



FACTORY TEAMS HOLD UPPER HAND IN PRODUCTION VEHICLE TITLE RACE

The Toyota and Ford Racing factory teams last year won seven of the eight Production Vehicle category races in the Donaldson Cross Country Championship, and the status quo looks likely to continue when this year's series opens with the RFS 450 in Harrismith on 28 February and 1 March.

The Castrol Toyota Hilux squad, spearheaded by Anthony Taylor and Dennis Murphy, scored five of the seven wins on the way to clinching the overall Production Vehicle and SP Class championships with an event to spare. This season the SP Class has been split into two categories, but that won't affect the battle between the two factory giants.

The factory teams will compete in Class T which caters for vehicles powered by engines of four litres or more with solid rear axle or independent suspension. Class S will accommodate vehicles of up to four litres with solid axle suspension, and both categories will score points in their own class as well as the overall championship.

Both teams show changes from last season, but the Atlas Copco Ford Racing Team will have the more difficult start to the season. Taylor/Murphy team up in the Castrol Toyota Hilux that finished fourth on this year's Dakar Rally, and will be joined by Leeroy Poulter and Rob Howie in another Dakar specification Hilux.

Poulter replaces former champion Duncan Vos and is no stranger to the Donaldson series. The multi talented Poulter had a difficult Dakar debut but has to be regarded as a serious challenger for race wins and the overall championship.

Where Ford Racing is concerned the lead up to the RFS 450 has been difficult. Rising star Lance Woolridge is out for the season after back surgery, and former South African champion Chris Visser will miss the first race following neck surgery after an accident on the Dakar.

Ford has, however, secured Atlas Copco backing and the services of the highly experienced Gary Bertholdt and Siegfried Rousseau. Bertholdt and Rousseau were the pick of the privateers last season, and should blossom in a factory team environment.

Another team shuffle sees former SA champion and Ford stalwart Manfred Schroder step into the breach. For the first race Schroder will join Japie Badenhorst in the second Atlas Copco Ford Ranger, with both cars built to Dakar specifications, and can be relied on to produce a solid performance.

Access to additional resources gives the factory teams an advantage. But there is enough quality among the privateer ranks to provide the Toyota and Ford teams with a few concerns.

Thomas Rundle and Juan Mohr will be back in harness in the Godrich Toyota Hilux and will want to build on a highly impressive Dakar debut, while Atlas Copco have additional ammunition by way of Johan van Staden/Mike Lawrenson, in a new Nissan Navara, and Sarel van Biljon and Philip Herselman in a Toyota Hilux. Former Sun City 400 winners Christiaan du Plooy and Henk Janse van Vuuren will debut the new RFS Ford Ranger, with back-up from Hennie de Klerk and Johan Smalberger in the RFS BMW X3

Richard Fuller and Gary Austin will be out in the ex RFS BMX3 while Mike Whitehouse and Terence Marsh will shoulder the driving burden for Regent Racing in a pair of Nissan Navara entries. Whitehouse will be partnered by George Myburgh, with Marsh relying on Imperial Auto Celebrity Challenge co-drivers with television personality and international model Marius Roberts first up in the hot seat.

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The RFS 450 will also be a big moment for Harrismith based stalwart Kobus van Tonder with the Uni Freight team fielding two ex factory Ford Rangers – one in Class S and one in Class T. Van Tonder and son in law Freddie Kriel will be in the Class T entry with siblings Jacques and Lizelle van Tonder in the Class S car.

There are also two interesting newcomers in Class T with youngsters Jason Venter and Vince van Allemann (4x4 Mega World Toyota Hilux) and Johan and Werner Horn (Malalane Toyota Hilux) out in ex factory cars. It is likely to take the two crews a while to settle into Class T, but a personal rivalry carried over from last year's Class D will be followed with interest.

Class S looks to be wide open and it is going to be interesting to see how much of a nuisance they will be to their Class T counterparts. A Ruwaccon Racing versus Regent Racing rivalry could also add a touch of spice to the mix.

On the Ruwaccon side former champions Jannie Visser/Joks le Roux (Toyota Hilux) link up with Pieter Ruthven/Hansie Rheeder (Toyota Hilux) and Louw de Bruin and Riaan Greyling in a Ford Ranger. Regent Racing opposition will come from Archie Rutherford/Gerhard Schutte and Jurgen Schroder/Mike Abramson in Nissan Navara entries.

Deon Venter/Ian Palmer (4x4 Mega World Toyota Hilux) and Luke Botha/Jason Rathbone (Force Fuel Toyota Hilux) will also come into the reckoning. None of the Class S crews are likely to challenge for overall honours, but some interesting racing can be expected from the category.

Race headquarters, the start/finish and the designated service park will all be located at the La La Nathi resort on the outskirts of Harrismith. Public access to these areas and spectator points along the route is free of charge.

The qualifying race to determine grid positions will start at 11:30 on Friday, February 28 and the race at 08:30 on Saturday, March 1.

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