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ROUND TWO – WAKEFIELD PARK

After an amazing start to the 2009 season at Eastern Creek, the Combined Touring Cars entourage headed down to Goulburn's Wakefield Park for round two of the 2009 NSW Combined Touring Championship presented by Goldram Financial Services. The second round saw a change in race format, with the return of the popular one-hour endurance race, which included a compulsory pit stop, and for some a driver change.

QUALIFYING

Compared to the impressive turnout at Eastern Creek, 14 cars turned up for round two with some notable absentees. Following the issues that occurred at round one, Martin Rambow was still without his HSV VS GTS, Glenn Kenny decided to sit out the round and Anthony Loscialpo had a prior overseas commitment that prevented him from competing in this round. However, the quality of the field was still high. For those that did enter the round with co-drivers, reigning champion Matthew Holt re-enlisted Brett Howard for driving duties in his HSV VX GTS and Tony Virag again joined forces with V8 Ute driver Steve Hodges. Marty Miller would be joined in his HSV by Kerry Millar, Dion Pangalos came back to defend his stranglehold on Class D with Shane Fowler and Mark Phillips, who has previously been co-driver to Paul Wilbow, had a new co-driver in the form of Phillip Holden.

Conditions for qualifying were sunny and warm and the drivers utilised the conditions to good effect. Like at Eastern Creek, the enthralling battle between Nissan and HSV continued and it was expected that the tight and twisty layout would suit the Nissan GTR of Duncan Handley. But surprisingly, it wasn't the Nissan that claimed the top spot. Tony Virag and Steve Hodges (#41 ISRI Truck Seats HSV VX GTS) would claim his first pole position for the year with a 1m09.03s ahead of Holt/Howard (#1 AAP & Son HSV VX GTS) who posted a 1m09.04s time. Third was the GTR of Handley with a 1m09.30s and Jim Pollicina (#7 Martini Racing HSV VY GTS) returned to defend his enduro win from 2008 in fourth with a 1m09.42s. Miller/Millar (#55 Jost Australia HSV VZ GTS) were fifth, posting a 1m09.43s time.

In Class B, Jeremy Gray (#67 JMG Ford Falcon FG XR6 Turbo) put behind all the dramas of Eastern Creek to post some very fast times at the same venue where his Falcon made its debut last August. Despite its sheer speed, the car has gone through a lot of trouble during its development and has given the JMG team plenty of headaches. But the signs were looking up for Gray as he posted the fastest time in his class, ahead of Rod Thorpe (#20 Interfreight Transport HSV VX Clubsport R8), Phillips/Holden (#5 Phillips Exhaust HSV VX Clubsport R8), Brian King (#75 Stephan Auto Body Repairs HDT VK Group A), Steve Kent (#3 Metalair HSV VX Clubsport R8) and Gus Barbara (#79 Cox's Rd Fruit Market Commodore VK). Paul Wilbow was a notable absentee from qualifying but would contest the enduro race.

Class D was again a battle between Proton and Mazda as the venerable Mazda 626 of Pangalos/Fowler was challenged by Chris Reeves in the Proton Satria GTi. With the Mazda being more powerful than the Proton, it was expected that it would be the faster of the two, but at the end of qualifying, the results were a totally different story. Reeves managed to qualify fastest, giving him a psychological advantage over the duo of Pangalos/Fowler.

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RACE 1 – SPRINT – 8 laps

If there was a much talked about race from the weekend, it was the first race on Saturday afternoon. Even though the race was a sprint, the finishing positions for the race counted towards the championship, so getting a good finish was high on everyone's agenda. As the flag dropped, it was the GTR of Handley who got the jump from his HSV opposition. But as they made their way around Wakefield Park on the first lap, all hell seemed to have broken loose. At the final corner, Miller, Holt and Gray were battling to gain the upper hand in their battle until Gray was momentarily squeezed by Miller and, in turn, got a tad too exuberant and braked late. Gray ran out of track and slammed into the right rear of the Holt Commodore, putting both drivers out of the race.

The Gray Falcon suffered damage on the front left and broke a front cross member, which effectively put him out for the weekend. As for the Holt crew, work immediately began to repair the damage, which was fairly extensive. The chassis was bent and the tracking of the car was out by nine degrees. Gray later admitted that he was a bit too committed at the time of the crash. The race was brought under Safety Car conditions for three laps whilst the crash was cleared and resumed with three laps to go with Handley still at the front of the field. Despite pressure from Virag and Pollicina in the last few laps, Handley held on to win from Virag by 0.4s, followed by Pollicina and Miller.

In Class B, the battle started out with Gray dominating the lead until his retirement after the first lap incident with Holt. Thorpe took over the class lead and continued his consistent run of good results by winning the class again from Phillips, Kent, King, Wilbow and Barbara. In Class D, Fowler did the driving duties in the Pangalos Mazda as he fought to fend off the strong challenge from the Proton of Reeves. After an intense battle that carried on from Eastern Creek, the Mazda came up trumps ahead of the Proton.

Whilst the first race counted towards the point score, the co-drivers race on Sunday morning did not. For the record, Handley won the race ahead of Brett Howard in the rebuilt Holt Commodore, Virag, Pollicina and Wilbow. A few drivers sat out the co-drivers race in preparation for the main event late on Sunday afternoon.

ENDURO – ONE HOUR

Following the incident on Saturday afternoon, the Holt crew worked for most of Saturday night and early Sunday morning to straighten and repair the Commodore into race ready condition. Though the chassis was as good it could be, the crew did manage to pinch the right rear door from a friend's Commodore as a replacement part. The crew hoped that the car would at least drive as good as it had previously and remain straight. Fortunately, the car did drive straight and finished second in the co-drivers event with Howard at the wheel.

However, Handley's luck would run out after the co-driver's race. After returning to the pits following his win, Handley discovered a engine bearing had failed and had no choice but to pack up and head home after such a strong showing the day before. With the main threat to the HSV fleet now out of the equation, the likes of Holt, Virag, Miller and Pollicina were now able to take charge in the one-hour event.

As the flag dropped, that's exactly what they did - Holt took charge of the race from Virag with Pollicina and Miller close behind. On lap three, Miller made a move on Pollicina, taking third place in the process, as he continued his impressive charge in his return to Combined Touring. Positions remained this way for the first third of the race, until around lap 14, the 20-minute mark, when the whole complexion of the race changed.

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At the tail of the field, the Class D battle between Pangalos and Reeves was still raging for the class lead. Reeves managed to claim the class lead on lap 13 but with rain starting to fall, the pair went deep into the last corner causing Reeves to run wide. Reeves attempted to recover and return to the track, at the same time as Rod Thorpe was taking evasive action to avoid another car. The pair clashed heavily with the incident putting both Thorpe and Reeves out of the race and brought out the safety car.

Whilst the damage to Thorpe's Commodore wasn't too severe, the same couldn't be said for Reeve's Proton. The left front passenger door was badly dented and the Proton itself didn't look too good. Both men eventually walked away unscathed, but Reeves was a major concern for medical crews at the track. At first glance, it was thought that Reeves was seriously hurt, but luckily his injuries were limited to a stiff neck.

So with the Safety Car deployed at the opening of the pit stop window, most front-runners came in to take advantage of the window and many of the crews worked overtime to get back out on the track. The revised race order was now Pollicina, followed by the Holt Commodore - with Howard at the wheel. Surprisingly, the driver in third place was Brian King, who remained in touch with the leaders and inherited the Class B lead.

When the race resumed just after the 30-minute mark, the drivers who had stayed out eventually made their stops. Once the field settled down it was the Holt Commodore of Howard that took charge of the race from Pollicina in second and King in a surprise third.

Charging through the field was the Virag Commodore, now with Steve Hodges at the wheel. After the alternator issues that plagued them last year, they weren't going to let anything stop them. Though King had a quick car Hodges was reeling him in at a rate of two seconds a lap. While Hodges did make an error coming out of the Fish Hook in the last 15 minutes of the race, the inevitable happened at the final corner when he snatched third place from King by less than a second.

At the front, Howard had remained unstoppable and after one hour of racing, claimed a magnificent win considering the issues that confronted the Holt team the day before. Pollicina was not far behind, claiming an encouraging second with Virag/Hodges in third. King was the hero of the day, finishing an impressive fourth in front of the Phillips/Holden combination – who were in impressive form in fifth.

In Class A, it was Holt/Howard, Pollicina, Virag/Hodges and Miller/Millar. Class B saw King claim a well deserved class win ahead of Phillips/Holden with Kent in third and Wilbow rounding out the class after a multitude of dramas.

Gus Barbara's weekend was one he'd rather forget with electrical gremlins and a coming together with Steve Kent putting him out of the race. In Class D, with Reeves out, the duo of Pangalos/Fowler stayed on the track to win the class.

After the dramas and excitement of round two, there was a new championship leader: Steve Kent on 74 points ahead of Marty Miller and Jim Pollicina in equal second on 72 points and Mark Phillips and Dion Pangalos sitting equal fourth with 70 points. The championship is already starting to heat up and the battle is set to continue with Round Three at Oran Park May 30-31.

For the latest news, results and point scores, log on to the Combined Touring Cars website at www.combinedtouringcars.com.au

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