

## ***The Decade of WA Rallying 2000-2009***

At the end of each decade we humans look back on the events that shaped our lives. This is an article covering the last 10 years of Rallying in Western Australia.

In 2000, we all celebrated the start of a new Millennium, Century and Decade all on the one night. The Y2K bug was a huge concern and we all wondered whether the world would come to an end when our VCR's TV's and computers running Windows 98 would not start on the 1/1/00. This was of less concern for Rally cars as many still ran on Twin Side Draft Webber carburettors and points in the distributors. The Clubman Cup had 4 rounds and the WARC had 5. The Respect Yourself Forest Rally as it was then known also moved from its Mundaring home down to Busselton and Nannup in the State's Southwest.

By 2001 Rallying in WA had moved along and continued in many of its favourite haunts. WA competitors Andrew Hannigan and Duncan Jordan made a giant slaying effort when they competed in the Australian Rally Championship and won Formula 2 outright against much more well backed competition in their Daihatsu Charade. Rob Herridge won the State Championship title in his Subaru Legacy, a feat he would repeat again in the next two seasons. The world also witnessed one of the greatest and most publicised criminal events in history when September 11th occurred in the US. This event would have far reaching implications and rallying even as far away as Western Australia, would be impacted. 2001 was the last year of the decade in which a true Rally Sprint was run in WA, "Climb Dance" at the Ferndale special stage.

After 9/11 as it became known, a wide change swept Australian Rallying in 2002. The biggest impact was the cost of rally licenses and permits to run events. Insurance costs had sky rocketed for CAMS and therefore members had to pay for it. Competitor and officials' licenses also changed and a new National Rally License structure was introduced. More rallies became combined State & Clubman events. The list now included The Lewana Stages and Safari Rallies with only the Experts Cup a stand-alone state round. The Clubman Cup still enjoyed stand-alone events in the form of the Darling 200 rally, based out of Jarrahdale and the Trial Event run around Mundaring as a training exercise for Rally Australia.

By 2003, 4WD Turbo had been well established for some time within the WARC. More competitors were running 4WD cars and the numbers of older, especially RWD cars were dropping. 2003 will be most infamously remembered for the Stirling Stages rally in September of that year. Well-liked navigator Paul "Bazz" Bazzica tragically lost his life in a freak accident on a special stage where 3 other competitors were also seriously injured. It was a sobering shock to the WA Rally fraternity, which is very much like a large family. It had been 10 years, since Roger Freeth had lost his life at Rally Australia when sitting alongside Possum Bourne on a special stage in

Mundaring. Possum also lost his life in road accident in April 2003 when completing recce for a gravel hill climb in New Zealand.

2004 saw a changing of the guard within WA Rallying. Younger competitors were now challenging for the title and that year, the farmer from Broome Hill, Craig Bignell would take the title with Joan "Granny" Percival alongside. The pair had an almost flawless year in their Lancer Evo 3. 2004 saw the introduction of Duetime.com.au. Duetime would become the benchmark for rally results, easily shaming ARC & WRC results services. RallyWA had also come of age and was beginning to produce documentary style DVD's (including interviews) of the years rallying as well as a well rounded web site.

2005 would see the rally fraternity (and general public) shocked again. This time the conflict was politically motivated, when the labor government announced that WA would no longer host Rally Australia after 2005. The reasons cited were tenuous at best and many failed to see the logic of abandoning what had been regarded as the World's best rally on the WRC circuit. The announcement at least spurred a few more WA competitors to enter Rally Australia, whilst it was still on their front door step. On the state championship side, round one fell by the wayside. The Lewana Stages rally was cancelled because the roads were impassable due to heavy rains early in the year. This left the WARC to be decided on four rounds, the first round then becoming the Forest Rally. Craig Bignell and Joan Percival took their second WARC crown, however drivers like Chris Anderson and Toby Heyring who had stepped up to 4WD were now also challenging for wins.

As 2006 dawned, a new force found their feet in the WARC. Alex Stone and Dianna Madlener (WRX) had showed plenty of pace in their Subaru over the last few years, however mechanical gremlins always intervened. In 2006, no such gremlins existed and the pair won every rally. 2006 also had a shortened season when organisational problems prevented the Stirling Stages rally (round 5) from running. It was also to be the last time that the state championship would visit the world famous jumps and water splash of the Bunnings/Sotico/Wespine tree plantation in Boddington. The plantation had been sold and save for the last Rally Australia, the new owners were determined not to let rallying continue, despite a long and happy relationship spanning more than 20 years. The Experts Cup rally in Collie changed to a fully pace noted event and also combined with the Clubman Cup. In September 2006, Australian racing legend Peter Brock, lost his life in an accident on a special stage of the WA tarmac rally, Targa West. Despite the announcement in 2005, the WA government could not off load Rally Australia to another state and had to run the 19th and final event in Perth in 2006. No amount of protesting or lobbying could turn the tides and a somewhat sombre atmosphere showed at the final Rally Australia after party.

A new rally entered the WARC in 2007, known as the Donnelly Rally. The event was based around the old logging town of Wheatley, better known as Donnelly Mill.

Donnelly became a direct replacement for the Stirling Stages and began as a fully pace noted event. The Safari rally found a new home in Mundaring, using some of the special stages vacated by Rally Australia and The Forest Rally added the Clubman Cup to it's established combination of ARC/WARC. As with 2006, Alex Stone and Dianna Madlener featured prominently in the championship in their newly built WRX. It was not all one sided though, when Leigh Hynes/Stuart Percival (WRX) won the inaugural Donnelly Rally it showed other competitors had the pace to match the leading pair.

2008 was a restless year within the WA Rally camp. Organisers, officials and competitors were all struggling on different fronts and occasionally the strain showed. A vicious circle had developed where less competitors and officials were attending rallies, causing an escalation in costs. The 2nd rally of the year (Lewana Stages) was cancelled within 3 weeks of its run date. A hastily assembled event known as the Blackwood Rally was put together and the 5 rounds of the WARC remained. The year was not all plain sailing on any front and by the end of it all, Leigh Hynes/Stuart Percival had emerged victors.

The Phoenix was born from the ashes in 2009 to some degree. A new and highly tenacious state rally panel put in place ambitious plans for the WARC. Despite a world economic crisis that had been unfolding for more than 12 months, most of the 2009 rallies actually had an increase of competitor numbers over previous years. Whilst some familiar names appeared on entry lists, new names and cars also appeared which was an encouraging sign. The WARC had a stable platform of rallies and new organisers also stepped up to run some events. The competition at all levels seemed to be hotly contested with both the WARC & Clubman Cup decided on their final rounds. There was also a renewed interest in 2WD cars, with classics such as Escorts and Datsuns having a resurgence. Within the WARC, an early 90's Mitsubishi Galant VR4 (Derek Reddie) and a 1970's Ford Escort (Blair Pugh) won or held podium positions on various rallies and no fewer than 5 crews could have taken the state title. In the end, 60 year old John Macara with Nic Box alongside won in their Lancer Evo 9, however the championship lead had been held by at least 2 other crews during the year. By 2009, the only stand-alone event left was the Darling 200, which was reserved for Clubman Cup competitors. The end of the decade also saw the withdrawal of Duetime results service from the WARC & Clubman Cup.

Rally people of notable mention during this decade:

- Craig Bignell, having moved up from Clubman Cup driver in a 1970's Corolla to State Champion in a Lancer Evo 3.
- Shane Eather started the decade in a Datsun 1600, moved onto a Subaru Legacy and then a WRX, finishing on the podium and leading rallies, before switching back to a Datsun for 2009.
- John Macara, winning his 5th State Championship title at age 60.
- Blair Pugh, for never giving up on 1970's Ford Escorts and proving that you can still finish on the podium 30 years after the cars were out of production.

- Geoff Leatt-Hayter for driving his 1970's Escort like Ari Vatanen, doing as much damage and still finishing events in the points.
- Lee McLroy, after so many years charging off the road, Lee drove maturely to his best ever results in the 2009 WARC.
- Robyn Feaver, for photographing nearly every moment of WA rallying during the decade.
- Lyndon Dodson, for founding the original Rallywa.com website and putting together videos and DVD's of WA rallying for most of the decade.
- The Skipworth and Percival families for tirelessly running or helping organise rallies.
- John Thorburn for his invaluable knowledge of just about any rally road, anywhere in WA.

With the start of a new decade before us, Rallying in Western Australia has much to look forward to.

Karl Drummond