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NAME FROM THE PAST RETURNS TO RALLYING

When he was a young man Stephen Gill of Winton enjoyed competing in rallies and sprints in Datsun 1200's. "I was young and it was fun at the time," says Gill who will make his return to the drivers seat at the Catlins Coast Rally on Saturday. "The Rally Of Southland was the big thing in those days. There were stages at places such as Wyndham, Otautau, Tuatapere. We didn't do a lot of rallying, we did two Southland Rally's and lots of sprints. I strongly recommend doing that to young guys. It was a controlled environment and driving a car without a lot of horsepower and good brakes I learnt so much."

After those initial rally experiences Gill knuckled down with work. "I still did a bit of co-driving and got into the mechanical side of the sport. Over the years I worked for the likes of Todd Bawden and Marty Roestenburg when they came south and also in NZ Rally Championship events and Rally New Zealand." Then about ten years ago through a mate, Lindsay Hegan, he got involved with Race Torque Engineering who prepared and ran the highly successful Team MRF cars in the Asia-Pacific Rally Championship. Several other Southlanders did the same as Gill, travelling back and forth to service for the team at rounds of the championship. Craig Cormack who will also compete at Catlins this year still does so and will head to Malaysia the day after the rally. "I did all the rounds over the years, I never did them all in one season but over a period I travelled to most - Japan, China etc. I learnt a lot, it was a great crew, well drilled. They would practice gearbox and diff changes, learning not to panic and keep their heads. A few years ago I contracted pneumonia and needed an operation. That stopped me and I never went back to it."

He now operates Gill Repairs in Winton and now, many years since he last drove in a rally, he will make his return at Catlins. "I just want to go out and have some fun. It can't be all work and no play." The car he has purchased has a pretty proud history, the ex-Derek Ayson Ford Escort powered by a Nissan FJ20 motor. Ayson won a National Title in the car and drove it to third at Catlins on one occasion. "I bought the car some time ago but have been busy at work and it has only been the last month and a half that I have started preparing it. I'm looking forward to it. One of the guys from work, Chris McFarlane, is my co-driver and he hasn't rallied before."

Finishing the event is the aim for Gill. "Anything can happen. I haven't driven the car in anger yet so we will see if I am too old," he says. A little older or not, it is great to see someone coming back into a sport that they have enjoyed so much over the years!

Lindsay Beer, on behalf of Eastern Southland Car Club 021 351 499