21:43

Le Touquet Talk

Good evening from Le Touquet and the night before the start of Winter Challenge to Monte-Carlo 2018.

All registered crews have made the hotel and attended a drivers briefing earlier this evening which was held by Clerk of The Course, Will Rutherford. It was a very upbeat mood in the meeting with crews relishing the prospect of snow as we move onto the higher ground after the concentration run tomorrow.

It wasn’t all plain sailing for one crew however. Dermot Carnegie/Paul Bosdet arrived into their overnight hotel with steam pouring out of their usually bomb-proof Volvo PV544 and they suspected a head gasket problem which had reared its head on the RAC Rally of The Tests had returned. On filling the coolant system up it was noticed that a trickle of water was entering the car which led to a faulty heater matrix being diagnosed and bypassed. Great news initially, but the repair has left Dermot and Paul without a heater and with the forecast snow it could be an icy affair for the pairing.

Ed Abbott is in fine fettle after swapping his Jaguar XJ-S differential for a lower-g geared version, the extra acceleration this will bring will be welcome on the snow-free sections but it may become a handful the higher we climb should the snow come down.

As the crews parked their cars up tonight outside the Westminster Hotel in Le Touquet a steady stream of admirers filed through Parc Fermé and chatted to competitors and organisers alike. The town has been incredibly friendly and accommodating to the event and HERO would like to pass on our thanks to the town for this.

We start at 08:01 local time tomorrow and will be live on our Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/herorally/) where you can see the crews leave the line and wish them Bon Voyage as they start out on an adventure that is sure to bring some twists and turns. Who will seal the win on that most famous of places, the Col De Turini on Thursday afternoon, stay tuned to this web page and our social media channels to find out.
Vieux aux Rampartes, Provins - Northern France

We're in the ramparted town of Provins for lunch in some absolutely beautiful conditions, the sun is shining, not a cloud in the sky and all is well with the world, especially the Winter Challenge to Monte-Carlo.

This morning has been a 300Km run to pass through the vast plains of The Somme and get around Paris with the least traffic possible. Leaving here will see an hour’s run to the very first regularity of the event where competition will commence on the event. There are three regularities this afternoon and we will bring you the updates and news from Beaune this evening.

16:38

Bubbling over in Chablis

The first competitive section of The Winter Challenge to Monte-Carlo has caused some crews a few issues. Richard Prosser/Martin Neal found themselves on the sharp end of a speed change, a missed instruction costing the Alpine pair dearly.

Dan Gresly/Elise Whyte put in a storming performance to drop 6 seconds with Dermot Carnegie/Paul Bosdet posting the reported best time of day on just four seconds dropped over three timing points.

Tony Sheach/Rachel Wakefield have had suspension issues on their Triumph TR4 and we don’t yet know if they are able to continue. More on this later when we find out what has gone wrong for sure.

The average for this section was twelve seconds, more from Beaune later this evening.

21:07

No Beaune of contention from Bloxidge and Canavan.

That’s been a very long day.

We’re here in Beaune after travelling almost 350 miles through France to sit just north-west of Switzerland and around an hour north of Lyon.

We have had one crew with mechanical difficulties today, sadly, we don’t know as yet if Tony Sheach and Rachel Wakefield are able to carry on in their very famous Triumph TR4, ‘Beastie’. We believe the issue to be Kingpin related and Tony is trying
to source one through his extensive knowledge of Triumphs and the followers of the Marque.

The route today took the Winter Challenge north-east of Amiens and along the arrow straight D934 near Roye before cutting across the Somme and Choisy-en-Brie prior to lunch at the delightful town of Provins to the south-east of Paris, avoiding the melee of traffic that surrounds the famous city on the Seine. Provins is a medieval town and is famous for its production of rose based foods, one of the most palatable being rose honey which we are told is delicious. As well as wine and food, Provins has some ancient buildings which are simply stunning and under the view of the ramparts crews took lunch.

From here we crossed the Seine to the south of Paris and into the Bourgogne for the first regularity of the day, near Bérulle. This was designed to ease crews into the coming days’ competition and was a fairly straight-forward section, class of the field were Dermot Carnegie/Paul Bosdet on four seconds penalties and Paul Bloxidge/Ian Canavan one behind them. Bill Cleyndert/Roger Bricknell were a further second adrift as were Monty Karlan/Peter Rushforth. Other crews with great attempts here were Dan Gresly/Elise Whyte on eight and Helge Helmbold/Stephan Huber on nine.

The scenery here was in total contrast to the flat and often featureless plains of northern France, we were now climbing into the hills made famous by the Chardonnay Grape and the town of Chablis which gives its name to the world-renowned wine produced in the area. The second regularity seemed to be a pretty innocuous affair, the sting in the tail being an easy to miss timing point that was placed after a hairpin junction. Cleyndert/Bricknell fell foul of this after an excellent first section with Helmbold/Huber following suit in exactly the same manner. It caught out a plethora of other crews with Peter Neville/Pat Neville dropping 29 here, Richard Prosser/Martin Neal being caught to the tune of a minute and Neil Walmsley/Kevin Needham in their mighty three-litre Healey also had difficulties here.

The final section set off in a lay-by with the first timing point situated after a complex of roads near a farmyard, Bloxidge and Canavan dropped a second here with Helmbold/Huber trying to pull time back with a clean time. They fell foul of the second timing point at a junction that was quite difficult to negotiate in the rapidly decreasing light, the half-light also caused issues For Liam Hammond/Mark Simpson and Mike Howells/Sue Hill who both dropped a minute here.

At the end of the first day we have Bloxidge/Canavan in the lead by three seconds from Carnegie/Bosdet in their Volvo. A second Volvo lies third with Karlan/Rushforth five seconds behind Carnegie/Bosdet, in fourth and waiting to pounce lies the Porsche 911 of Gresly/Whyte whilst Olaf Pothoven/Pieter van Leusden lie an excellent fifth with a string of consistently good performances.

First car is away tomorrow at 08:31, we’ll see you during the day with more live updates from Winter Challenge to Monte-Carlo 2018.
Twists and turns at the top

A quick update from the stunning Le Regardoir Restaurant in Moirans En Montagne where a fine lunch has been enjoyed on the banks of Lake Vouglan high in the Jura Region.

We’ve hit snow, not much but enough for the third regularity of the day to be tricky underfoot with some snow on the road interspersed with black ice where the road was sheltered with trees.

A run out from Beaune this morning crossing the Seille Plains saw crews enshrouded in mist before taking in the first regularity close to Beaufort. This was a twisting section that climbed through the trees of the Curenne Forest and St. Cevaux before the final timing point at Augisey. This was a more complex section than the previous ones with several hairpins and hills to negotiate with blind crests adding to the fun. Dan Gresly/Elise Whyte were joint class of the field on six seconds, their score equalled by Michael Moss/Andrew Duerden. Bloxidge and Canavan dropped seven seconds with this fine score being equalled by Monty Karlan/Peter Rushforth who between them have 80 competitive events to Monte-Carlo under their belts.

This section caught out Drmot Carnegie/Paul Bosdet who had issues at the third timing point being 13 seconds late which would see them drop into joint second with Gresly/Whyte.

The second regularity of the day was much more straight-forward with only a couple of junctions and an odd hairpin to attack. Moss/Duerden cleaned this section as did Ed Abbott/Pete Johnson in the mighty XJ-S V12. Bruce Wood/John Vaughan were getting into the swing of things in their Bristol and dropped just nine seconds, a fine attempt from the newcomers to regularity rallying. Paul Merryweather/Tony Jolly dropped 15 here which was enough to cost them a couple of places in their Consul Capri, a car that has drawn many admiring glances from locals as the event has crossed France.

The final reg of the morning was a longer section that looped around the Ruisseau de Giron and climbed into the snowline. A good distance between the timing points kept crews on their toes and pushed Bloxidge/Canavan into a ten-second penalty at the second timing point, an easy to overshoot slot right onto a mixed-surface road that had suffered heavily with recent snow fall. Nick Maris/Nick Pullan have started to gel and recorded a creditable 17 with Roy Perkins/Andrew Fish one-second behind them. Australia’s Aidan Mawhinney/Rory Gallagher are struggling a little with the navigation on the event and are essentially touring at the moment. The Triumph pairing of Jonathon Hancox/Richard Lambley starred on this section, finding the snow and ice on some points of the regularity to their liking and dropping just five seconds over the three timing points.
We're at Circuit JuraSud now for a driving test and will post times later on.

07:42

Aches and Pains in Aix Le Bains

That was an afternoon and a half. Spent in the higher parts of the Grand Montagnes, the sections have tested crews with a myriad of hairpins and some challenging navigation. One thing that has come from the crews is the quality of the new maps introduced by the Clerk Of the Course and Event Director. Despite the clarity of the 1:25,000 scale maps, some crews weren’t used to the speed at which they have to be read, under a magnifying glass or Poti, these maps come alive but some roads are still missing from them – as is the French way.

Coming out of Moirans-en-Montagne, a short hop took the event to the Circuit JuraSud where a good crowd were present to welcome the crews. Four crews escaped penalties, Bosdet/Carnegie, Gresly/Whyte, Bloxidge/Canavan and Perkins/Fish all posting the quickest times in their respective class. From here the regularities would come thick and fast with three sections that would vary from open and flowing roads to tight and tortuous hairpins to keep the crews on their toes. It would also prove to be the downfall for the overnight leaders, Bloxidge/Canavan when an overshoot at a timing point netted them a one-minute penalty, more about this later.

Reg 2/4, Jura Sud started outside of Molignes and wound its way on the D63 through Vulvoz and Choux before the End of Reg at Désertin. Despite the best efforts of the Clerk of The Course, the first timing point was the one that took time from 99% of the crews, only Bill Cleyndert/Roger Bricknell cleaned this and posted a one at the next timing points to claim bragging rights for this section.

RS 2/5 took crews back into the snow and caught many out before the first timing point with snow covering the entrance to the desired road meaning crews had to venture down to ascertain if there actually was a road there. Perkins/Fish came in very hot into the first TP after missing this and almost slid off the road after their front wheel hit the verge and dragged them towards some trees, other crews that were really pushing here were Peter and Pat Neville and Paula and Mike Donald, wheels locked seemed to be the order of the day on this broken surface section of road. The route wound its way through the Forêt Du Comble with much of the road covered in snow that had frozen making progress tricky and needing deft touches on the steering and throttle at times to keep pointing in a forward direction. One crew who struggled here were Liam Hammond/Mark Simpson who’s Rover’s tyres weren’t up to the snow and left them needing a tow from the closing car to get up a hill…

Carnegie/Bosdet heaped the pressure on with a fine two points dropped but Bloxidge/Canavan countered this with a one-second penalty for the whole regularity. Olaf Pothoven/Pieter van Leusden were spectacular in their Escort 1600 Sport,
fishtailing beautifully through the woods and keeping great time with just seven-seconds dropped.

Up next was a linear regularity that followed the contours of Le Grand Colombrier and although not as twisting and demanding as the other regularities it was here that the leaderboard would see significant changes. Carnegie/Bosdet and Gresly/Whyte were locked in battle through this section, both scoring a total of nine-seconds over the two timing points and leaving each other with no room for errors. Hancox/Lambley pipped them both though with a fine eight-seconds lost to climb into third place overall. The second timing point was situated just after a tight 90 right and after coming in a little too hot into the control, the Porsche 911 of Bloxidge/Canavan couldn’t stop in time and failed to stop astride the timing point, relegating them to fifth.

Reg seven took in the infamous Col de Sapenay and with 17 hairpins in just under two kilometres, this was a section that the drivers could really attack. Monty Karlan/Peter Rushforth were in a class of their own here and stopped the clocks at five seconds, not wanting to be upstaged, Michael Moss/Andrew Duerden set the exact same times in what was a real challenge for all the crews. Nothing could surpass the commitment and skill of Helge Helmbold/Stephan Huber who posted an amazing three-seconds lost in their BMW 323i, a testament to the German pairing who, if they hadn’t had some mistakes earlier in the event, would be challenging for a place in the top three for sure. Nicholas Maris/Nick Pullan were another crew who thoroughly enjoyed this section with the big Datsun 240Z ideally suited for this sort of regularity.

We end the second day here in Aix-le-Bains quite early for the Winter Challenge, but tomorrow sees a huge day in front of the crews with a night section that is sure to change the order about.

• 22:58

All change again!

It’s been a full-on day that has seen changes throughout the table. After leaving Aix-Le Bains the event ventured immediately in the Alps to the south-east of the town, the first and second regularities didn’t have much bearing on the event, but, as crews headed higher and into the Vercors, things would change significantly. The event was well in the snow line now and the regularities and navigation were becoming more challenging for the crews.

Starting in the lowlands of the Chartreuse region, regularity three would climb up from les Essaits de la Palud and end slightly north of Col du Granier. Dan Gresly/Elise Whyte were in a class of their own recording just four seconds lost for the whole section. Just one second behind them were Olaf Pothoven/Pieter van Leusden in their wonderful sounding 1600 Sport Escort – breathing through twin Weber IDF carburettors and filling the surrounding areas with memories of times past. Jonathan Hancox/Richard Lambley were climbing stealthily through the pack and stringing a set of ultra-consistent performances, they couldn’t top the best times here but stayed
in contention with 19 seconds penalties. Despite having some imperious runs over the first two sections of the day, Dermot Carnegie/Paul Bosdet had a nightmare start to this section with Paul misreading a couple of corners which led to them dropping one-minute in penalties and sending them tumbling down the leaderboard.

Next up was a regularity named Vence which took its name from a river that was crossed in the midpoint of the section. Despite it being a fairly wide section situated on a D (Domestique) road it would claim time from the majority of crews. Using all their experience of the area and the roads in it, Monty Karlan/Peter Rushforth stormed the section with just three-seconds in penalties. Carnegie/Bosdet were at maximum attack to post four-seconds whilst Peter and Pat Neville were on fire with just five-seconds dropped. Gresly/Whyte showed a chink in their armour that would leave them vulnerable later and dropped 11 seconds here, New Zealand husband and wife team Paula and Mike Donald started to get to grips and posted a great time of 12 seconds lost to give them their best performance on a regularity of the event so far.

Into lunch via a test at Lens-en-Vercors and Carnegie truly went to town on the ice racing circuit which is normally host to the Andros Trophy. Nobody could match the Irishman as he used his years of Rally Cross experience to set fastest times on both of the tests here, many (including the writer of this report) would have given their eye-teeth to have been sat in the Volvo PV 544 as Dermot showed how to control a car on immensely slippery surfaces. Paul Bloxidge/Ian Canavan, Olaf Pothoven/Pieter van Leusden and Peter & Pat Neville all claimed fastest times in their respective classes on the first test. Karlan/Rushforth, Cleyndert/Bricknell and Perkins/Fish claimed bragging rights on the second alongside Carnegie/Bosdet as the test was reversed, a challenging downhill hairpin left on ice proving too intimidating for a full attack from many crews.

Things were starting to change and putting the disappointment of the earlier navigational error way behind them, Carnegie/Bosdet Piled on the pressure after lunch. Regularity six would take in the Col de Echarasson and it was here that snow would play a big part towards yet another change in the results. A line fault at the first timing point cost Gresly/Whyte 25 seconds and would put them within grasp of both Carnegie/Bosdet and Hancox/Lambley, Carnegie/Bosdet having the bragging rights with just nine seconds dropped, the closest crews to them were Paul Merryweather/Tony Jolly and Karlan/Rushforth on 13.

Col de Machine would live up to its fearsome reputation of being a real test for crews and cars and here Dan Gresly/Elise Whyte faltered, misjudging some snow they found themselves embedded on a snow bank needing some deft excavations to free themselves, dropping a minute. Merryweather/Jolly posted 18 alongside Ed Abbott/Pete Johnson, Karlan/Rushforth once again were on fire with 13 but nobody could match Canavan/Bloxidge who posted 12 here. This regularity was another set on D-class roads but the sting in the tail was several excursions through lay-bys that would catch the unwary out. The second timing point was situated on a downhill right hander on gravel where several crews came in hot, Paula & Mike Donald tried to attack the local verges whilst Pothoven/van Leusden slid perilously close to a line fault-their Escort developing a rear brake problem. One crew that struggled here were Nicholas Maris/Nick Pullan who missed the first timing point completely and overshot the second prior to realising their mistake and returning to clean the timing point!

We're awaiting crews to return from the TC section tonight and will report more as we have it.
Triumphant day for Hancox & Lambley

Tonight has seen a night section and two regularities that have tested the crews to the limit. Under magnification, the presented maps have come into their own and the detail that is able to be lifted from them is drawing praise from the crews.

Supper was taken in an old favourite of Winter Challenges past at the Domaine de Turzon where a hearty Beef Stew and Dauphinoise potatoes was welcomed before the night’s competition. A short run out to St-Fortunat-sur-Eyrieux brought the ninth regularity of the day, L’Eyrieux de Trible, this was a lengthy section that wound its way from the start up the Col de Trible towards the finish at Le Chambon de Bavas. Gresly/Whyte pushed hard here to score an outstanding six-second penalty and claw back some time they had lost earlier in the day. Nearest score to them was the ten-seconds of Bloxidge/Canavan who were followed by Hancox/Lambley on 18.

Up next was a TC section where nine controls had to be visited in timed-to-the-minute sections, some of which were PC sections designed to impede crews as well as ensure route adherence. Two crews were outstanding here – Hancox/Lambley in their Triumph 2.5 PI and Bloxidge/Canavan in their Porsche 911 were the only crews to clean this part. The section between the start and the first Time Control proved the most problematic with just three crews cleaning it. As well as the previously mentioned pair, Roy Perkins/Andrew Fish put in a storming performance here.

The final action of Leg Three was a regularity that started from the tiny Ville of La Justice before snaking its way along the spine of Roche de Merly, les Côtes de St-Loup and the Col des Ayres for the final timing point. Gresly/Whyte were top dogs once again with five-seconds dropped whilst Karlan/Rushforth posted six. Hancox/Lambley and Carnegie/Bosdet tied the section on nine-seconds in what had been a frenetic battle over the course of the day.

However, partly due to their excellent performance on the TC section, the Triumph pair go into Leg Four in the lead from Gresly/Whyte by ten-seconds. Third are Carnegie/Bosdet holding Karlan/Rushforth into fourth whilst Bloxidge/Canavan sit fifth.

It can all change tomorrow as we enter the penultimate leg of the Winter Challenge to Monte-Carlo 2018.

21:03

Problems in Provence take down the Triumph

Whilst snow hasn’t played a major factor in today’s events, the scenery and terrain have been incredible as the south of France looms closer. Seven regularities have been the order of the day and it has been an incredible battle between two crews, Jonathan Hancox/Richard Lambley went into today with a ten-second advantage and
up to lunch they had been pegged back to just three-seconds by Daniel Gresly/Elise Whyte.

Before we get into the update we have to reflect on the bad luck that has plagued Tony Sheach/Rachel Wakefield on this event. The front suspension rebuilt after a Kingpin had snapped on the first day, Tony and Rachel made a huge effort to re-join the rally which they did after a 600-mile round trip to Germany to source and fit parts. This morning saw them leave the Golden Tulip in Valence to attempt the first regularity only for a stone to fracture their oil cooler requiring a hasty fix at the side of the road. Whilst relaying this story to one of the media crew, Tony attempted to open a soft drink only for the ring pull to snap off without opening the can, sometimes, lady luck is just not on your side.

The main areas of combat today have been the Ardeche and later into the day, Provence. It was quite startling to see the difference between the two areas unfold and how quickly this occurred. Skirting the higher peaks in the Ardeche, an Alpine feel was prominent and the rugged nature of the terrain drew many a gasp of admiration from crews as they traversed an area that was known (in times past) to ‘strike terror into the hearts of rally drivers’. The descent from these peaks, albeit a small one, signalled a huge change as Bay Trees, Lavender farms and Olive Groves lined the side of the route. The smell of the Bay Trees during regularities five and six was intoxicating and the flora and fauna now had a distinct ‘Méditerranée’ feel with more swooping and flowing hairpins, the foliage a deep, lush green in contrast to the frozen needles on the Pines in the Ardeche we had left behind.

The first regularity eased crews into the day and started close to the banks of the River Rhône which was in spate and thundering ever south towards the coast. Climbing out of La Voulte-Sur-Rhone the first timing point came after some hairpins on the Col des Vaux. Gresly/Whyte were immediately on the attack, cleaning the first timing point, taking two seconds from Hancox/Lambley in the process. Dermot Carnegie/Paul Bosdet hit a bad patch of form and dropped 1 minute 19 seconds over two timing points whilst Monty Karlan/Peter Rushforth hit a similar vein of misfortune but ‘only’ lost 41 seconds over the final two points. Amongst the newcomers, it has been fantastic to watch Neil Walmsley/Kevin Needham grow in confidence in their thunderous three-litre Healey as the event has gone on, this can also be said about Bruce Wood/John Vaughan in their Bristol 411. The first regularity was going incredibly well for them and they had dropped just 12 seconds over three timing points to put them inside the top ten performances before a wrong-slot at TP D cost them a minute. They look to be a force for the future in regularity rallying. Mike Howells/Sue Hill have experienced differential issues and are touring to the finish on the Col du Turini, the crew are upbeat to be able to make the finish but not visiting the controls along the way will cost them dearly in penalties.

Coffee was taken in the town of St. Remèze and only one crew didn’t make the stop, Aidan Mawhinney/Rory Gallagher are attempting some sections but not others and are thoroughly enjoying themselves on the sections they are. Another crew that is relatively new to regularity rallying, they are finding that it is advisable to gain some
experience before attempting one of the more challenging events. The next section, regularity three, was, in the words of Competition Director, Guy Woodcock, ‘One that might shake things up a bit’ and he wasn’t wrong. Starting on the D217 at La Forestiére before plunging down the Comme de Sarran, the first timing point was situated just after an easy to miss left slot in les Fumades. It truly did split the field with no less than 11 crews either picking up a minute here or not visiting the control at all. Top dogs Hancox/Lambley saw their lead strengthen here after taking 25 seconds out of Gresly/Whyte who had a nightmare at TP 4/3C. One crew reported how difficult the section was at lunch describing the action as ‘frantic yet completely absorbing’.

The final regularity before lunch took place in Chateauneuf du Pape and circled the vineyards in the area, the roads between the vineyards dusty from the rocks and poor earth which forces the vines to deliver such a good grape, we are told. Hancox/Lambley gave back 22 of the 25 seconds they had taken from Gresly/Whyte at the final timing point, the maze of single-track and unsealed surface roads catching them out. Bloxidge/Canavan were the crew with least penalties after dropping an excellent four-seconds over three timing points. But the big news was that Gresly/Whyte were now in striking distance of the Triumph pair and were slowly edging in front of them, timing point by timing point.

A fine lunch at Ogier’s Vineyard in Chateauneuf du Pape was enjoyed by all, barbecued Tuna, Chicken, Pork, Beef were accompanied by local charcuterie of the highest standard with petit-fours to finish. The final three regularities would bring the event into Mallemort overnight via some beautiful passes with open hairpins giving wide views over the vistas of Provence. The gorges and cliffs ranging in colour from a light buff to dark grey and seeming to shimmer in the warm late winter sunshine. There was nothing to upset the balance any further but Gresly and Whyte had narrowly reclaimed their lead back from Hancox and Lambley, they lie 12 seconds in front of them and have it all to lose tomorrow on the run to the Col du Turini. Best performance on all sections today went to Bloxidge/Canavan who have been shaking off some intermittent mechanical gremlins that has seen their Porsche 911 difficult to start at times. They recorded a one minute and six seconds total for the day to claim third from Dermot Carnegie/Paul Bosdet. In fifth are Monty Karlan/Peter Rushforth who are holding Ed Abbott/Pete Johnson at bay by a comfortable margin.

We’ll see you tomorrow to wrap-up what has been an enthralling and dramatic Winter Challenge to Monte-Carlo.