

MOTORSPORT
MOTOCROSS

Lewis claims maiden Arenacross podium

BY CHRIS CALDWELL

TWO young Tyrone racers enjoyed the opening rounds of the 2023 Arenacross UK Tour at Belfast's SSE Arena over the weekend, although neither escaped without some drama.

Omagh's Lewis Spratt is competing in the series for the third time, and the reigning Irish high wheel 85cc champion achieved his pre-weekend goal of earning a podium, while 10-year-old Newmills lad, Daniel Devine, was making his debut and he did so impressively.

Having won the Cumbrin Championship 65cc title last year, the P7 pupil at Cookstown's Holy Trinity Primary School went into the event with confidence and took to the big stage with relative ease.

He entered the arena as a complete novice in such a setting. And the rookie, who only took up the sport just over a year ago, was in contention from the off. His lap times were around half a second slower than the leaders and he enjoyed a top five finish before really turning on the style on Saturday.

Deciding to 'go for it' on the final day, he began doubling the whoops, rather than taking them one at a time as most of the 65cc riders were doing. That allowed him to cut his lap time and he qualified second, only for disaster to strike on the start line of the final race.

He was using a hole shot device, which locks the front suspension in place so the rider doesn't wheelie out of the start gate. Unfortunately, it didn't disengage and he spent the whole race without suspension, which made just riding the bike incredibly difficult.

But the gutsy lad stuck at it and despite having to absorb every bump his bike went over, he finished a stunning fourth overall on the day to sit com-



Omagh's Lewis Spratt in action during his AX Supermini British Championship race at the Arenacross UK held in SSE Arena, Belfast.

Photo: Rod Neill

fortably in the top five overall going into this coming weekend's event in Aberdeen.

Fourteen year-old Spratt, meanwhile, who was racing in the big wheel 85cc class, went into proceedings keen to seal his maiden podium on the Tour and he did just that, finishing second overall on day two to take third place in the Championship

ahead of the next event in Aberdeen.

That result on Saturday was all the more impressive as it came after a heavy crash earlier in the day and after he had been almost taken out by a back marker the day before.

The Omagh High School pupil started impressively and looked set to achieve his goal of a podium on Friday only for one of the slower

racers to swerve in front of him, causing him to crash from second place. Spratt managed to recover, remount his bike and battle back up to seventh to finish fifth overall on the day.

Day two wasn't without drama either, with another rider almost taking him out on the whoops before a heavy landing on the big jump causing him

to hit his chest heavily on his bike's handlebars. But despite some discomfort, he battled on and produced an impressive race to claim second overall on the day to move up to third in the standings.

The two lads will return to action in Aberdeen this coming Saturday and Sunday.

WORLD RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

Top six finish in Monte Carlo for Johnston

BY CHRIS CALDWELL

AARON Johnston and Takamoto Katsuta made a somewhat frustrating start to their latest World Rally Championship campaign at Rallye Monte Carlo over the weekend.

The Toyota Gazoo Racing Challenge Programme crew started brightly with a fourth fastest time on stage one, but their Rally1 Yaris then developed a handbrake malfunction on stage two, which meant they lost almost a minute on the leading competitors.

From that point on it was a case of the duo attempting to salvage what they could from the weekend, which, had things gone their way, could well have ended with a podium spot had lady luck not turned her back on them.

Throughout Friday's stages, Fintona co-driver Johnston and Katsuta punched in a string of top four stage times which allowed them to climb up from eighth overall to seventh going into the penultimate day of action. They continued their fine form on Saturday, maintaining a fast pace throughout the day to gain another position in the overall standings to sit sixth going into the final day.

Sunday proved to be something of a rollercoaster for the pair, who started the day almost 40 seconds behind fifth placed Ott Tanak and they immediately began eating into the M-Sport former World Champion's advantage by taking just over a second out of the Estonian on the first run of the day.

They then posted a fourth fastest time overall on stage 16, which reduced Tanak's lead by another six seconds and a stunning second fastest time on the penultimate stage of the day saw them move to within 0.1 of a second of their rival.

However, having maintained his tyres throughout Sunday's stages played out well for Tanak who claimed second on the power stage to take fifth overall while Johnston and Katsuta ended their run with damage to their rear-left suspension after their car developed a mechanical issue during their run, leaving them unable to fully open the throttle.

While their sixth placed finish at Rallye Monte Carlo is a two place improvement on 12 months previous, Johnston and his Japanese driver will take confidence from a solid outing that they know could have yielded so much more and they will hope to pick up more points next month at Rally Sweden.



Aaron Johnston and Takamoto Katsuta finished sixth overall at Rallye Monte Carlo.