

GILL HOLDS NERVE TO WIN TARGA ROTORUA FOR FIRST TIME

Targa event regulars Jason Gill and co-driver Mark Robinson (Mitsubishi Evo 9) were the toast of New Zealand's tarmac rally fraternity on Sunday (March 19) after their breakthrough win in this year's Targa Rotorua event. "We've definitely been second a few times," Aucklander Gill said as he was surrounded by fellow competitors and well-wishers at parc ferme on Rotorua's Village Green immediately after the event. The pair were second too - to fellow Aucklanders Leigh Hopper and Michael Goudie - after the first day of competition on Saturday.

But there was only 36 seconds in it and when defending event title holder and four-time Rotorua event winner Hopper crashed his newly-built Subaru WRX Impreza heavily just 4.7kms into the first stage of the day on Sunday morning the event was Gill's to win. "The pressure was definitely on but we did it and today the car didn't miss a beat," he said

After famously getting to within spitting distance of the Hawke's Bay finish line only to blow an engine in the 2013 Targa New Zealand event, Gill has earned a reputation as being quick but unlucky. So after last year's Targa New Zealand event he commissioned a major rebuild of his Mitsubishi Evo 9 for what was to be his 13th Targa event. It obviously paid off because bar a blown intercooler hose slowing it on Saturday the long-serving Mitsi was a picture of reliability.

Traditionally the two-day Targa Rotorua event has been held over Queen's Birthday weekend but the move to bring it forward - in search of longer daylight hours, warmer weather, and drier roads was welcomed by virtually everyone.

"We've had the odd person lament the fact that the rain stayed away this year," said event director Peter Martin, "but for everyone else, competitors, Tour participants and our volunteers the balmy weather this weekend has been a Godsend," he said.

The first day kicked off with seven stages - the first featuring fog just like a June event of old - south-west of Rotorua before heading to the South Waikato for the afternoon and a long transport stage at the end of the day to base camp at the Rotorua Novotel and the adjacent Village Green. Sunday's action remained in the eastern Bay of Plenty with four stages before a return to the ceremonial finish line at the Novotel.

With current Targa New Zealand champion Glen Inkster on commentary duties on Saturday, and five-time former Targa NZ event winner Tony Quinn and co-driver Naomi Tillett finally debuting Quinn's much anticipated Porsche GT3 RS the talk ahead of this year's event was that the rally-based four-cylinder Subaru WRXs and Mitsubishi Evos might finally have met their match.

Stage times across the two days put paid to that theory, however. Even in the warmer-than-usual weather and tinder-dry roads six of Saturday's stages and three of the four on Sunday were won by 4WDs. Gill and Hopper won three apiece on Saturday, Gill one and Chris West two of the four on Sunday,

The exceptions were the first run through the fast, open Rollett Rd stage north-west of Tokoroa on Saturday. This was won by the talented Mike Lea and co-driver Grant Handley in recently re-located former Rotorua but now Nelson man Lea's standard-looking but wickedly effective TTI sequential gearbox-equipped, Nissan SR20-engined BMW Compact.

The other stage won by a 2WD car was the fateful first one on Sunday, Manawahe/Braemar Rd, in this case won by Quinn and Tillett in the new Porsche.

That win proved Quinn was getting used to his new whip, though Dunedin pair Martin Dippie and Jona Grant in Dippie's virtually identical GT3 RS, were ultimately quicker over the two days.

Again, the stop watch told the story. They arrived back at Rotorua's Novotel after 295.5kms of closed special stages and 428.6km of touring stages in-between in second place and winners of the new GT2 class, two minutes behind Gill and Robinson but a minute ahead of Quinn and Tillett. "Yep, pleased to be home in one piece," Dippie said at the finish line. "it's been a fantastic event with some great stages. Very much fast and furious from beginning to end."

Though a new class structure promising more and fairer 'like-against-like' comparisons was introduced for this year's Rotorua event the top ten was still a glorious celebration of the variety that is the spice of Kiwi car life.

Fourth overall after a typically quick and understated performance was Perth-based expat Robert Darrington and co-driver David Abetz in Darrington's sleek black E36 BMW M3, fifth New Plymouth's Ross Graham (this time with Matthew Merwood reading the road book) in the booming V8-engined Holden Torana A9X replica Graham also circuit races with the Central Districts Muscle Cars.

Sixth was where it really got interesting though, the place going to the brothers Grooten, Tom and Ben, in the indecently quick Toyota Starlet Tom 'bought off Trade Me.' In former BMW E30 Scholarship winner Tom's hands the Starlet is a true 'giant killer' and begs the question what could the second-generation siblings (the pair are the sons of Dad's Pies Porsche man Eddie Grooten) do in a Mitsubishi Evo or Subaru WRX?

First home in the Metalman Classic 2WD class, meanwhile, were Mark Kirk-Burnnand and father Chris in their E30 model BMW M3. "Barry and the other K-Bs couldn't be here this weekend so we are just happy to be able to fly the flag," said Chris.

Competition in that class came from several quarters - including the always impressive Rex McDonald and co-driver David Dixon in McDonald's BMW 325i from Auckland and Nelson pair Bruce Farley and Glenn Warner in Farley's similar model.

Neither could match the Kirk-Burnnand's consistency though, McDonald rueing losing time early on in the event with a trip off the road, and Farley one of a number of competitors forced to battle a nasty stomach virus over the weekend.

Finally in only his second Targa event Auckland driver Joe Kouwenhoven with car preparation expert Carl Hannaford co-driving did well to finish 10th overall in his Nissan GTR 35. "To win my class (GT4) in only my second Targa...you can probably tell by the smile on my face. I'm absolutely fizzing," the West Aucklander said.

Best of the local Bay of Plenty drivers was Maurice Shapley and co-driver Kane Malasch (Holden Monaro) who finished 27th overall. And former Asia-Pacific Rally champion, WRC round winner and winner of the Paris-Dakar Rally, Kenjiro Shinozuka was, not surprisingly perhaps, first of the trio of Japanese entrants home in his 1976 Honda Civic.

Shinozuka was invited by the University in Japan that runs the rally car build-and-run programme for students to drive one of three cars entered in this year's event and rewarded them with 43rd position.

Targa New Zealand events are organised by the Ultimate Rally Group with the support of sponsors AndrewSimms.co.nz, Chicane Racewear, Ecolight, Global Security, Kids In Cars, Metalman.co.nz, NZ Classic Car magazine, Race Brakes, Racetech, TeamTalk, TrackIt and VTNZ.

For more information go to www.targa.co.nz.

CAPTIONS

Celebrating their breakthrough win in this year's Targa Rotorua tarmac motor rally event after the first day are Auckland pair Jason Gill and Mark Robinson (Mitsubishi Evo 9). Second overall were Dunedin pair Martin Dippie and Jona Grant in Dippie's Porsche GT3 RS. Fourth were Perth-based Kiwi expat Robert Darrington and co-driver David Abetz in a BMW M3. Former WRC and Dakar Rally ace Kenjiro Shinozuka was first of the visiting Japanese competitors home in his diminutive university student-built and maintained Honda Civic. Photo credit: Fast Company/ProShotz.

2017 Targa Rotorua

Overall results

1. Jason Gill/Mark Robinson (Mitsubishi Lancer EVO 9) 2:06:17.4
2. Martin Dippie/Jona Grant (Porsche 991 GT3 RS) 2:08:28.6 + 2:11.2
3. Tony Quinn/Naomi Tillett (Porsche GT3 RS) 2:09:38.6 +3:21.
4. Robert Darrington/David Abetz (BMW M3) 2:11:24.9 + 5:07.5
5. Ross Graham/Matthew Merwood (Holden Torana LX SS 2:12:54.0 +6:36.6
6. Tom & Ben Grooten (Toyota Starlet) 2:13:46.4 +7:29.0
7. Mark & Chris Kirk-Burnnand (BMW M3) 2:14:00.7 +7:43.3
8. David Rogers/Aidan Kelly (Mitsubishi Lancer EVO X RS) 2:14:55.7 +8:38.3
9. Matthew Wales/Mitchell Osborne (Mitsubishi Lancer EVO 9) 2:15:07.1 +8:49.7
10. Joe Kouwenhoven/Carl Hannaford (Nissan GTR R35) 2:16:54.8 +10:37.4

Prepared by FAST COMPANY on behalf of Targa NZ. To find out more about the various Targa events go to the Targa NZ website at www.targa.co.nz. To talk to Targa Event Director Peter Martin tel 0-9-298 8322 or 0274 525 643. To get in touch with event media man Ross MacKay from Fast Company tel 021 677 919 or e-mail on ross@fastcompany.co.nz

