

# Circuit of Ireland International Rally

## Golden Jubilee of Eire's most celebrated motorsport event

By John Mulhere

A narrow ribbon of blacktop wends and weaves through a sea of green rolling hills, disappearing occasionally, then returning to view as it travels over or around the landscape. On either side of the tarmac strip, gray stone walls a yard high and half as deep protect livestock which imperviously graze on the green surface. The bucolic setting is typical of most of Ireland most of the time.

But this isn't most of the time, and the three or four thousand Irish men and women who line the street, many just a foot or two from where its surface abruptly turns to the dominant green, contradict the otherwise pastoral setting. The crowd is growing restless as it awaits the appearance of the first of more than 100 rally cars which will traverse this special stage of the Circuit of Ireland International Rally, an event which has become as much a fixture in Eire as the Easter weekend on which it is held.

The Circuit of Ireland International Rally, which this year celebrated its golden jubilee, is an especially noteworthy event in that it not only offers exposure to some of the finest rally roads and rally drivers in the world, but also affords some of the most beautiful scenery and exuberant social gatherings known to man.

The Circuit itself was first held back in 1931, making it one of the oldest rallies in Europe. In those days, it consisted mainly of a touring event and was the only major annual rally other than the Monte Carlo. In the 50 years since its start, the rally has been canceled only three times: In 1948, when gasoline rationing throughout Europe forced its suspension; in 1957, when the Suez Canal crisis interrupted normal events in Europe, and in 1972, when the civil strife in Northern Ireland brought the rally to a halt.

Because the Circuit of Ireland is traditionally held over the Easter weekend, it conflicts with another great international event, the Safari Rally. For this reason alone, the Circuit of Ireland probably has never achieved the type of international status it would seem to deserve. The Circuit of Ireland is, by consensus, the toughest rally held in the British Isles. It has more stage miles, is longer and more demanding

than any other rally held in Ireland, Scotland, Wales or England.

Markku Alen, the Finnish driver who led Fiat to the World Rally Championship last year and who has previously run the Circuit of Ireland, described the event as "the toughest rally I have ever done." He later added, "This event should not be in the European Rally Championship, it should be in the World Championship."

But the Circuit of Ireland isn't run solely for the points available for the European Rally Championship, since it also counts toward the Rothmans RAC Open Rally Championship and the Irish Tarmac Championship. Nor are the rally cars the Circuit's only attraction. Because it actually is comprised of several mini circuits, such as the Circuit of Ulster, the Circuit of Donegal, the Circuit of Galway, the Ring of Kerry, et al., the event traverses the length and breadth of Ireland to a large degree.

**The Circuit of Ireland Rally not only offers exposure to some of the finest rally roads and rally drivers in the world, but also some incredible scenery.**

For instance, the 1981 Circuit of Ireland skipped the Dublin stages that are normally included, but still encompassed 550 stage miles and 950 road miles—that on an island which is only about 240 miles long by 170 miles wide at its greatest points. That means in the span of just five days (the Circuit normally runs from Good Friday through Easter Tuesday), anyone who is following the rally is sure to see a lot of Ireland and interact with a lot of Irish people.

Irish people won't be the only ones you find competing in or spectating at the Circuit, however. Many British competitors and spectators flock across the Irish Sea from England and Scotland for the event, as do some continental Europeans and North Americans. This year, the event had only one competitor from North America, Canadian John Nixon, who campaigned an Alfa Romeo Alfetta without much success (seems the car literally fell apart from the pounding it received on the tough Irish tarmac).

Belfast is the rally's starting point.

Belfast has been a much-maligned city over the past decade, due mainly to the scars still being inflicted by the sporadic sectarian violence that breaks out there and captures worldwide attention.

The city nestles around Belfast Lough, a huge briny waterway which gives way to the Irish Sea. Where Belfast was once a mighty world capital of shipbuilding, the port where the infamous Titanic and many of the world's luxury liners were built, the huge dry-dock cranes now stand idle most of the time. Most of Belfast's main industry has been snatched by the current recession and by the Japanese, as has most of the U.S. shipbuilding work. The widespread unemployment helps to foster the continuing civil unrest in Belfast, according to many.

Signs of the "troubles" are quite visible in the city. Graffiti, seemingly on almost every wall, proclaims "Smash H-block" or "Brits out." British troops are seen regularly patrolling the streets.

But after spending a few days in the city, one wonders if, like New York today, or Detroit after the riots, Belfast isn't at least the partial victim of an undeserved reputation. It's not an unpleasant or unattractive city, especially for such an industrialized one.

During rally week, at least, Belfast's attention seems focused on more pleasant pastimes. There's no talk of politics, partisan feelings giving way to a common interest: The Circuit of Ireland Rally.

Headquarters for the Circuit is located near city center, in the Belfast Europa Hotel. Here, rally drivers, their crews, spectators, members of the press and assorted hangers-on assemble and congregate to discuss the cars, the prospects for their favorite entry and who's likely to win the Circuit. This means a trip to one of the local pubs, either within the hotel or to Robinson's or the Crown Victoria across the street.

The Circuit, like most rallies, has been dominated by certain marques of cars during different periods. From 1963 to 1967, for instance, the rally was

won by drivers piloting the Cooper Mini S, twice by the legendary Paddy Hopkirk, who captured the Circuit trophy on five separate occasions. Between 1968 and 1978, different versions of the European Ford Escort garnered no less than eight circuits—including three straight by Roger Clark, the only man to take the Circuit three times in a row.

In 1979 and '80, high-output versions of the Vauxhall Chevette won the event. And so the 50th anniversary of the event inspires conjecture before the race as to whether the Vauxhall Chevette can once again dominate the Circuit. The leading candidate to give Vauxhall its third straight trophy: Englishman Tony Pond.

But others figure prominently in the conversation also. There's Jimmy McRae, the Scotsman who won the event in 1980, this year switching from a Chevette to an Opel Ascona 400; the Team Rothmans entries in Ford Escort RSs, Finn Pentti Airikkala, who figures to take a shot at the European Rally Championship this year, and Englishman Malcolm Wilson; two-time Circuit winner Russell Brookes from England, driving a Talbot Sunbeam; Sweden's Per Eklund in the Team Toyota of Great Britain Celica, and, as always, a host of Irishmen, from both the north and the south, who are ready to take the pace should the favorites falter. Among these are Cork's Ger Buckley in a Vauxhall Chevette, Dublin's Brendan Fagan driving a Chevette and Belfast's John Lyons in a Ford Escort.

The rally cars used in the Circuit are geared for speed and durability. Although the entire rally is run on tarmac roads, closed to the public through special legal dispensations, their tight, twisty nature and loose marble-like sections mean that stamina is just as important as speed in the rally machines. The suspension is set up accordingly, with all points double welded and boxed. Skid plates are a must for the serious competitors, as there is a lot of bottoming out, mostly due to the high number of "yumps" throughout the Circuit's special stages. Not every entry takes the event quite so seriously, however, as evidenced by a certain number of oddball cars that enter every year. This year the main object of bemusement was a Daihatsu Charade—not the sort of machine you ordinarily



Sights of the Circuit: Balbriggan Castle (left); Airikkala taking a yump in Ulster (above); Jim McDonald's Escort on the Ring of Kerry (top right); South African Sarel Van De Merwe (bottom right); Swede Per Eklund's Celica (right on opposite page); and Belfast City Hall (far right, opposite page).





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The airborne Vauxhall Chevette 2300 HSR of Dessie and Ronnie McCartney didn't make it to the 50th Circuit. Ronnie won the event in 1964.

## Circuit of Ireland

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seeds. By the time the tail end of the 133 competitors takes on the section, the spectators that are left have decided that discretion is the better part of rally-watching.

The trend among spectators is to watch the first 20 or 30 cars through a section of road, then race like hell to get into their cars and hot-foot it to a stage further down the line. This makes for an instant traffic jam, and once it clears there's as much rallying going on with the spectators as with the competitors.

The spectators' cars even look like Group One rally rigs, with Cibie or Hella rally lights plastered all over the grilles and more bodyside decals than the works cars, all proclaiming affiliation to some local auto club, race/rally shop or product. These old rear-drive Ford Escorts, new front-drive Escort XR3s and Golf GTis scream down one-lane roads at 80 MPH, obscuring the countryside with a cover of dust and occasionally losing a negotiation with a bovine chicane (stationary cow in the middle of the road).

On the second day of the Circuit, the route shifts south of the border into the Republic, with the first special stage starting at 4 a.m. The secret the second day is to catch a few early stages and then head for Killarney, some 280 miles from Belfast, at the extreme opposite end of the island. The trek looks easier on the map than it is in reality. First off, driving right-hand drive cars on the left-hand side of the road can present a bit of a challenge for Americans. It's not that remembering to stay on the wrong side of the road is difficult, it's just that judging how much room you have on the left side can be troublesome when you're going 85 MPH and there's a car coming toward you at 90 MPH on a one-and-one-half lane road. This makes for some impromptu "offroad excursions"—slightly tricky since there's usually either a stone wall or a grass dike abutting the foot-wide shoulder.

There's a 55-MPH speed limit on Irish highways and, to their tribute, about 25 percent of the Irish drivers actually manage to adhere to it. The other 75 percent tend to believe the limit is only a guideline, the moving violators opting for speeds closer to 90 MPH and such refined maneuvers as passing on blind curves, driving in the center of the road and applying full brake when coming upon a "mobile chicane," inevitably some free soul who likes to drive at 35 MPH instead of 95.

Killarney at Easter time, Circuit time, is the Irish equivalent of the Long Beach Grand Prix, spring break at Daytona Beach, and the St. Patrick's Day Parade all rolled into one. Thirty miles outside the city traffic begins choking off the highways. Hundreds of outstretched thumbs extend from backpacks headed for the city. Overnight, the village of Killarney turns from a peaceful tourist haven to a screaming celebration. The population spirals from 15,000 to over 50,000, and every avail-



Scot Jimmy McRae took his second straight Circuit, this year in an Opel Ascona 400.

able bed, parking space and restaurant table have been laid claim to. Tent cities spring up on the apron of town, and the village park becomes a menagerie of bodys, some twisted together in uncharacteristically Irish public displays of affection.

They come from all over, from Belfast where they began following the rally, from Cork, Ireland's automotive manufacturing center, and from cosmopolitan Dublin, where the fashionable trend for Easter holiday is to head west to Killarney for the Circuit.

By early evening, every pub, hotel lobby and street corner in the entire city of Killarney is packed with revelers. When the pubs close at about 2 a.m. (well past legal closing time) the crowds flow into the hotel bars. And when they close down, the painful but lucrative duty of filling the empty pint glasses falls on the stooped shoulders of the night porter, an agreeable, be-

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