

MEDIA RELEASE

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MCRAE RETURNS TO THE ROADS OF CATLINS

After taking four years out, Graham McRae of Invercargill will return to competitive rallying in this year's Catlins Coast Rally on Saturday 10 August.

McRae's motorsport journey is an interesting one. "I was completely not into motorsport," he said recently. "I even got my driver's licence a little later than most. It was my little brother Robert that got me into the sport after he started competing. I started out in autocross and club events and I started my first rally, Catlins, in 2004." I was seeded 97th out of 100 for my first rally and worked my way up to the point where I finished third in class in 2013 and second the year after that.

McRae estimates he has done "around twenty rallies" with the Eastern Southland Car Club's Catlins and Rankleburn regular events. He also had one tilt at the Spring Rally in Geraldine, three starts at Otago and even a Southland Rally many years ago. "We missed the first stage of that one as we got the directions wrong. We rejoined to do a couple of stages later on and eventually I put it in a culvert in Pebbly Hills."

While that was not his greatest day there has been no shortage of success for McRae. In addition to the Catlins successes he was runner-up in the Eastern Southland Car Club's Club Championship behind Dean Bond in the 2012/2013 season before becoming Club Champion in the 2013/2014 season. "I was pretty stoked with that, I had a pretty good little stint around that time." While McRae now lives in Invercargill he was originally from Gore hence his connection with the Eastern Southland Club, a club he holds in high regard, while he is also a member of the neighbouring Southland Sports Car Club.

There are several constants in McRae's rally career. One is his car – a Toyota Corolla GT. Graham has used the same car since that first rally in 2004. "It hasn't even had a paint job in that time," he laughs. "It still runs the same engine that Roger Laird prepared for us eleven years ago."

The other constant is family. Brother Robert has been in the co-driver's seat for every single rally. Graham's dad, Fraser, assists with the servicing and preparation of the car even though he too wasn't really a motorsport enthusiast until the boys got involved. In fact according to Graham you have to look back to his grandad who was a Southland karting champion many years ago for the motorsport link. Robert also assists with mechanical and engineering work and has spent many hours modifying the rally car and making sure it is super reliable. Family was also the reason that McRae has not competed at Catlins for the last four years. "Katie and I have two boys under two and a half years of age so family has taken priority. It was also the reason Graham, who has held many roles within the Eastern Southland Car Club, stepped down after a time as President.

However even during his self-imposed time out he has driven the safety car at Catlins for the last two years and he and Katie worked as a start crew the year before that. For those three years Robert and Fraser stayed involved too, carrying out Rescue Recovery roles at the event.

McRae credits his development as a driver to the grass autocross and club gravel events that he has contested. He also had a track car in which he did very well at Teretonga Clubsport events until he crashed it. It too, was a Toyota Corolla GT. He now has a new track car, another Toyota Corolla GT, and McRae makes no secret of the fact he is an unabashed Toyota lover.

With his first Catlins Rally looming after a four year break McRae reveals there have been a few developments made to the rally car with a few wee tweaks to be completed. "I did the Circle Hill Rallysprint recently and I would like to be at the pointy end of the class again on my return although considering my lack of driving in recent times a finish is very important. Class B is really booming at the moment with several national level drivers competing in the class."

McRae has achieved much as he has gone about his motorsport in a humble way over many years and it would be no surprise to see him achieve another great result on his return to the roads of the Catlins on Saturday 10 August.

McRae is grateful to Donny from Tyreland Gore, Eastern Engineering and Laird Motorsport for getting him up and running for Catlins 2019.

Owaka will once again be the hub for the event with the start taking place at Owaka Motors in Campbell Street, Owaka from 10am and the first car due to return to the rally finish in Campbell Street at 3.40pm. The rally is Round 5 of the Mainland Rally Championship and part of the Eastern Southland Car Club Rally Championship.

The Eastern Southland Car Club is delighted to have the support of the Clutha Licensing Trust through their Rosebank Lodge Balclutha establishment, plus Southroads, Owaka Motors, Yuasa Batteries and Stadium Finance. The club is also especially grateful to Rayonier Matariki Forests and the Clutha District Council for their assistance with the event.

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Graham McRae at the Circle Hill Rallysprint in the Corolla GT recently

Photograph: Becky Ladbrook - Fast Exposure Photography