

A.T.S. Coracle Stages – 30th June 2002

Rally Report

After setting fastest, or equal fastest time on seven of the eight special stages, Graham Middleton / John Morgan took a comfortable victory on Carmarthen and Epynt Motor Club's Sweet Lamb Stages Rally in their Toyota Corolla WRC. Surprise of the rally was John Morgan, who on only his second loose surface rally, proved to be Middleton's nearest challenger, as he and Carl Williamson took the runners up spot in their new Mitsubishi Lancer Evo 6. Rounding off the podium finishers were the fancied Martin Healer / Peter Thomas, who after a tardy start pulled back to third at the finish in their Ford Escort Cosworth.

The route consisted of two stages, each run twice, and then two runs over each in the reverse direction in the afternoon, all at the Sweet Lamb Complex in Mid Wales. 68 competitors started the event, which was a round of the Sweet Lamb Welsh Clubmans, RED A.N.W.C.C., and Dunlop A.S.W.M.C. Loose Surface Championships.

It was Middleton who got off to the best start, setting fastest time by two seconds on SS1, though just starting the vent had been a relief, after last minute problems had seen the Toyota' engine require a rebuild the evening before the event. Despite stalling at the hairpin in the bowl, Healer set second fastest time, with Morgan third quickest in the Group N Mitsubishi. First retirement of the day was Gareth Jones, whose hired Micra snapped a driveshaft in the bowl, though once repaired, he completed the Trophy stages later in the day.

John Morgan totally belied his lack of forestry experience, as he set fastest time on stage two, the Lancer a second up on Middleton's Corolla, and six faster than Healer's Escort Cosworth. Fourth fastest Mick Gilman / Nigel Bayley drowned out briefly in the ford in their Escort Cosworth, whilst Chris Earles / Iain Scott were fifth fastest in their similar car ahead of John Leckie / Graham Lewis in a Subaru Impreza.

Stage three saw Middleton back at the top of the fastest times, as he proceeded to set a time five seconds quicker than Morgan, with James Vincent / James How taking third fastest in their Subaru Impreza. Gilman moved ahead of Healer for third position after the latter driver stalled at the bowl hairpin once again, and Leckie fell from fifth place after suffering a puncture.

Morgan may have bettered his stage two time by a second when it was run again as stage four, but on this occasion he was no match for Middleton, who was faster by six seconds, to hold a 17 second advantage at the half way mark. Second fastest time on the stage was good enough for Healer to move into fourth position, and was now just six seconds behind Gilman. The remainder of the top ten, which was led by Vincent was separated by just over half a minute. Young Finnish driver Jari-Matti Latvala, partnered by Steve Harris, was holding an impressive tenth position in his Group N Renault Clio, having survived an exciting moment passing a slower car on SS1.

With the stages reversed for the afternoon runs, both Middleton and Morgan set off at a fair pace, the pair sharing fastest time on the fifth test, seven seconds ahead of

Healer, who was now equal with Gilman. Simon Redhead / Alan Thomas set fifth quickest time in their Group N Subaru to move ahead of Earles for fifth place, whilst fellow Impreza crew Vincent / How retired with a broken driveshaft.

Three seconds separated Middleton and Morgan on stage 6, allowing the Toyota driver to open up a 20 second lead, whilst third fastest time allowed Healer into third position. Despite dropping back to fourth, Gilman was nine seconds quicker than fifth placed Redhead, as Richard Fishleigh / Tim Edwards were sixth quickest in their Subaru Legacy.

There was only a second between fastest man Middleton, and second quickest Morgan over stage seven, which meant that, barring a disaster, the Toyota driver was looking good for his first ATS Coracle stages win. Similarly, Morgan was safe in the runners up position, as he took seven seconds out of Healer / Thomas, who increased the margin to fourth placed Gilman by a further five seconds. Earles moved into fifth, and Fishleigh to sixth after Redhead's run was brought to a premature end with turbo failure.

With the leading positions settled, there was no need for heroics on the last stage of the day, but Middleton was taking no chances, as he increased his overall advantage by a further 12 seconds over Morgan to seal his win in style. By now, Healer and Gilman were secure in third and fourth positions respectively, whilst Earles finished a fine fifth on his debut outing in his similar Escort Cosworth.

Sixth placed Fishleigh was comfortably ahead of the Mitsubishi Lancer Evo 7 of Andrew and Gary Kenny, whilst Bob Morgan / Dave Saunders admitted to being a bit rusty, but still finished in eighth position in a Ford Escort Cosworth..

Rounding off the top ten were the leading two litre and two wheel drive crews. At the finish, Jari-Matti Latvala / Steve Harris were eventually victorious and took ninth in their Clio after an excellent run on only the drivers third event, their only problems being caused by catching slower cars. Dave Brick / Dave Fowler were just three seconds behind at the finish, a big push on the final test seeing their Escort slide wide, losing time in the process. Irish crew Brian Dunlop / Sammy Hamilton had been quick early on before retiring their Ford Escort RS.

Leading 1600cc crew, Ieuan Rowlands / Keith Davies, overcame a late misfire to win the category and finish 11th overall in their Toyota engined Escort, ahead of the Peugeot 106 Gti of Dorian Rees / Gareth Hall. Sebastian Ling took a fine third in class and 16th overall, no doubt helped by the experienced Phil Clarke in the left hand seat of his Vauxhall Nova.

In the 1400cc class, Howard Allan / Nick Thornton were clear winners in their Ford Escort, finishing ahead of the Skodas of Mark Cowell / Graeme Field and Mark Fear / Kevin Willis. Winners of the over two litre class were Martin Kenny / Dave Stocking, whose Escort finished ahead of the similar car of Irish visitors John Reid / Brian Greene and Chris Gittins / Stuart Humphreys.

Simon Gronow