

Colin McRae
Plus His £100K Group 4 Escort

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Words: Phil Royle
Photos: Kenny P



Bruv, Alister's got a MkII as well.
How's that for sibling rivalry?

Colin Goes Retro

We caught up with Colin McRae at Castle Combe's Rallyday to chat about the WRC, Fords and specifically his own mad MkII.

With an ex-works Puma WRC, rallycross Focus WRC, old-school three-door Group A Cossies, RS200/2000s galore and more MkI and MkII Escorts than you can wave a bobble hat at, Castle Combe's Rallyday is the place to be if you love your Fords, and rallying.

Despite the first class quality of all these other raucous rally machines in the packed paddock, there's only one getting all the attention — DJM Motorsport's unique MkII, built for rally star, Colin McRae.

This 330 bhp, independent rear end MkII is an engineering masterpiece. And, despite it being rwd and naturally-aspirated, Colin's mad MkII is capable of swifter special stage speeds than a WRC car... given the right driver, of course.

So, after a long day racing brother Alister sideways around Castle Combe, and giving the

world and his wife an interview, Colin kindly spared Fast Ford time for a chat.

Fast Ford: What's the Castle Combe Rallyday about for you, Colin?

Colin McRae: "It's just a great fun day out — nothing too serious, for a change. It also gives me and my MkII a chance to race Alister in his!"

FF: What made you decide to build and drive a MkII?

CM: "The MkII is the rally car of all time. When my father, Jimmy (rally legend and five times British Champion) started rallying, these were the type of rwd cars that were at the top level of the sport. I remember watching in the forests and they always sounded the best and looked the most spectacular —

sideways. Ever since then, they've stuck in my mind. And now that MkIIs are making a big comeback, I thought I'd build one of my own for rallying."

FF: How did the project come about?

CM: "The idea initially was to build a standard one, but as I've got more involved with Dave and Julie at DJM, I've gone for something more radical, as you do when you meet them and see what they do. It's been great getting involved in something so different."

FF: So, what's the low down on this MkII then?

CM: "On the outside, I wanted the car to look as much like a MkII as possible, but underneath, it's a full prototype. DJM Dave

COLIN MCRAE

has brought together the final spec of the shell, independent rear end, suspension, Millington engine and his own transmission system. But I've been heavily involved in the development — bringing my experience from the WRC scene, as well as fine-tuning the finished result.

"It's still a basic rwd rally car, just with a few special modern additions — like the sequential shifter, DJM-developed gearbox and independent rear end. A lot of people try and build a modern MkII, but this one actually works."

FF: What's it like to drive?

CM: "My first drive of the car was testing at Blyton, and it worked really well straight out of the box. We had some initial trouble with the first gearbox, but after Dave designed and built his own sequential unit, it's worked great. It actually works better than a box on a WRC car, as it's not broken down yet!"

"Out on the stages, there's so little roll, giving great corner speeds. That's a lot to do with the centre of gravity being right down.

It's 50 mm lower than a standard MkII and the engine is set further back too, and the ancillaries are mounted low down, which all helps. It's also very light (900 kg), making it extremely responsive, and allows me to brake very late.

"I've not had it right on the limit yet either. You can go so deep into corners that you think you've missed your braking point, then it stops and you're right on line. It's a learning process, but I know there's still a lot more to come from this car."

FF: Can you compare it to a WRC car/other Fords?

CM: "You can't compare it. It's 300 kg lighter for a start, which makes a massive difference. It does lose out with the lack of 4wd, but the traction for a rwd car is very good indeed (thanks to that DJM rear end). And once you get up the gears, it really starts to get your attention. The faster you go, the lighter it feels and the more responsive the

car becomes. It gives me a real buzz... very different from what I've been used to."

FF: What plans have you got for the MkII for the rest of the year?

CM: "Well, there's my own event; the 'Colin McRae Stages Rally,' based in Perth on October 1, then I'll just be using it for fun days out."

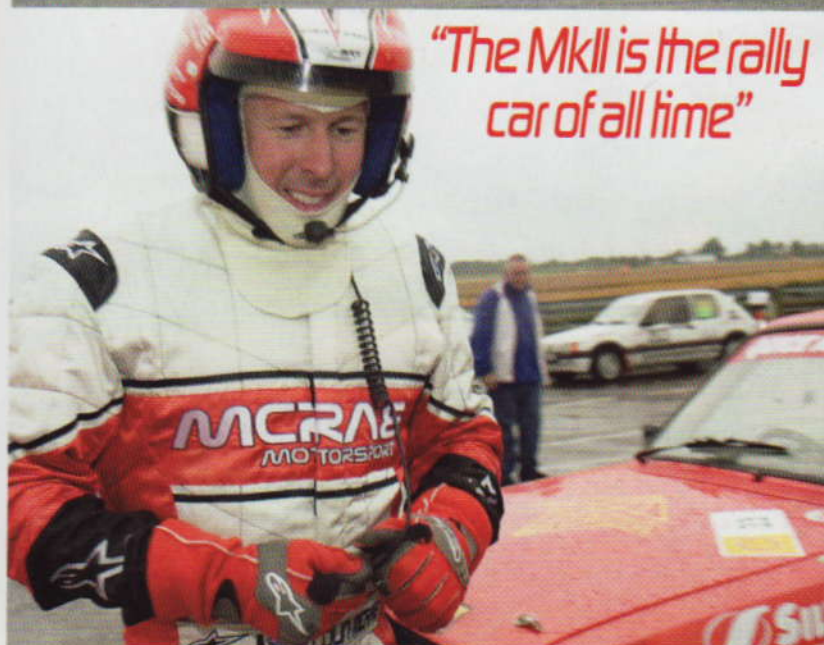
FF: Any future plans for the WRC?

CM: "I'm really looking forward to the drive in the Skoda Fabia. There's still a lot I want to explore within the WRC before I stop; I feel as though I have a lot left to give. The Skoda drive is a great way of getting back into it. I'm aiming to give the team a better result than they've had so far this year."

"I am working on putting something together for more WRC events, so if something really positive comes up, I'll be back. If it's the right team and the right car, I'll go for it."



"The MkII is the rally car of all time"



Forget the Lancias, EVGs and Imprezas, it was an old Escort that was grabbing the limelight at Rally Day.



With the Escort nearly always sideways, this is the window Colin looks out of the most.

Weapon Of Choice

With a semi-spaceframed rear end, sequential six-speed box and 330 bhp 2.5-litre Millington engine, this must be the ultimate MkII Escort.

Without upsetting Malcolm Wilson, I think this MkII is my favourite Ford now," reports rally legend Colin McRae, while massive smiles beam across the faces of the car's creators, David and Julie Plant of DJM Motorsport. This is high praise indeed.

It doesn't stop there either. Colin continues to describe how fast the MkII is on the special stages — quicker than his previous Focus or Xsara WRC cars, despite being naturally-aspirated, way down on torque/technology and only rwd. This is phenomenal stuff, but the sort of quality we've come to expect from the unique 'imagineering' process of DJM Motorsport.

The project began about three years ago, when Colin came up with the idea of building a MkII with an independent rear end to try and increase the car's wayward back end traction. He had already owned and rallied a superb MkII

with a proper 2-litre BDA engine, and although he found it great fun, it was too slow for the charging McRae... spending more time sideways than going forwards!

Colin initially pitched his plan to Gordon Birtwhistle (of suspension giants Proflex). But, as this was such a specialist project, Gordon introduced Colin to David and Julie Plant of DJM Motorsport, creators of the infamous Kitten rally car, 4wd WRC-engined Ka and other potty prototypes..

"The phone went one morning back in January 2002, and it was Colin McRae. I thought someone was taking the mick. I was so chuffed to have him on the phone, and we talked about his MkII project for ages, coming up with a plan to increase the traction limit at the rear end, with a bespoke independent set-up," reports David. So the plan was hatched, and rather than

simply do the job for Colin, DJM made the call to develop this MkII conversion as a kit to sell to clubman rally folk. So, you too can buy a piece of this engineering masterpiece.

Since that first phone call, Colin has flown his helicopter into DJM's back yard every few months at critical phases of development, ever since his first visit when he was taken in by DJM's unique approach.

"It's been so rewarding to work closely on a project of this size with a man of Colin's calibre and experience," adds Dave.

The first decisions were engine and gearbox choice. With only the best in both Colin and David's minds for every facet of the car, that meant another 2-litre BDA or a 2.5-litre Millington engine. The larger, more powerful Millington made the cut, so Dave got a dummy engine made up, to begin the painstaking process of



MKII ESCORT

measuring up where the engine, (initially out-sourced) gearbox, custom DJM front and rear suspension and roll cage would go.

The idea was to create a car where you get a feeling of perfect neutrality, where the driver becomes totally akin with their car, thanks to minimum inertia and maximum feedback.

With the dummy engine and gearbox laid out inside Colin's MkII donor shell, Colin came back to set up his perfect driving position (and design his own, superb pedal box). Then Dave worked out the rest of the cage, suspension, gearbox,

driveshaft and diff positions around it. A low centre of gravity (and wheelbase) is at the heart of the mission, hence why everything is mounted as low as possible. And is something Colin is adamant about too, bringing his years of rallying (and spannering) experience to the project.

It's also the reason the engine is mounted so far back in the engine bay, and why it's angled slightly to the right, to line up perfectly with the gearbox, for the best possible handling benefits and weight distribution.

With those critical early decisions made, Dave designed and manufactured the roll cage and front and rear suspension kits, while partner Julie did her stunning stuff with carbon-fibre, Kevlar and other composites. This included making a MkII replica-shaped dashboard with bespoke steering column to mount all the electrical switchgear/driver aids. Then there's the amazing fly-off handbrake, breath-taking fuel cell custom door cards, radiator panel, bonnet pin holder, tripmeter holder, oil tank cover, gearbox tunnel cover, battery box,



Turreted rear runs Proflex coil-overs, APs and a Sierra 7.5 inch diff.



Check it out: multi, multi-linked rear is the trickiest we've seen on a MkII yet.



DJM's Dave: built the mad Cossie Ka (May '04 issue), and now this monster.



MKII ESCORT

navigator's footrest and ram-air system. What a talent she is — not only giving a woman's touch to the awesome aesthetics, but helping make the car stronger and lighter.

The equally-talented Dave manufactured the T45 lightweight, super-stiff steel roll cage and front and rear suspension kits, all based around a shell with the same track as a normal MkII, but with a 60 mm wider track for added traction.

The kit is pure genius, and instantly effective. The fact that it's faster than a WRC car, in the right hands and environment, is staggering.

The front kit uses DJM uprights, output flanges, track control arms, compression struts and a lightweight tubular cross member. The rear end is more complex — a semi-space frame with a custom diff cradle mounted on the rear seat belt mounts (using 7.5 inch Sierra Cosworth 3.6:1 diff unit), DJM bottom wishbones, driveshafts, uprights, output flanges

and no anti roll bar. Roller system Proflex coil-overs are then employed all round, with remote gas dampers and geometry set up by Mr McRae, of course.

As the project neared completion, Colin has added more feedback for the final finish and set-up. "We had 200-plus hours in the car before we could push the button and test it finally. At this stage, there are only very small changes you can make, so it has to work well straight away," says Dave.

The only problem they had was with the out-sourced gearbox, which destroyed itself on the first gravel test. To avoid a repeat drama, Dave (along with another business interest) has developed his own gearbox.

This new box allows for a very low engine position, therefore low centre of gravity, and Dave has developed a carbon-fibre paddle shift system to operate on the gearbox.

"Colin's had 6R4s, loads of Group A and B stuff and driven at the top of the WRC, but it's this MkII that really turns him on.

"Whenever we take the car up to see him, he is out of the house and getting us to drive it off the trailer as soon as possible, then he goes straight out on the country lanes. He obviously loves driving it, as there's always a massive grin on his face when he gets back. That makes all the hours of hard graft worthwhile.

"It's been an amazing project to be involved with, and to get positive feedback from a guy like Colin is why we did it," smiles a mightily proud Dave.

So, there you have it. The recipe for the ultimate MkII Escort: take a rally legend, 21st century DJM genius, a great engine and gearbox and constant feedback from arguably the world's fastest rally driver. The king is dead — long live the ultimate MkII.



Colin's last MkII ran a big-spec 2-litre BDA; now he's gone for Millington power. These beauties roll out at 2.5-litres and run to 300+ bhp using natural aspiration...



Engine's mounted as far back as possible to improve the weight distribution. Clever.

Thanks

Big thanks to Colin McRae, and Dave and Julie at DJM Motorsport (01623 836503, www.djm-motorsport.co.uk).

AVON TYRES

