

FEATURE

Photos: SMJ Photography, Luke Barry

WHEN A NOVICE CO-DRIVES ON ONE OF BRITIAN'S BIGGEST RALLIES

Luke Barry is more accustomed to writing about rally cars than competing in them, but that all changed on the Neil Howard Stages



Coffey and Barry were rewarded with a finish



Barry (l) attempted to read the pacenotes for Graham Coffey (r) in British Rally opener

“That’s quite cool,” quipped William Creighton as he cycled through one of Oulton Park’s garages, gesturing to the stickers ‘LBARRY’ stuck onto the side of Graham Coffey’s Ford Fiesta S2000 Turbo. I wasn’t going to disagree with him. After 23 years and 10 months on planet Earth – and over five years working in rallying in some form or another – my chance had come. I was competing on an event.

The Neil Howard Stages is a fading memory as a rally that happened two-and-a-half weeks ago, but the adrenaline is only just beginning to settle.

Working in motorsport enables you to do many cool things. Arguably it’s the best seat in the house as you get to mingle with the drivers and cars and get paid for that privilege. I’ve now had my way in, and my shot in the true best seat in the house. It didn’t disappoint.

Although I’ve now only ever sat in two rally cars before, it’s fair to say I haven’t been messing about. The first was on a test with five-time Scottish and 2011 British Rally champion David Bogie while at Oulton, I was strapped in alongside Coffey who, as a two-time winner of the Neil Howard, is rapid.

Clearly, I would be the weak link in this equation. But I was OK with that. I was just staggered to even have the opportunity.

Without wishing to make this an Oscars speech, my gratitude has to be expressed not only to Graham and the ATM Engineering team but also to Darren Spann and the Motorsport

News Circuit Rally Championship. I’ll forever be in their debt.

I had done my fair share of worrying up to the event. That ranged from little things, like making sure I could clip the tethers on my HANS device on and off my helmet without too much drama, to the much more important details like timing and map reading. Realistically though my job was, essentially, to not cock up. Call the splits right and we would be OK. To put it more succinctly, I was to be 84kg of ballast for Mr Coffey.

I’m not sure much will ever prepare you for your first-ever rally stage. I’m quite a deep thinker. I tend to overanalyse. Thankfully, as soon as the balaclava and helmet were on and the belts were fastened, I just got on with it. I just did what I had to do.

It did soon become clear to me however that I certainly don’t have the minerals to be a top-line co-driver (as if I didn’t know this already)! While I’m immensely proud I didn’t make a mess of any of the splits, this information was all I could really offer poor Graham. My information was restricted to the bare essentials. But the fear of feeling unwell as someone that’s prone to car sickness, making a botched job of whatever notes I could call and just generally my brain not keeping up with the pace had made my mind up pretty quickly. I wanted to walk before I could run.

Stage one was the first eye-opener of the weekend, and it was action-packed. Thankfully for us, it was mostly plain sailing but within the first few corners we had already passed a beached Elliot Payne, a stuck Kev Furber and then a spun-out Nigel Worswick who eventually brought out a red flag. We almost made it to the end but had to back off on the last couple of corners and were therefore handed a notional time.

The test had left its mark on me though. The launch of the Fiesta off the line was superb. It was already quick as the tyres bit into the asphalt, but once it really got going, it really got going. I got sudden tunnel vision as if we were moving at warp speed. And the braking, my word. It isn’t sane to be approaching bus stop

chicanes that quickly and leaving yourself such little distance to slow the car down in.

Stage two was a smoother affair as it was a repeat of one, except without the on-stage drama. Stage three was a new test of my character as there were more splits but we made it through in one piece. The next was a bit of a disaster as a stall at the first hairpin out of the pits restricted us to just the 67th best time overall, and there was a brief scare when Joshua Davey’s Darrian went up in flames in front of us. Thankfully he and co-driver Tamsyn Davey were unharmed.

Stage five was one of the first few occasions I really noticed where I was costing Graham some valuable seconds. On the gravel sections, when close to another car, the dust kicked up made it a challenge and my silence down the intercom didn’t exactly help matters – I didn’t know where I was either...

The next stage was probably the best of the rally. Things just seemed to click, although the baking Cheshire sunshine was not a welcome gift when competing in an enclosed box with your fireproofs on! There was some respite on the fast bits via the airbox, but overall this was a rally where better physical fitness would have stood me in better stead.

The fourth and final layout was best suited to our partnership. Me, the quite literal silent partner, wasn’t really needed as it was essentially just a few laps of Oulton Park. There were some moments though; a spin for Charlie Payne just in front of us and a close merge with the aforementioned Creighton another.

That merge with Creighton turned out to be vitally important as we beat him and Liam Regan by two seconds overall. They won’t hear the end of that from me. We’ll quietly ignore the fact the Junior WRC pairing were two driveshafts and several horsepower down though...

We won’t talk about my near error where I went to write our next control time down, started chatting to Graham on the intercom and then forgot it either. Deal? Thankfully it was nothing a conversation with



All mapped out for our man: Barry had a bunch of paperwork to sort through

Michael Wilkinson – co-driver to Stephen Petch who was two cars ahead of us – wouldn’t fix. My blunder aside it must be said how effortless and simple the contactless timecard system is though. Displaying your clock-in time and car number as you enter the stage and then displaying your finish time and next clock-in time as you exit was easy for a novice like me to grasp.

I’m not sure it’ll ever make sense to me that I’ve actually done a rally. I see pictures of car #27 from the event, and then I see my daft self sitting in there! It’s a memory I’ll treasure forever. The experience has given me a stunning level of respect for the pace the top rally drivers are on, but even more appreciation for the job of the co-driver.

Now, where do I sign to have a go at this driving malarkey...? ■

STAGE TIMES			
Coffey's Neil Howard Stages			
STAGE	TIME	STAGE POS	OVERALL POS
SS1	8m 28s*	19th	19th
SS2	8m 07s	27th	27th
SS3	5m 25s	30th	29th
SS4	5m 37s	69th	32nd
SS5	6m 40s	33rd	31st
SS6	6m 27s	28th	30th
SS7	5m 54s	41st	28th
SS8	5m 50s	35th	27th

\*notional time

OVERALL LEADERBOARD			
Our man's finishing record			
POS	DRIVER/CO-DRIVER	CAR	TIME
1	Sam Moffett/Keith Moriarty	Ford Fiesta Rally	249m32s
25=	Brendan Cumiskey/Ronan O'Kane	Volkswagen Polo GTI R5	+2m43s
25=	Damian Cole/Dale Bowen	Skoda Fabia R5	+2m43s
27	Graham Coffey/Luke Barry	Ford Fiesta S2000T	+2m56s
28	Barry Morris/Tom Hutchings/Darrian	T90 GTR+	+2m57s
29	William Creighton/Liam Regan	Ford Fiesta Rally4	+2m58s

"I got a bout of tunnel vision"

Luke Barry