As the Dunlop National Rally Championship reaches its mid-point here in Kilkenny with the Raven’s Rock Rally, series leader, Tim McNulty and co-driver, Paul Kiely, are chasing their fifth successive victory in the series that will be decided on the best seven scores from the ten counting rounds. At present, McNulty is 28 points ahead of Robert Barrable with Liam McCarthy a further four points behind in third place. Series regulars, Niall Maguire and Kevin Barrett along with Colm Murphy, who missed the last round in Cavan, will endeavour to give McNulty a tough battle around the roads of County Kilkenny.

Aside from the race for the Vard Memorial Trophy, the series will also determine the Motorsport Safety Team Group N and the rally.ie two-wheel drive awards. Here is how the previous four rounds have unfolded:

ROUND 1: McNULTY IS KING OF THE MANOR

LEADING from the start, Tim McNulty (Subaru WRC) and his Sligo co-driver, Paul Kiely, won the Manor Hotel Abbeyleix Rally, the first round of the Dunlop National Rally Championship. They finished 59 seconds ahead of reigning Dunlop champions, Mel Evans/Patrick Walsh, also in Subaru WRC. Colm Murphy/Don Montgomery in a Group N Subaru were third. The Group N category, sponsored by Motorsport Safety Team, was won by Monaghan’s, Sam Moffett/James Reilly (Mitsubishi) and victory in the rally.ie two wheel drive category was annexed by Tommy Doyle/Liam Moynihan (Renault Clio R3).

McNulty was impressive on the opening stage and took a decisive 26 second lead over the Subaru WRC of Kevin Barrett with reigning Dunlop champion, Mel Evans, a second further behind in third. Colm Murphy (Subaru) set a cracking pace in the Group N category that was strong enough to elevate him to fourth overall in a top six that also featured the Subaru pair of Niall Maguire and James Belton. Meanwhile, Wexford’s. James Stafford (Darrian) led the two wheel drive category and was seventh in general classification. The remaining places in the top ten were taken by Steve Simpson (Subaru), Derek McGarrity (Mitsubishi) and late entry, Sam Moffett (Mitsubishi).

Barrett retired on the second stage with gearbox troubles. In overall terms, McNulty led Evans by 32 seconds with Colm Murphy a further 15 seconds behind in third. Moffett moved into fourth followed by Stafford and Simpson. Kevin Kelleher (Mitsubishi) retired with engine difficulties. On the completion of the final stage of the opening loop, Evans set the pace to move into second trailing McNulty by 28 seconds with Murphy continuing in third - 42 seconds further adrift.

Stafford was fourth with Simpson fifth and Niall Maguire occupied sixth position. At the service halt, the top ten was completed by Moffett, Liam McCarthy, McGarrity and Thomas Fitzmaurice. Out on
the second loop, McNulty stretched his advantage and even though the Meath ace and second placed Evans both beat the bogey time on the sixth stage, McNulty led by 41 seconds at the final service halt in Rathdowney. Neither driver reported any problems although Evans admitted he had little chance of catching his rival. Colm Murphy continued to set very quick times as he retained third and moved some 25 seconds ahead of Maguire. Simpson - on his second ever Irish rally - held fifth from Moffett with an untroubled Liam McCarthy (Toyota Corolla WRC) in seventh position. Wesley Patterson (Escort), who led the two wheel drive drive after Stafford crashed out on S.S. 4 was ninth and Shane Maguire (Subaru), completed the top ten. Moffett (Mitsubishi) was on the wrong tyres for the loop and lost time, particularly on S.S. 5; fellow Group N ace, Thomas Fitzmaurice (Mitsubishi) was concerned by a drop in fuel pressure through stages five and six. James Belton (Subaru WRC) retired with electrical issues.

Meanwhile, a puncture on S.S. 4 that cost substantial time, dropped Derek McGarrity to 18th in general classification. Declan Boyle (Ford Escort) also punctured on the same stage while Aidan Bourke (Mitsubishi) was building up his confidence after losing some 13 minutes on the third stage with a broken rear differential.

On the remaining loop of three stages around Rathdowney, McNulty continued to dominate and emerged victorious by 59 seconds. Evans was content to have finished second and admitted McNulty’s opening stage performance was the decisive factor. Colm Murphy (Subaru) took a fine third.

Just as he appeared to have secured fourth, former triple national champion, Niall Maguire (Subaru WRC) lost time with turbo troubles and eventually finished eighteenth, one place behind Derek McGarrity (Mitsubishi). Manchester driver, Steve Simpson (Subaru WRC) was fourth followed by Monaghan’s, Sam Moffett (Mitsubishi), who won the Group N category, on the middle loop of stages, he admitted he had selected the wrong tyres. Liam McCarthy (Toyota Corolla WRC) and Wesley Patterson (Ford Escort) were next in general classification. Ninth placed, Shane Maguire (Subaru) was the recipient of the Dunlop "Driver of the Day" award and Ian Barrett (Subaru) on his first rally in some three years, completed the top ten.

**ROUND 2: McNULTY MASTERS MONAGHAN**

Tim McNulty and co-driver, Paul Kiely, in their Subaru WRC, maintained their one hundred per cent record in the Dunlop National Rally Championship with victory in the Hillgrove Hotel Monaghan Rally, the second round of the series.

They finished 43 seconds ahead of locals, Niall Maguire/Enda Sherry (Subaru WRC) with the Dublin/Monaghan combination of Robert Barrable/Damien Connolly (Skoda Fabia S2000) a further 25 seconds behind in third.

The two wheel drive category was won by Monaghan’s, Daniel McKenna/Andrew Grennan (Ford Escort) while another local pairing, Sam Moffett/James O'Reilly (Mitsubishi) won the Group N category. McNulty set the pace on the first stage, Mullynahinch, as he led local hero, Maguire by 14 seconds with Daragh O'Riordan (Subaru WRC) two seconds further behind in third. Daniel McKenna (Ford Escort) was an impressive fourth – three seconds behind O'Riordan. By the completion of the opening loop, McNulty had moved 26 seconds clear of Maguire and admitted to slackening his pace as the tyre compound that he selected was too soft for the conditions. Maguire in second was only two seconds ahead of the Skoda Fabia S2000 Robert Barrable that had a slight misfire in fifth gear.

McKenna in fourth also suffered tyre troubles, like McNulty, the compound he selected was also too soft, in addition, the link box had come adrift on the opening
stage. After a bright opening stage, O’Riordan was a little miffed at his own performance as he slipped to fifth. The Subaru WRC of Monaghan’s, Adrian McElvaney failed to select third and fourth gears and an oil leak on the second stage didn’t help his cause as he held equal sixth with Kevin Barrett (Subaru), who spun on the opening test and also had engine concerns. The top ten was completed by Trevor Mulligan (Escort), Sam Moffett (Mitsubishi) and Wesley Patterson (Escort). Meanwhile, Manus Kelly (Ford Escort) and Liam McCarthy (Toyota Corolla WRC) were just outside the top ten, the former lost a few seconds with a puncture and the latter spun. The loop accounted for a number of retirements, on the second stage, Colm Murphy retired when the selector pin of his Subaru broke, Gary McPhillips also bowed out - his Escort succumbed to engine troubles while Declan Boyle crashed his Escort.

On the repeat of the three stages, McNulty extended his lead to 42 seconds with Maguire maintaining second, the Monaghan ace set fastest time on the fifth stage. Barrable, having sorted the misfire, could do little to improve his third place as he lost out to the more powerful Subaru WRC’s on the long straights. O’Riordan was fourth with McKenna fifth and leading the two wheel drive category.

McElvaney, who continued to struggle with transmission woes, held sixth spot ahead of Barrett, who admitted he couldn’t go any quicker. Sam Moffett (Mitsubishi) was trouble free in eighth spot in a top ten rounded off by Manus Kelly (Ford Escort) and Liam McCarthy (Toyota Corolla WRC). Trevor Mulligan (Escort) lost over four minutes on S.S. 6 and slipped from eighth to 31st. place, he eventually finished 18th. Elsewhere, Brendan Cumiskey’s Mitsubishi was down on power, Trevor Bustard lost time with an excursion as mud filled the rim of his Mitsubishi and caused a severe vibration. Shane Maguire reported that the centre differential of his Subaru wasn’t working from the very start. Pat Kirk (Mitsubishi), who had no brakes over the opening three stages, lost more time on the second loop with differential woes.

McNulty went on to claim his second victory of the current Dunlop campaign with Maguire and Barrable completing the podium places. The misfire in Barrable’s Skoda returned over the final loop of three stages, however, it was more of an annoyance rather than a hindrance, the Billy Coleman award winner did manage to set fastest time on the penultimate stage. O’Riordan finished fourth.

McKenna won the Modified category with a fine performance once he sorted the problems of the opening loop. Fellow Monaghan driver, Adrian McElvaney (Subaru) was sixth from Kevin Barrett (Subaru WRC) and Group N winner, Sam Moffett (Mitsubishi). The final places in the top ten went to Liam McCarthy (Toyota corolla WRC) and Shane Maguire (Subaru). Manus Kelly retired on S.S. 7 when he went off near the finish.

The Dunlop “Driver of the Day” award was won by Cookstown’s, Samantha Thom (Citroen C2R2).

ROUND 3: McNULTY WINS CARLOW RALLY

The Mount Wolseley Country Resort Carlow Rally, the third round of the Dunlop National Rally Championship was won by Tim McNulty/Paul Kiely (Subaru WRC), who finished 25 seconds ahead of the Skoda Fabia S2000 of Robert Barrable/Damien Connolly. Daniel McKenna/Andrew Grennan (Ford Escort) were third – 40 seconds further behind. McKenna was quickest on the opening test, Tomduff, where he was two seconds in front of his fellow countyman and former triple national champion, Niall Maguire (Subaru WRC) with Robert Barrable (Skoda Fabia S2000) a further four
seconds behind in third. The Mk. 2 Escort of Gary McPhillips occupied fourth with the Subaru WRC’s of Tim McNulty and Stephen Murphy completing the top six. McNulty lost time with the suspension set-up. Meanwhile, Kevin Barrett (Subaru WRC) dropped time with a brief excursion to the scenery while Colm Murphy was caught out at the same location, his time loss was considerable as all four corners of his Subaru showed signs of contact with an unforgiving fence, a bent wishbone made his Group N Subaru difficult to drive through the rest of the loop. Sam Moffett retired his Mitsubishi with differential failure just a few kilometres from the stage finish. Trevor Mulligan made an early exit – crashing his Escort between the first and second junctions of the first stage.

Having made some adjustments to the suspension system, McNulty set the best times on the second and third stages of the loop and arrived at the Tullow service halt with an eight second advantage. Three drivers tied for second spot, Niall Maguire, Daniel McKenna and Robert Barrable lined up behind McNulty. McKenna recounted a spin on the second test that cost him at least six seconds, he also expressed concern about the brake bias through the third stage. Maguire was untroubled while Barrable clipped a bale on the second stage and then overshot a junction on the third test. McPhillips was fifth with local ace and former back to back national champion, Stephen Murphy (Subaru WRC) sixth in general classification. The Carlow ace opined, “I’m braking far too early for corners, but I’m gradually increasing my pace, it’s been four years since my last outing.” Simon Mauger, who was seeking a hat-trick of wins in the Mk. 2 Challenge retired at the start of S.S. 3, Ballintemple, when his car failed to start, on the opening test, he clipped a wheel rim, his time for the stage was 22 seconds off the pace set by McKenna, who was six seconds faster than the British ace on the second stage.

Through the second loop, McNulty increased his pace and even though McKenna matched him through S.S. 5, McNulty arrived at the penultimate service with a twenty second lead over Robert Barrable (Skoda), both enjoying untroubled runs. Niall Maguire was third five seconds further behind despite a spin on the sixth stage, McKenna was only a second behind. The top six also featured the Escort of Gary McPhillips and Stephen Murphy (Subaru WRC), who took a minute and one second off his previous run through the loop. McPhillips stated that his tyres were not working well as his car was filling the road. The top ten also included Kevin Barrett, his opening stage excursion had knocked his confidence, it was a similar situation for Colm Murphy, who occupied equal eighth place with the Toyota Corolla of Liam McCarthy. The Darrian of Washington James was tenth. Elsewhere, late entry, Sean Flanagan retired his Subaru after a visit to the Carlow scenery went awry and knocked a wheel off.

On the final loop, Maguire bowed out on junction four of S.S. 7 when his Subaru WRC failed to select gears. McNulty, who changed the power steering pump at each of the three service halts, took victory to maintain his one hundred per cent record in the Dunlop campaign. Barrable, in second, moves into second place in the series. McKenna took the final spot on the podium.

Meanwhile, Stephen Murphy (Subaru WRC) came home in fourth place with Gary McPhillips (Escort), Kevin Barrett (Subaru WRC) and Liam McCarthy (Toyota Corolla WRC) completing the top seven. The Dunlop “Driver of the Day” award was won by Sam Smyth, he was eighth overall in a top ten rounded off by the similar Escorts of Adrian Hetherington and David Condell. Stephen Cullen (Subaru) won the Group N category from Colm Murphy, who lost fifth gear on the final stage. Meanwhile, the rally also incorporated the second round of the Dunlop Junior Rally Championship with Monaghan’s, John Doogan (Escort) taking a seven second victory over Meath’s, Chris Snow
(Honda Civic). Cork driver, Pat Barry (Honda Civic) was third – a minute and 35 seconds further behind.

**ROUND 4: McNULTY CONQUERS CAVAN**

Meath’s, Tim McNulty (Subaru WRC), co-driven by Paul Kiely, continued his dominance of the Dunlop National Rally Championship with victory in the Hotel Kilmore Cavan Rally, the fourth round of the series. They finished 24 seconds ahead of the Skoda Fabia S2000 of Robert Barrable/Damien Connolly with Niall Maguire/Enda Sherry (Subaru WRC) a further 25 seconds behind in third.

The Group N category was won by Sam Moffett/James O’Reilly (Mitsubishi) and the two-wheel drive award was won by Damien Gallagher/Mac Walsh (Ford Escort).

Late entry, Barrable set the pace on the first stage albeit a second ahead of Dunlop series leader, McNulty with Maguire next best – six seconds further behind. McNulty punched in the best time for the second and Barrable was quickest through the final stage of the loop. At the Cavan service halt, McNulty, who held a five second lead, commented, “Everything is fine, the stages are tough, I have decided to go for a harder compound tyre for the second loop.” Barrable was quite happy with his tyre choice and general performance. Maguire was a further 17 seconds behind in third and admitted there was little he could do about matching the pace of the top duo. Kevin Barrett (Subaru) was fourth as fifth placed Seamus Leonard (Subaru WRC) admitted he was a little rusty, he also stalled his car at the start line of the second stage. Liam McCarthy (Toyota Corolla WRC) was untroubled in sixth.

Meanwhile, Sam Moffett (Mitsubishi) had a number of niggling problems with the steering and anti-lag systems. Elsewhere, the top ten also featured Shane Maguire (Subaru) who was four seconds behind Moffett;

Washington James (Darrian), who led the two-wheel category – three seconds ahead of Damien Gallagher (Ford Escort).

Opening loop retirements included Manus Kelly, his Ford Escort stopped with alternator troubles, Declan Boyle (Ford Escort) while Adrian Hetherington put his Escort on its side on the opening stage.

McNulty stretched his lead through stages four and five but made a slight error on the sixth stage where Barrable reigned supreme. The net effect gave McNulty a nine second lead at the final service halt. Barrable reckoned his tyres were too hard for the fourth stage but were perfect for the remaining stages. Maguire continued to maintained third – some 15 seconds further adrift. Barrett was trouble free in fourth with Leonard fifth. Moffett had a strong run through the loop to move into sixth where he was followed by Liam McCarthy (Toyota Corolla WRC). There was a change in the two-wheel drive category, Washington James (Darrian) who had moved 13 seconds ahead of Damien Gallagher (Escort) after S.S. 4, lost time with a broken steering arm. By Stage 6, Gallagher, who was eighth overall, was 12 seconds ahead of the Escort of Michael Conlon. James had dropped to 21st. in general classification. Elsewhere, Trevor Bustard lost time when his Mitsubishi developed a misfire, he was eleventh overall followed by the Escorts of Sam Smyth and Frank Kelly. McNulty pushed hard through stages seven and eight and duly stretched his lead to 26 seconds and was able to slacken his pace on the final stage where Barrable was quickest. Third placed Maguire had a major moment near the finish of the final stage but he survived to take 16 Dunlop points. Barrett, who was fourth, reckoned his performance improved on the final loop. Leonard was fortunate to finish due to a gearbox problem while a change of tyres saw McCarthy regain sixth.

Moffett, who had a slight moment at a crossroads on the final stage, won Group N and Gallagher took the two-wheel drive award. The top ten was completed by Trevor Bustard (Mitsubishi) and Michael Conlon (Ford Escort). The Dunlop “Drive of the Day” award was won by Frank Kelly (Ford Escort).