

After more than six months waiting for the new season to begin, the 2009 NSW Combined Touring Championship kicked off in fine style at Eastern Creek on March 21-22. Changes to class structure and a new Kumho Ecsta control tyre has brought with it a number of new challenges for everyone involved but the first round looks set to set a high benchmark for the year ahead.

QUALIFYING

A total of 20 cars entered for the first round but three failed to make qualifying. Black & Gold Racing's Martim Rambow got his 2009 campaign off to the worst start possible when a brand new engine blew during Friday practice. After the dramas that severely affected his 2008 campaign, Rambow was starting to wonder what he ran over to carry on the bad luck so early into the new season. The teething troubles for Jeremy Gray's new Ford Falcon FG XR6 Turbo continued when the turbo six registered no oil pressure and was withdrawn. Finally, the Mazda3 MPS of Adam Dodd blew a turbo and was parked for the weekend. All that action happening and it happened on the Friday! So Saturday qualifying came and a torrential downpour fell upon the Creek as the meeting began. It was starting to dry rapidly as qualifying began and for everyone, the new Kumho Ecsta tyres were giving everyone plenty of issues on how to adjust camber, tyre pressures and castor to suit the new tyres they were using. Out on the track, the battle between Matthew Holt(#1 AAP & Son HSV VX GTS), Anthony Loscialpo (#37 Tempest Air HSV VY GTS), Jim Pollicina (#7 Martini Racing HSV VY GTS) and Tony Virag (#41 Isri Truck Seats HSV VX GTS) picked up where it left off in 2008.

Virag set the early pace in the first five minutes of qualifying with Holt and Loscialpo on his heels, until at the end of the session, Loscialpo pounced and grabbed pole with a fast charging Marty Miller, making a long awaited return to Combined Touring, a close second. Loscialpo grabbed Class A and outright pole with a 1m50.13s, Miller was .46s behind with a 1m50.59s. Third outright was Virag with a 1m50.65s and Holt in fourth with a 1m50.81s. Jim Pollicina was the last of the drivers in the 1m50s bracket, qualifying fifth fastest with a 1m50.97s.

The battle for Class B was led by Rod Thorpe in the # 20 Interfreight Transport HSV VX R8 Clubsport, the same driven on debut at the last round by Steve Hodges. He qualified on class pole ahead of Paul Wilbow (#4 HSV VX R8 Clubsport), Steven Kent (#3 Metalair HSV VX R8 Clubsport), series returnee Brian King (#75 Stephans Auto Body Repairs HDT VK Group A), Gus Barbara (#79 Coxs Rd Fruit Market Holden Commodore) and series debutant Mark Phillips (#5 Phillips Exhaust HSV VX R8 Clubsport). Phillips has previously raced in the Combined Touring endure events with Paul Wilbow but has branched out on his own with a brand new car and is hoping for a decent result for the weekend.

With no entrants for Class C, the next class entered was Class D. Only two cars entered, with series regular and defending class champion Dion Pangalos returning in his ex-Murray Carter Mazda 626 and successfully claiming the class pole, but only by .04s from series rookie Chris Reeves. Reeves is running in an ex-works Proton Satria GTi and is genuinely excited by learning the ropes in production car racing. In Saloon Cars, Dean Kelland (#52 Advanced Tyre Auto Ford Falcon AU) took a commanding lead to claim class pole from series regular and

defending class champ Glenn Kenny. Kenny made the admission that against the newer model Saloon Car of Kelland, the best that he could hope for is to just finish.

The first race of the round is this afternoon over seven laps, with two more races tomorrow. For more news and results, log on to www.combinedtouringcars.com.au.

RACE ONE

The first race of Round One for the 2009 NSW Combined Touring Championship was run in similar conditions to qualifying, drying conditions that were preceded by heavy rain that lasted three quarters of an hour. The seven lap journey around Eastern Creek provided some entertaining racing with a number of position changes throughout the race, particularly at the front of the field.

When the lights went out for the start of the first race and the season, it was the Nissan GTR of Duncan Handley, who managed to upstage the front row of Anthony Loscialpo and Marty Miller and jump into second place behind Miller, who took the lead. Loscialpo fell in behind Handley for third while defending series champion Matthew Holt struggled from the outset when a bolt in the right front suspension had broke and made the balance and steering harder than hoped. On the very next lap, Handley grew plenty of balls and took the daring outside move around Miller at turn one to take the lead. With the GTR's renowned 4WD ability and sheer speed, the signs were there that Handley would give the HSV frontrunners a lot of grief.

However, this grief would only last for a total of two laps. On lap four, Miller regains the lead around the back of the circuit as Handley's GTR was suffering from overheating. With Handley out of the equation for victory, his focus turned to his fellow HSV guns in Loscialpo, Jim Pollicina, Tony Virag and Jim Stewart in the Subaru WRX STi. Though Stewart was also able to keep up with the HSV pack, the Subaru slowed up dramatically as it came across the line to start lap four and retired not long after. With the Japanese invasion out of the running for outright honours, the HSV battle was very much on with Loscialpo challenging Miller very hard for the race lead. A mistake at Corporate Hairpin on lap six cost him some time, but that was minor compared to the major problem he was having with his gearbox. Fifth gear was refusing to co-operate and he had to force the gear lever into fifth for the remainder of the race, each time he changed gears.

Pollicina tried to take advantage of Loscialpo's drama but was unsuccessful in the end. At the end of seven fast paced laps, it was Miller who made a winning return to Combined Touring Cars, 0.6s ahead of a struggling Loscialpo, Pollicina, Virag, Holt and Handley. But Virag would lose fourth post race when the officials whacked a 60 second penalty for ignoring a black flag when he was alleged to have jumped the start. As a consequence, Holt and Handley and everyone else up to 14th moved up a place.

In Class B, Rod Thorpe led the battle in his Steve Hodges built HSV VX R8 Clubsport from start to finish. Despite the pressure he was facing from Paul Wilbow, he maintained composure and at one stage was up with the Class A frontrunners, before settling into his race pace whilst being in total control of the class. He won Class from Wilbow by two seconds, with Steve Kent third in class, a pensive Brian King happy to finish fourth, Gus Barbara and Mark Phillips. Phillips was deeply embarrassed and annoyed after the race when he ran out of fuel on the last lap but had enough to complete the full distance.

Class D saw Dion Pangalos dominate from Proton's Chris Reeves. In the early stages of the race, Pangalos and Reeves dived with Glenn Kenny, but the pair managed to pull away from

Reeves as the latter openly admitted before and after the race the Proton was lacking power and not ideally suited to the longer layout that is Eastern Creek. In Saloon Cars, Dean Kelland dominated from start to finish, finishing eighth overall, whilst Kenny stayed out of trouble whilst enjoying his battle with Pangalos and Reeves to finish second in class.

Races two and three are held tomorrow, March 22. For the latest results, point scores and race reports, log on to www.combinedtouringcars.com.au

After the inclement weather that dogged Eastern Creek yesterday, races two and three of Round 1 of the 2009 NSW Combined Touring Championship were held in glorious sunshine. Add in the element of a greasy track and the racing was nothing short of exciting.

RACE TWO

The second race held mid morning saw the field reduced by one when Jim Stewart and his Subaru didn't make the grid. In between races, a number of drivers made changes or adjustments with improved performance the key objective. Gus Barbara suffered a dropped cylinder when a spark plug lead came out then suffered a split power steering hose at the end of the race, both items were replaced and were ready for the second event. Anthony Loscialpo replaced the broken gearbox with a spare from his workshop and Matthew Holt realigned his suspension and replaced the broken bolt that affected his performance. Mark Phillips filled his car up with enough juice to last a full race and Tony Virag was slapped with a \$400 fine on top of his 60 second penalty for ignoring the black flag for the his alleged jump start. He appealed and had his fine reduced to \$200.

At the start, both Miller and Loscialpo got a clear jump from the field, but it was the GTR Skyline of Handley who again jumped up a number of spots to hound the heels of the leader, which was Loscialpo. By the time they came out of turn two and went over the hump towards turn four, it was Handley that gained the upper hand. However, unlike the first race when overheating issues hampered his charge, Handley stayed out front and wouldn't be challenged. That being said, it wasn't easy as his rivals remained in touch.

Miller regained second place from Loscialpo and the pair provided plenty of entertainment for both the people at the track and for those sitting behind the pair. Whenever Miller braked at corners such as Corporate Hairpin, Loscialpo would try to brake later and intimidate the former champion into a mistake and pass him. Miller was not fooled for one minute. While they battled on, Pollicina closed up rapidly and also tried to pass Loscialpo, but with very little success until the final corner with a couple of laps to go, when he passed on the outside at turn 10. Holt on the other hand remained in touch but could do little to challenge. In the end, it was Handley who dominated from flag to finish, winning ahead of Miller, Pollicina, Loscialpo, Holt and a fast finishing Virag, who came from 14th to 6th.

In Class B, Rod Thorpe and Paul Wilbow continued their battle for class supremacy. Thorpe led for the entire race, but Wilbow remained on Thorpe's tail and tried everything to get past and get in front of his inexperienced rival. But it was to little avail, as Thorpe took the class win again from Wilbow with Steven Kent staying out of trouble and keeping his consistent run of finishing on track in third. Fourth in class was Mark Phillips, who found a second in his lap times and improved in his on track performance. Rounding out the class was Gus Barbara, who was happier with his older model Holden Commodore VK but was excited at the next round, as he debuts a brand new HSV GTS Coupe. Brian King retired mid race when the car overheated due to a part in the radiator hose breaking.

Class D was again dominated by Dion Pangalos, who again engaged himself in a battle with Saloon Car's Glenn Kenny and fellow Class E rival Chris Reeves and unlike yesterday, did get

pass Kenny for track position. Reeves was happier with the car, but was more excited with racing at the shorter tracks such as Wakefield Park and Oran Park. Saloon Cars was again dominated by Dean Kelland with Kenny continuing to plug along and finish, which he done so.

RACE THREE

As the field lined up on the grid for the final eight lap race for the round, Pollicina was the notably absent from the grid. As he was firing up his Commodore, the MoTec management system had failed which meant he couldn't get the car start. He managed to eventually get the car started, but when he did join the race, he was a lap down thus putting him out of contention. At race start though, it was Handley who gained the upper hand as the 4WD system in his GTR put the power down to the ground better than his HSV rivals. He led into the first corner and set a precedence right up to the chequered flag.

Whilst Handley had total control from the race, those in HSV land were still nipping at his tail as the gap between Handley, Loscialpo, Miller and Holt was not much more than one second. So it wasn't an easy run for Handley as it may have seemed. Where Handley had the speed down the straights, the HSV's definitely had the upper hand in the braking areas such as Corporate Hairpin. Loscialpo, Miller and Holt continued their weekend long battle for the minor placings but were still hoping for a minor miracle that Handley's GTR would fail like it did in race one the day before. Sadly they'd be disappointed.

At race end, it was Handley who took a commanding win from Loscialpo and Miller in the battle for the minor podium placings. Fourth was Holt and Virag recovered from his race one indiscretion to finish fifth. Pollicina stayed out of trouble to finish 14th overall but gained some points that keeps him in touch with his rivals for Class A and outright placings.

In Class B, Rod Thorpe capped off a perfect debut weekend by winning the third race in front of Steve Kent and Paul Wilbow. Thorpe remained in touch with his Class A rivals for most of the weekend and despite the car running a bit hot, the HSV Clubsport ran on song to the delight of Thorpe. Fourth in class was Phillips, who survived a love tap at turn three by Dean Kelland to finish the race. Fifth was King and rounding out the field was Barbara. Barbara is now relishing the opportunity to move up into a HSV GTS Coupe next round, now putting the tried and proven VK Commodore into back of the workshop as a backup car.

Class D was set to be dominated by Panogalos, but the Mazda 626 suffered a rare failure to finish when the car pulled off at turn 10 on lap 3. This allowed Reeves and the Proton to move up and claim an unlikely class win and the smile on his face was hard to wipe off after the race. In Saloon Cars, Kelland capped off a perfect weekend by winning the class, despite his moment with Phillips while Kenny finished second in class and finished off a quiet weekend with an optimistic outlook on the season ahead.

It was the ideal start to the weekend for everyone involved. Everyone had good results, the new Kumho control tyre was given the thumbs up and Combined Touring Cars said thank you and goodbye to former sponsor Disc Brakes Australia as the category moves on to bigger and better things. The battle for the 2009 title continues on April 18-19 at Wakefield Park with a one hour endurance race and for many, the battle has just begun.

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