

Off in the distance, a fast closing red speck is searing already parched earth, kicking up storm clouds of dust. The speck soon gains definition - boxy, upright, winged: A Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution 6 with www.rallyschool.com.au emblazoned on its flanks. Its tyres are clawing at the burnt orange beneath, its master making it dance on tip-toes, throwing its nose into corners on a wastegate flutter before standing on the throttle again to produce long, languid, sliding exits.

With a jab of handbrake, the Evo pulls alongside the viewing platform, its driver's face already broken into a smile as he hears yet again the incoherent ramblings of another passenger who has just had their perceptions of fast driving altered forever. The driver, completely relaxed, climbs out, the Evo now sitting idle, its previously superheated internals now ticking cool. He pulls up a chair alongside mine, shakes my hand. "G'Day, I'm Brendo. Nice to meet you."

'Brendo' is perhaps better known as Brendan Reeves, the 21 year old country Victorian who has already proved himself as one of the quickest rally drivers in the country. His resume is already highly impressive and many in the industry are tipping massive things in his rallying future.

Fuelling the passion

How did it all begin? "My Dad Michael was a successful rally driver, winning the Victorian Rally Championship in 1997 and 2003. I remember going to watch him long before I was old enough to drive, helping out in the service crew. I was fascinated by the sport, and when my older brother Nathan got into go-karting I wanted to as well," he recalls.

Even at the age of 7, Reeves had established that he wanted to be a professional rally driver when he grew up. Obviously not yet old enough to drive a car, he entered the world of karting and participated until he was 11, but found the atmosphere a little tense with other parents pushing their children a little too firmly to be the next Schumacher.

Being so young at the time, he remembers that the new information was quickly absorbed. "I learned race-craft on the karts, and almost unconsciously developed an understanding of the tarmac 'line' - of entry, apex and exit, which helps me even today on bitumen."

Reeves played Aussie Rules football and hockey as he ticked away the couple of years required before he could legally compete in local Autocross events. By the time he was 15, brother Nathan was already into rallying and father Michael felt it was time to retire from the stages to devote all his time to developing his children's rallying interests (I say children as daughter Rhianon Smyth is today a highly successful co-driver in her own right, and usually partners Reeves on major events.)

Dirty work

Out at the family farm at Wedderburn, Michael built a dirt practice track and Brendan's first memorable dirt experiences came in an assortment of Datsuns, along with a stripped out Falcon. "It had no weight in it so the suspension worked quite well, and it had a torquey engine so I quickly learned about oversteer!" he laughs.

Brendan fondly recalls Sunday afternoons where he would race a stopwatch over 6 kilometres around the track, battling for top time against his father, brother and friends. “It was fantastic to have the benefit of that track. Combined with Dad’s advice, along with that of his rallying friends, was invaluable. I still occasionally venture out there for testing.”

The next move, into autocross, was “To learn the ropes in a competitive environment at low cost,” he says.

Obviously a fast learner, at 16 years old Brendan became the youngest ever winner of the Victorian Autocross Championship, which pits drivers against the clock over a range of 2 km dirt circuits. He competed in a Datsun 240Z that he keeps to this day. “It was a great, reliable car, with around 280bhp and the ‘Option 1’ dog-leg gearbox which the works teams used back in the Seventies. Being rear-wheel drive and quite powerful, I learned a lot about being smooth with my inputs and aiming for the cleanest, grippiest exit lines during that time.”

At the end of 2005 Brendan entered Nathan’s Datsun 1600 in his first stage rally with his father’s old co-driver, Robin Smalley. “Having an experienced hand guiding me at that point was vital,” Brendan remembers. “I drove right on the edge in the first stage, as fast as I could go. As the stage ended, Robin said ‘You don’t need to drive anywhere near that hard to win this event.’ The underlying message really sunk in- you had to manage your speed in a way to combine good pace with enough margin to bring the car home.

“I also discovered how fit you had to be to achieve consistency. There was a 57km night stage, still the longest I have ever driven, and I came out of it panting. Dad caught me, and said ‘What’s the matter, Brendo? A bit puffed are we!’”

Brendan’s quickly developing professional mindset was enhanced by an invitation to a 3 day course at the Australian Institute of Sport Rally Development program. Here he was presented with further tools that would assist his development. “We basically learned the other side of rallying. Most people think we just turn up and drive the cars. The AIS educated us about nutrition and mental/physical fitness, but also introduced skills in dealing with the larger rallying community- sponsors and media in particular.”

Adaptation

2006 saw Reeves participate in a couple of rounds of the RS Cup, a championship designed for the all-wheel drive, naturally aspirated Impreza RS. “It was...enlightening!” he grins. “Going from the 240Z which had big power but not much grip to something completely the opposite dictated a change in driving style. The RS was all about keeping up momentum through the corners.”

He quickly adapted, winning the RS cup with a twelfth outright at the 2006 NGK Rally of Melbourne, a round of the Australian Rally Championship (ARC). Rallyschool.com.au owner Mick Ryan reminds me that “Brendo also won a Victorian event outright in the RS...against turbocharged STI Imprezas... including one driven by his brother!”

In light of this banter, it is obvious the siblings enjoy a good natured rivalry. Rhianon, who also works at the Melbourne rally school weekends with her brothers, appears to enjoy stirring the pot- at one stage cheekily asking a returning school student which brother was the quicker 'hot lap' instructor. When "Nathan" was the response, she made sure Brendan heard about it! "But those laps are about going sideways not about speed!" was his smiling response.

The national stage

Brendan's impressive performances in the RS led to a real breakthrough for 2007, as Les Walkden provided a privately owned left hand drive STI for Brendan and Rhianon to compete in the ARC. "Les was a big supporter of the RS challenge and after it finished in '06 he wanted to give a young driver a chance to step up. I was lucky enough to be chosen," he recalls.

It was another steep learning curve as Reeves was new to LHD and the Impreza's 'dog box'. The established rallying fraternity, more close-knit than in other forms of motorsport, were quick to lend the new boy a hand. "Cody Crocker was great," Reeves says. "A fortnight before the first rally in Queensland he came out to the farm and, on that same dirt track Dad had made, he showed me how to get to grips with the car."

This quick familiarisation led to a scarcely believable third outright in Queensland, but the lingering taste of champagne was not long to last, for at the next event in Western Australia Brendan and Rhianon failed to finish. "We'd come through to the last stage and were again looking good on pace. It was a wet stage...we crashed and basically destroyed the car. It was humbling, especially after experiencing the elation of Queensland."

Reeves/Smyth ended the ARC season sixth overall and third privateer. Ever competitive, he recalls with disappointment the missed opportunity to take third overall with a strong finish in the Melbourne finale. "The Victorian drought made the surfaces very slippery. On the fourth stage I misheard the pace note for a 7 Right and lost my spot on the stage. We ended up rolling seven times..." he says, voice trailing off at the memory.

The 'new boy' had thus made an STI-sized dent (sorry) on the sport, and as time went by he found that the advice that was once free-flowing from guys like Crocker, Simon Evans, Ed Ordynski and Neal Bates was now replaced with competitive banter as their respect for his ability grew. "Cody and Simon sometimes work for the rally school, and we always try to one-up each other, the aim being to slide the car as much as possible!" he laughs.

The brother/sister team then spent the summer of 2007/08 developing their pace note communication, adapting the familiar 1 to 10 corner grading system to their own specifications under the guidance of the aforementioned Crocker and Ordynski. A more diverse range of opportunities were to come in the new year....

Water crossing

They decided to make a splash on the international scene by tackling Rally Whangaeri in New Zealand with a leased Ford Fiesta. This first foray overseas also saw Brendan's front-drive competition debut. "Rally Whangaeri came about because the Fiesta Sporting trophy hadn't taken off in terms of popularity and they wanted an international driver to boost exposure. We had minimal testing in the car and I found that it needed to be set up for entry well before a corner, so we could drive through under power. My usual left-foot braking technique wasn't as effective in the Fiesta, due to the brake booster (he had never rallied with one before) altering the pedal feel and making it harder to pivot into turns. Despite this we lead all Fiestas after the first day and were again ahead of the pace on the second. A puncture cost us some time but our challenge ended when we returned to the car. It wouldn't start because the battery had gone flat," he remembers.

Whangaeri was the precursor event to participation in the WRC round in New Zealand, again in the Fiesta. When I ask Reeves about nerves, he smiles, but his response is quite assured: "We took a lot from the experience, just seeing how much importance the WRC guys place on reconnaissance and being specific with their notes. I wasn't nervous being in front of them, as obviously they were running well ahead on the road."

As for the rally itself, they finished first in the Fiesta class and 25th outright- despite a broken ball joint on the last stage sapping time. Off the back of this performance Brendan earned a wild card entry to the UK for a Fiesta shootout. The majority of other invitees had been running the cars all season...

"Twenty junior drivers were flown in from around the world to compete, the prize being a contract with M-Sport (Ford's international rally team). The first day we did fitness and psychological tests, and I came out at the top of the list. Day 2 was the actual driving. The conditions were very difficult for me, being minus five degrees and with an icy surface- I'd never driven on that type of surface before. It was a 3km stage and we had three allocated runs each, but I never had my last run as the driver before me destroyed the Fiesta! My second run was good enough for eighth overall, but I had a lot more time in hand as I got to grips with the car. Unfortunately I never got the opportunity to show it," he says with slight annoyance. Regardless, Reeves made it through to the final five and was interviewed by an illustrious panel that included Marcus Gronholm and Malcolm Wilson. After his demeanour was assessed, they placed him third overall- a remarkable result given the circumstances.

Targa time

Back in Australia Rhianon had an opportunity to co-drive for Rick Bates in the Targa Tasmania for the factory Mazda team in a Mazda3 MPS. Bates was impressed with her professionalism and when an opening came up to drive a second MPS she recommended Brendan. The siblings were subsequently entered in the showroom class for the Tasmanian Tarmac Challenge, as preparation for an assault on the Targa in 2009. The result was a strong eighth outright and first in showroom class.

This momentum carried into the Targa as they won the 2WD Showroom class at Targa Tassie after mixing it in the wet with the Mitsubishi Evos- until the MPS was penalised for a tyre change (against Targa rules) after a puncture.

Gravel, however, continued to be the Reeves focal point. “Our intention was to do as many pace noted gravel rallies as possible, to gain more experience and good enough results to allow an entry into the Australian WRC round in Perth,” he says.

The early results were encouraging despite a small budget which did little for continuity of competition and equipment. “We were fortunate to have Mick offer us a Rally School STI for a couple of events. We won outright at Rally Lithgow in NSW and came second behind Eli (Evans) in South Australia despite being in a less developed car. “

Rising star

Two further key results leap out from his results page. The first was his performance in the Pirelli Star Driver event in Queensland, with Glenn Weston co-driving (Smyth was part of an all-girl team with Emma Gilmour). “This concept pitted drivers under 26 against each other where we competed for points on each stage rather than going by totalled stage times,” he says. “There was some exceptional competition with Eli Evans, Hayden Paddon and Nathan Quinn present. The top 2 guys were to be invited to an Asian Pacific shootout, with the winner getting a paid drive in the Production Car class of the WRC.” Reeves/Weston were duly victorious and one guaranteed spot was theirs, the shootout scheduled for aforementioned WRC round in Northern NSW.

The wander back to Whangarei

A chance for more international exposure came when Brendan was able to lease Emma Gilmour’s STI to enter the New Zealand APRC round, again at Whangarei. This time his intent was nothing less than outright victory. With Weston alongside, Reeves showed confidence and poise as he mixed it with the best rally drivers in the Asia Pacific championship. “The car was very well set up; with a terrific diff program that Emma had developed with Possum Bourne Motorsport to suit the NZ roads. Again we didn’t have much opportunity to test, but still we were running second overall behind Paddon. Cody (Crocker) was third, but driving a new and unsorted car so I expected a fight as the rally continued on. On the fourth last stage, we caught up to Richard Mason, who had blown a turbo and filled the stage with smoke. I lost too much time behind it, and Cody’s clear run allowed him passed. There just wasn’t enough time for me to catch it back up!” The rallying fraternity were mightily impressed with this 20 year old arriving to drive a leased car serviced by borrowed crew to a podium in his first outright Asia Pacific event. Things were looking great, and confidence in the Reeves camp was sky-high for a memorable performance in the Australian WRC event.

Learning experience

Rhainon returned to the co-driving chair for the ARC’s Rally SA, but it was here that all the hard grafted momentum stalled with a massive accident that separated the Rally School STI’s engine from its frame. “We were really focussed on running at the front and we were setting fastest stage times. Unfortunately the car developed a misfire and with the time lost came a need to claw it back. I don’t remember much of the accident- but in the lead up we were doing over 180km/h approaching a 9L over a crest. We landed on a gutter on the right side, the gutter then pulling the car up and into a gumtree before spinning us into another tree on the left. “

Rhianon suffered breaks in both legs and heels, while Brendan cracked vertebrae in his neck. As a result, the guaranteed entry into the Australian WRC in Northern NSW had to be shelved as it was on only three weeks later. "We were pretty shattered and Rhianon had to have several operations to set her legs. She maintained her positivity throughout, and she has vowed to get back alongside me again in 2010," he explains.

An incident as monumental as this can have a negative effect when one climbs back behind the wheel, however Reeves enlisted the help of a sports psychologist, Anthony Klarica, who was recommended by Simon Evans to assist in his rehabilitation. "He basically helped me refocus on my goals for the future, and to move forward with real positivity for the time ahead," Brendan remembers.

Fightback

The return came on a local VRC round, the Akademos that he had previously won outright in the naturally aspirated RS. This time he entered in the STI that he had prepared for Perth, alongside Ben Atkinson, who is best known for sitting with Cody Crocker. "My intent was to ease myself back into the groove. Ben was so good about it, being very encouraging. To start with I was braking far too early, but I knew my reasons for it. We were initially running second outright, eventually upping our pace and eventually taking the win, so it was great for the confidence knowing I could still do it."

Moving forward

So, what lies ahead in 2010 for Brendan Reeves? "I have an entry in Rally Tasmania in our LHD STI Spec-C, with Rhianon returning alongside," he says. "We are entered in the outright class which allows us some freedoms in tyres, gearbox and engine. The competition is going to be intense- Jim Richards in his Porsche GT2 will be there, Tony Quinn's GT-R...and Steve Glenney in a similar spec car to my own." A 'who's who' of recent Targa Tasmania winners, in other words.

"Things are also looking good for another attack on Showroom class in the Mazda MPS at Targa Tasmania and we'd love to do it again. It is a an event that consumes you... our 'recce' last year racked up over 6000kms as the roads change so much in wet/dry conditions. The challenge in making the tyres last the event was an education in smoothness and utilising a higher gear in corners to rely on torque to drag you out without spinning wheels."

Strong drives in these local events will contribute to 2010's ultimate goal- to further develop an international profile with entries in selected Asia Pacific and (hopefully) WRC rounds. Reeves is currently talking with a couple of international outfits to achieve this, and early feedback suggests things are progressing well.

The competition driving will be augmented with further work at the rally school ("It's very cheap testing!") and his ability to develop hardware has led to some further opportunities- in fact, after our chat he is off to test a new generation of tarmac rally tyre at Phillip Island, aboard a Les Walkden 2008 STI. I jokingly offer my availability should he "Need any circuit tips," and he kindly goes along with the (attempted) comedy in his easy, down-to-earth manner.

As we depart, it is this flash of personality that leaves the biggest impression. He combines good nature with an immense natural talent that is supported by an inquisitive, professional, committed attitude; the net result bringing a true self-belief that will see him go a very long way in the rallying world. Watch this space and remember the name- 'Brendo' is on a mission.

By Adam Davis

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