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## ROUND THREE – ORAN PARK

**What do you do when you add water to a race track? You get entertainment and a challenge and that's what the Combined Touring fleet faced as they battled it out for Round Three of the 2009 NSW Combined Touring Championship, presented by Goldram Financial Services. The weekend of May 30-31 dawned overcast, with the threat of rain added to the mixture and making things interesting for drivers and their crews.**

### QUALIFYING

A very healthy turnout of 22 cars made the grid for the third round, but there were a couple of notable absentees. Current reigning champion Matthew Holt was asked by Steve Hodges to substitute Warren Millet in the V8 Utes down in Tasmania, with the latter recovering for a brain tumour that had been removed not long and was awaiting medical clearance from CAMS. With a third straight title likely to be out of reach, Holt accepted Hodges' offer to race in Tasmania. The other notable absentee was Duncan Handley. After doing an engine bearing at Wakefield Park during the non-points co-driver's race that preceded the endurance event, the engine was rebuilt and put on the dyno in between rounds, before the engine let go whilst on the dyno. It was a massive blow to the Nissan driver.

But the plus side was a few returnees and a welcomed addition to a new competitor. Having rebuilt his Evo VII Lancer following the end of last season, Gerry Burgess was making a return to the championship, making Oran Park his first appearance of the year. Anthony Loscialpo returned from his overseas commitments to pick up where he left off at Eastern Creek, whilst Martin Rambow rebuilt the engine that let go during round one qualifying and returned for another crack of the whip. Gus Barbara had finally upgraded from his tried and proven VK Commodore to a brand new HSV GTS Monaro and Jeremy Gray rebuilt his FG XR6 Turbo following his misadventure with Holt during the first race of Round Two. But the most nervous yet excited of the drivers to attend this weekend's round was Matthew Reid. The 26 year old has just purchased a Mitsubishi Lancer Evo V that was once raced by former competitor Doug Moss and was making his circuit racing debut in this round.

Qualifying was conducted in cold but occasionally sunny conditions, conditions that would suit the turbocharged cars like the Lancer Evo's and Gray's XR6 Turbo. Many found the Kumho's were slightly quicker than the previous control tyre the category was using, which was the Yokohama Advan AO48 and this was a positive sign that some of the competitors were starting to get to grips with how the Kumho's operate. Whilst it was expected that the HSVs would dominate the top of the timesheets, they were upstaged by the sheer pace of Gray's Falcon. Having almost a year of development under his belt since he unveiled the car at Wakefield Park last August, Gray took advantage of the cold conditions and a new set of Kumho's to claim his first pole position of the year with a 1m18.74s. His time was almost 0.8s quicker than the first Class A car, which was the new GTS Monaro of Barbara. Barbara's time of 1m19.54s was impressive and even impressed the car owner himself. He was ahead of regular frontrunners Tony Virag (3<sup>rd</sup> overall – 1m19.70s), Jim Pollicina (4<sup>th</sup> overall – 1m20.25s), Marty Miller (6<sup>th</sup> overall 1m20.74s) and Anthony Loscialpo (7<sup>th</sup> overall 1m20.80s). Burgess was next in his Evo VII Lancer with Reid rounding out the Class A field, ten seconds slower than Gray and his Falcon but by his own admission, it's a real learning experience.

With Gray fronting the field in Class B and outright, the next to follow was the star of round two, Brian King (1m21.46s). His VK Commodore Group A was quicker than some of his opposition who were in quicker and more up to date machinery, which is still surprising him, though he was concerned with his front brakes at the end of the session. Following King in third was Rod Thorpe (1m21.74s), then Mark

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Phillips (1m21.84s), who could only manage four decent laps from his Kumho's before backing off to cool down, Paul Wilbow (1m22.01s), current championship leader Steve Kent (1m22.38s) and Martin Rambow (1m25.53s). Rambow discovered during his time out on the track a minute oil leak which was enough to cause a small smoke screen visible for everyone to see. Though the car wasn't severely affected by performance, the crew opted to fix the link at the end of the session to avoid any dramas.

With Chris Reeves out of action following his nasty crash at Wakefield Park, Dion Pangalos was left to carry the Class D flag and he stayed out of everyone's way to qualify his ex-Murray Carter Mazda 626 for the first race. Meanwhile in Saloon Cars, Gavyn Croft made a surprise return to Combined Touring and was joined by Luke Westall and Dean Kelland for the battle. With Croft's VT Commodore well developed thanks to some intense competition in the national series, Croft easily out qualified his rivals to sit on pole for his class and fifth overall (1m20.27s), which was way up with Gray's Falcon and the HSV fleet. Westall was next in class with Kelland rounding out the Saloon Car field.

### RACE ONE

Not long before the first race, rain had descended Oran Park but had stopped in time as the field lined up for the first of three races. As the lights went out, Gray was initially swamped as Virag got a demon start to claim the lead as they headed into the first corner, with the Monaro of Barbara in second, then Gray and Pollicina following in close company. Though Gray got a sluggish start, the XR6 Falcon really got going not long after exiting the first corner. By the time he got to Konica Minolta, Gray was up to second and kept onto the tail of Virag's Commodore. Virag led the first lap, but was soon swamped and overtaken by the Gray Falcon and many were astonished by the sudden change in fortune that Gray was experiencing. Following Gray up the order was Pollicina and Miller and by the end of the second lap, Pollicina was up to second, Virag dropping back to third and Miller in fourth. For Virag, third place was as far back that he would drop on the leader board. Despite a good start, Barbara and the new Monaro fell back slightly to sit behind Miller in fifth, but remained in touch with the leaders and was a constant threat.

Although the pressure from Pollicina was constant, Gray maintained his composure and won his first race in Combined Touring by 3.1s from the Commodore driver, with Virag finishing third, Miller in fourth, Barbara and the new Monaro in fifth and Loscialpo finishing in sixth. Winning Class A was Pollicina, followed by Virag, Miller, Barbara, Loscialpo, the Lancer Evo VII of Burgess and the Evo V Lancer of Reid.

In Class B, with Gray romping away from the field and winning the class and overall, the attention focussed on the minor positions. In the opening two laps, Phillips was already facing some intense opposition from the likes of King, Thorpe and Kent. The Group A Commodore of King was holding its own against the newer model HSV Clubsports, until on lap three, the car broke a gearbox as it approached the dogleg. King's retirement was the only one of the race. With King out of proceedings, Thorpe took up the fight against the Phillips machine and at the end of lap four, succeeded in passing Phillips for second. The latter was struggling with the Kumho's and the opposition around him. In the end, the battle for the minor placings behind Gray was Thorpe in second, Phillips in third, Kent in fourth, Wilbow and Rambow.

In Saloon Cars, the sheer pace set by Gavyn Croft was outstanding. He kept up with the leaders for the majority of the race was by far the fastest of the Saloon Cars out on the track. He won the class easily and finished seventh overall. The minor placings were filled by Dean Kelland and Luke Westall.

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Meanwhile, in Class D, Pangelos kept to his usual game plan of staying out of trouble and won the class. It certainly looked lonesome out there, without Reeves hounding him.

### RACE TWO

Again, there was a threat of rain on early Sunday morning, but the rain clouds had cleared for some glorious sunshine for the second race of the weekend. With Gray riding on a wave thanks to his first race win, he was hoping for a repeat performance in race two. But at the start, he was caught off guard by the equally fast Pollicina who led into the first corner. Following in tow was Barbara, who's Monaro got another good start, Miller, Loscialpo and a slow starting Virag. By the end of first lap, Pollicina had a clear track ahead of him, with Miller following suit, then Barbara and Gray. It seemed like the turbo lag in the XR6 was giving Gray a disadvantage against his V8 powered rivals, but with the conditions being cold, it was the perfect climate for the turbo to be operating and it wasn't long before he really got wound up. At the end of lap three, he moved up to third by passing the Barbara Monaro, then passed the Miller Commodore for second two laps later. All the while, Pollicina kept a cool head and despite the storming presence of the Gray Falcon in his rear view mirror, he led from start to finish, winning the eight lap battle by 2.1s. He didn't claim the fastest lap though, that went to Gray on lap four with a time of 1m20.09s. Behind the front pair, Miller continued his consistent form to finish third ahead of Barbara and Virag, who rounded out the top five.

Pollicina also won Class A, with Miller second in class, then Barbara, Virag, Loscialpo, who was struggling with a car that was proving to be troublesome along with tyre choice, the Burgess Lancer Evo VII and Reid in the Lancer Evo V.

Class B was again a shoe in for Gray, but behind him, the battle in the Commodore fleet was still intense. Thorpe and his Clubsport got a tremendous start and kept in touch with his Class A compatriots all race long. His speed and agility allowed him to romp away with second in class ahead of Kent and Phillips, who were battling for class supremacy and for the outright championship lead, which they knew had been eroded away by Pollicina. Kent was relatively happy with the Metalair Clubsport's performance, but Phillips wasn't too impressed with how he was running. Clearly, he was not having an ideal weekend. After eight hard fought laps, with Gray romping away to another class win, it was Thorpe who finished second, then Kent, Phillips, Wilbow and then King, who recovered from his gearbox dramas on the Saturday. Rambow once again rounded out the field.

Saloon Cars was once again the Gavyn Croft show. Maintaining his blistering pace and the ability to keep up with the V8 and turbocharged frontrunners, he romped away with the class win and sixth overall in the race. Behind him, Luke Westall, charged up the standings following his lacklustre first race performance to finish 11<sup>th</sup> overall and second in class with Kelland a few places behind and third in class. Clearly, this was the best outing for Saloon Cars this season. Meanwhile, in Class D, the Mazda of Pangelos stayed out of harm's way to finish and win the class.

### RACE THREE

Due to time constraints, the final race was reduced from 10 laps to seven, but those seven laps provided the best racing seen in Combined Touring in quite some time. Once again, rain had befallen on Oran Park, but it had stopped and was clearing in time for the field to race without disruption. When it did get under way, both Pollicina and Gray got extremely quick starts from the Barbara Monaro and the Commodore's of Virag, Loscialpo and Miller. As they all scrambled for positions on the first lap, it

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clearly became obvious that the battle between the Pollicina Commodore and the Gray Falcon was one to keep focus on. For the next seven laps, both men were trading blows in lap times and they weren't giving anything away from each other. Then, on lap seven, Gray pounced at Konica Minolta and pulled off a brave outside manoeuvre coming off the bridge. Gray held position as they cross the line with a lap to go, but Pollicina fought back, from the first corner up to Suttons, both men were running side by side with not one bit of paint traded between the two. It was close, competitive and hard fought racing and everyone was really enjoying it. In the end, it was Gray who came out trumps and despite a last corner bid for victory by Pollicina, Gray kept his composure and won the final race and the round by 0.3s. It was a well deserved win the Hunter Valley based driver and Pollicina was in admiration towards his rival after the race.

Behind then, Barbara kept a cool head to stay in front of Miller, Loscialpo and Virag to claim third overall and his first podium placing since he first joined Combined Touring Cars some years ago. It was the ideal debut for his new Monaro and it gave signs of good things to come. Loscialpo salvaged an average weekend to claim fourth, Miller fifth, Burgess in sixth and then Virag. Class A saw Pollicina claim class honours again, followed by Barbara, Loscialpo, Miller, Burgess, Virag and Reid, who came away from the weekend unscathed in his racing debut.

Whilst Class B was Jeremy Gray all the way, behind him, the battle for the minor placings was still important given that Kent and Phillips were in outright championship contention. Kent got the jump at the start from Thorpe, who rounded up the more experienced campaigner a lap later. Kent would then have his hands full holding at bay Wilbow and Phillips, the latter who was still struggling from a car that wasn't behaving the way he wanted to. In the end, Thorpe claimed second in class and for the weekend, with Kent in third, Phillips in fourth, then Wilbow, King and Rambow, who openly admitted that the VS GTS was just simply not fast enough and that it was time to upgrade to a VE GTS Commodore to stir up the honey pot!

The results in Saloon Cars were the same as in race two, the Croft Commodore gaining the winning advantage from the outset and never to be headed. Westall finished in second with Kelland rounding out proceedings in third. Class D remained the territory of Pangalos, who again kept to his quiet self to finish and win the class.

So the weekend of Round Three was the weekend Jeremy Gray finally broke through for a win. Through a lot of heartache and setbacks, the JMG team finally got the FG XR6 Falcon Turbo singing on song almost twelve months on and winning as well. It was also a weekend that saw a change in the outright lead of the championship, with Jim Pollicina taking over the mantle from Steven Kent, leading the title chase by 12 points. It was also the weekend that could be costly for Mark Phillips in terms for championship contention. He went from second overall to sixth. The big winners from the weekend were Marty Miller and Rod Thorpe, who move up to third and fourth respectively behind Pollicina and Kent. Presently, there are six drivers who are currently vying for the 2009 title at the halfway point of the championship and with the next round looming at Eastern Creek on July 4-5, the battle is set to continue.

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