

{mosimage}The last time Brendan Reeves drove a Les Walkden Rallying Subaru Impreza WRX STI on Tasmania's twisting tarmac roads, he finished second to motor racing legend Jim Richards.

Eighteen months on, the 20-year old is faster and more experienced, and has his sights set on a top five finish in this weekend's Rally Tasmania, the first round of the 2009 Australian Rally Championship.

Brendo finished the 2008 rally season by competing in the Fiesta International Shootout in the UK, where he drove brilliantly to finish third, narrowly missing a contract with one of the British-based World Rally Championship teams.

But his focus is now on Rally Tasmania, where he'll drive for Les Walkden Rallying in the left-hand drive Subaru previously campaigned by Michael Guest in last year's Australian Rally Championship.

The three-day tarmac event, based in Burnie, has attracted the cream of Australian rallying talent, but the Victorian is confident of a good result as he kick starts his 2009 season.

"I've rallied in the Burnie area a few times now, and I know some of the stages really well, particularly some of the longer stages such as Savage River and Hellyer Gorge," Brendo said.

"It's a great area to compete in, especially when you're driving for a local team, and after a test session in the Subaru, I'm really looking forward to the rally getting underway on Friday afternoon."

The mid-week test session saw Brendo and his co-driving sister, Rhianon Smyth, complete around 50 kilometres in the car, with the main focus on getting used to the WRC-spec Pirelli tyres, and the 'dog' gearbox.

The Group N (standard production) Subaru will be up against the latest specification Super 2000 Toyotas of Neal Bates and Simon Evans, and Brendo knows it will be tough to beat the lightweight Corollas.

"When the stages are fast and open we probably have a bit of an advantage over the S2000 cars, but when the roads get tight and twisty – as they tend to do in Tasmania – then the S2000 cars will be a lot harder to beat," he added.

However, with drivers of the calibre of reigning Pacific Rally Champion, Dean Herridge, and Eli Evans (Subaru), Matt Raymond (Toyota) and Spencer Lowndes (Mitsubishi) all in the running as well, finishing in the top five won't be easy.

Competitors are restricted to just 10 tyres for the three-day, 19 stage event, and drivers will need to ensure their choice of compound is the correct one, particularly if the weather is dry, as predicted.

“If it’s dry we’ll have to use a hard compound, because we can’t risk using a medium tyre and have it melt. Having said that though, the cool morning conditions may make the choice difficult on some stages.”

Brendo believes his experience of writing and driving on pacenotes will be an advantage over the new stages that the event has included this year.

“Once I’m comfortable in the car it will be a case of pushing hard and trying to set good stage times, but also ensuring we don’t do anything silly,” he explained.

“At this stage the drive for LWR is a one-off for this event, but we’d like to do more events for the team this year, so a good result is important.”

Rally Tasmania starts on Friday afternoon with three stages to kick off the event. Saturday is the rally’s biggest day, with eight stages over 116 competitive kilometres, while a further eight stages (72 kilometres) make up Sunday’s schedule.

The longest stages of the rally are the two popular Savage River tests. Competitors drive 25 kilometres downhill and into Savage River, before regrouping and driving the 25 kilometres back out again. It is one of Australian rallying’s most famous stages, and is one that all competitors look forward to.

For full details and live results from Rally Tasmania, visit www.rallytasmania.com.au