

Best of the best put the pedal to the metal in Sno*Drift Rally car race this weekend

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Lee T. Sam

X-Games hero Dave Mirra and co-driver Marshall Clarke throw up a wall of snow as they power their Subaru through a corner during last year's Sno*Drift rally in Northern Michigan. While Mirra isn't entered in this weekend's rally 68 teams, including the factory Subaru team, are ready to tackle the ice and snow of one of America's top rally races.

ATLANTA, Mich. — Northern Michigan is a nice place for a weekend drive and this weekend a lot of folks are going to take one...at 100 mph.

This weekend the roads of Mt. Montmorency County are going to roar to life as they play host to the Sno*Drift Rally on Friday and Saturday. The rally car race is made up of 24 timed stages and covers about 150 competitive miles over two days. It is the first of six races this season that make up the Rally America championship, the highest level of rally car racing in the United States.

"We're only the true snow event in the series," Sno*Drift media promotions liaison Alex Berger said. "It's a big

difference for a lot of the drivers."

Rally car racing differs from other high-level motorsports in that it is held point-to-point on real roads instead of as laps on a race track. Long a popular sport in Europe rally racing has been gaining support in the United States recently and variations of it were added to the X-Games in 2006. For safety reasons every car in the race has two passengers, a driver and a co-driver whose job it is to read off 'pace notes' that tell the driver what's coming next.

"It's not like any other race," rally driver Adam Yeoman said. "Every corner is new to you and you have to depend on your co-driver's pace notes."

Yeoman, a resident of Hancock, was the 2011 Rally America Rookie of the Year and finished ninth overall in the Sno*Drift rally last year. He noted the Atlanta race is hard to judge before it begins because of its wildly varying winter conditions, his team FY Racing has to bring extra tires of all types to prepare for the race as the roads can be anything from pure ice to slush and all of it means totally different setups for his car.

"I really enjoy it when I get in my zone," Yeoman said of racing. "It's intense but it's a great time behind the wheel."



Lee T. Sam

The snow fell pretty hard at times during last year's Sno*Drift rally but it didn't slow down any of the racers including Dillon Van Way and Jake Blattner in their Ford Fiesta. The Sno*Drift rally is the only dedicated snow and ice race on Rally America's schedule.

The 68 vehicles entered in the rally vary wildly from top-of-the-line factory entries fielded by Subaru and Mitsubishi to privateer entries that range everywhere from 2011 Ford Fiestas and Scion TCs to a 1987 Dodge Shadow and a 1991 GMC Sonoma. Though heavily modified for racing every car in the rally is still street legal and must be driven from stage from stage on public roads. Yeoman's car, No.425, is a blue-and-white 2002 Subaru Impreza.

"There's a long (rally) history (for the Impreza) and it's easy to get parts for them here in the US," Yeoman said of his Subaru. "They are the go-to car when you are starting out in an all-wheel-drive

car."

The rally is headquartered in Atlanta but begins in Lewiston at 1 p.m. Friday. The race moves into Atlanta when it begins again at 8 a.m. Saturday. Most of the action takes place outside town with a spectator guide including race times and directions to the five designated viewing areas throughout the county available on Sno*Drift's website, sno-drift.org. Including competitors, spectators and volunteers the event typically brings about 8,000 people to the area.

"We have to be very strict on spectator areas for liability reasons," Berger said. "It's a totally different racing event to what people are used to... They go by pretty quick for the road conditions."

During the race the cars can reach speeds of up to 100 mph which is slightly slower than most rally races because of the winter conditions the race is deliberately run in.

"It's hard to build up speed when you are slipping," Berger said. "Plus if you go off you're into the snow banks instead of a tree, it's a lot softer."

Most of the roads used for the rally are seasonal roads not in use this time of year but some are main roads. All are closed 45 minutes before racing begins with each stage taking just over an hour to complete. Some of the stages in the race are repeated to make the event more compact but road conditions change constantly. There is some clean up after each stage before the roads are reopened to public traffic.

"It seems like year after year it's always icy," defending Sno*Drift winner Travis Hanson, originally of Traverse City, said. "Somebody that's really consistent and has the goal of finishing the race rather than winning has the best chance for the overall win."

One stage of the rally that is not held on regular roads is a short 'super special,' where fans can see the entire stage, set to take place at the Lewiston Sand and Gravel Pit on Saturday. Parking is limited at the super special but free busing to the site is available from either Atlanta High School or the Lewiston Ace Hardware on the day of the race.

Other highlights of the rally include the pre-racing 'Parc Expose,' where fans can see the cars and drivers before they race both days, and the service areas where the cars are rapidly repaired between stages. Both the Parc Expose and the service area are located in Lewiston on Friday before moving to Atlanta on Saturday.

Berger notes that any fans attending the rally should dress warmly as it is going to be cold. He also noted that there can be some waiting at times for the cars to race by at any of the designated spectator areas.

For those wishing to attend the race important spectator safety information can be found on either Sno*Drift or Rally America's websites. For those unable to make it north Rally America is streaming live video from the race on its website, rally-america.com.

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