stage that in the past I have never done that well on as slow corners are not normally my specialty – patience not being one of my virtues! ☺



As we started the stage I realise that I may have knocked the alignment out on the stage before as the car is very tailiey on right handers again. Unfortunately on one slow hairpin I am not quick enough to catch the car and we spin, losing around 10sec as we have to back up and then get going again. We head to midday service in 2nd place.

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We then headed back out to repeat the two morning stages with the alignment now correct. We do a reasonable job through the first stage after service to move to within 14sec of first place overall for the heat. We are very determined to make sure we make up as much time as possible on the last stage and with 30km on offer – anything is possible.

It was a crazy stage with so many people having problems and cars off all over the place! Petter Solberg's co driver was standing on the side of the road slowing us down for a corner which they had gone off on. As we come around the corner I see where their car is parked half on the road and start making my line to go around it, but then realise that there is something in my near vision and that it's the power lines that are lying down across the road. It caught me by surprise that much that I ducked my head – not that it would do any good! Boy it gave me a fright and it took a couple of corners to get the focus back.



We do a great job through the stage attacking the whole way and when we pull up to the last control I know that we have done the best job we can. We managed to win the stage and take 7seconds out of first but this wasn't enough for the heat win unfortunately. We finished 2nd in the heat, 17th overall and 2nd in the PWRC. A great finish considering. I was pretty excited to win the last stage as, like I said earlier, this is a stage I normally struggle on.

So it has been another tough event but we have scored good points and learnt a lot. We are now 2nd overall in the Vantage Aluminium Joinery New Zealand Rally Championship after two rounds.

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I would like to say a big thank you to our great team - Aaron Thornton, Al Cottington, Brad Wade, Matt Collier & Neil Coles. The event was massive with early starts and late finishes making for long days, but the boys did a great job keeping MMMMMS running and Glenn and I fed! Also thank you to our engine tuner Kent Thompson, unfortunately this time he didn't have so much time to get everything 100% as we weren't able to access the FIA fuel until right at the last minute and this was the first time he had tuned a car on this fuel. At least we now have a good base for the future.

Thank you to Glenn who manages to take all the stress away from me to ensure that I can just focus on my driving. Doing the logistics for an International Rally takes a lot more time and attention to detail but like always he did a great job in and out of the car.

Thank you to my sponsors - 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.

Thank you also to John Coker and David Thomson for our press releases and to Geoff Ridder for the great pics here and on my website.

There was excellent TV coverage of the rally over the weekend on Sky but like me you might have missed it! Coverage of the NZ Championship component of the Rally will be on Sunday 23rd & 30th May at 4.30pm on TV3.

If you have a look on my website there are some links to the blog I am writing on the NZ Herald website, and also some photos from the weekend.

Rally of Whangarei is our next rally on the 3-4 July. I am hoping to do another event between now and then, but I will keep you posted!

Emma



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