

My Experience with the Ford World Rally Championship

By Chris Milne

Members of this Club have had many and varied experiences through their lives. This is one of mine.

In the early 1990's I was contacted by a patient of mine who had been asked to arrange local logistic support for the Ford World Rally Championship Team. Since I was his GP and we had an interest in Sports Medicine and fast cars he approached me.

What a blast it was. At that stage Ford were one of the four manufacturer's teams which contested the World Rally Championship. The others were Toyota, Subaru and Mitsubishi. Ford had bought Jaguar in 1989, in an effort to acquire a prestige marque in Europe, so there was a linkage there.

There are huge logistical challenges with running a World Rally Championship Team. Each manufacturer's team consists of about 50 people. There are the two drivers and the two co-drivers, plus about six management and PR staff. The remainder of the team are mechanics. However, they are not just ordinary mechanics, but trained to perform major interventions in a very tight timeframe. Change your gear box? That will take about 15 minutes sir.

In my first stint with the team in 1993, I was driven around by John Wheeler who had been the chief designer of the Escort Cosworth. It is best remembered for its giant whale tale spoiler and was a truly awesome machine. John recalled that he had previously spent nine years working for Porsche and really only understood what he learned during that time when he had to apply that knowledge at Ford's design and testing HQ at Boreham Airfield.

I was not surprised to find that all members of the team took performance driving pretty seriously. This was made particularly evident during a trip back through the Waioeka Gorge between Gisborne and Opotiki. We were shadowing a Toyota Camry 3-Litre Sudan and John was driving us in a Falcon station wagon. Even with the relatively unsophisticated live rear axle of the Falcon, not to mention the weighty rear end, he was able to keep up with the spirited drive of the Camry ahead of us. I had never been driven so fast or confidently before in my life.

In my second year with the team in 1994 their previous number one driver, Francois Delacour, had been injured in a car crash. He was replaced at short notice by the legendary Ari Vatanen. I first met him at the test road near Kawhia. He had flown from Finland via Korea and had only arrived in Auckland that morning.

At the end of six hours of intensive testing, he was still his genial self and they offered rides to any team members who were interested. So I got a five-minute ride on a twisting metal road with one of the rallying legends.



Francois Delacour



Francois Delacour's Ford Escort

Having seen athletes in many codes showcase amazing levels of skill, I was still blown away by his ability to keep a one-ton lump of metal going forward and sideways in such a controlled manner.

In the rally itself, Ari had a slight contact with a bank on the long Motu stage, and lost power steering. He needed plenty of energy to get through that stage, and the next one before the service point in Gisborne.

However, on the following three special stages, he set the fastest time on each of them. He was well placed on the final day when he had a major crash on a special stage near Helensville, and that led to his withdrawal from the event. At the post event drinks, he was typically self-

deprecating- 'Silly mistake Chris' as I recall. A wonderful personality who endeared himself to New Zealanders with his hard driving style that nearly won him the NZ rally in 1977. He subsequently became a Member of the European Parliament from 1999-2009.

What about the medicine? Most of the issues I dealt with were coughs and colds in various team members. The most painful issue I had to deal with involved a mechanic. He has been working on a car and a drop of hot oil went into his ear canal. Ouch! Fortunately, he did not sustain a ruptured ear drum.

The conversation amongst the team members was a joy to behold. Being mostly boys from Essex, the banter was of a very high standard and kept morale high during challenging times. As a Kiwi, I was able to connect with both the management and the mechanics on a pretty equal footing. Class divisions from the "old country" were still evident as the management and mechanics ate at separate tables.

Overall, this was an amazing experience and one that I will treasure for the rest of my days.



Ari Vatanan

Chris