Mendocino - The Mendocino Rally was back and better than ever for 2014. Touting a “best of the best” approach, the organizers combined the most well received aspects of the last few years into a real winner of an event, which features ideal rally roads and a central location to north and south competitors. Several new people stepped in to help organize as well.

The result was a rally that ran on time, outstanding communications, control, sweep, and medical volunteers, and unique and classy venues for start and finish. Did we mention it was hot? Well, granted, a cooler month would have solved that.

The 15 teams that entered showed true rally spirit, pressing on regardless of the high 90s temperatures. Saturday's Bear Valley Stages ran on Walker Ridge, a 16.3 mile ridgetop road with a lot of variety - wide/narrow, smooth/rough, tricky/fun. Sunday's Cow Mountain Stages ran in a giant OHV area closed just for the rally, on one of the most enjoyable, twisty, smooth rally roads in the California Rally Series.

Saturday's first run on Walker Ridge provided some immediate action as David Easter and Jeff Andrew's Open Class WRX got stuck in a ditch for a while, then reported Jeff was suffering a lot from the heat. Chuck Wilson/Brent Ellzey reported their STI's brakes "were toast". And David Ault, with co-driver Vahan "Joey" Yessayan, ran into his first troubles of the day getting stuck on a berm for a while, then having to deal with a dying master cylinder that required him to pull the clutch pedal up with his foot every time he wanted to shift (a problem that never went away all weekend). Although David has co-driven for Kris Psara, this was his first event as a driver. He was seeded second to last on the first stage - but that position was destined to change as both days' rallies reseeded after every stage. Another first-time driver in Open Class, Jason Copt with Cameron Meng co-driving, impressed everyone with a second-fastest time, just 14 seconds behind rally leader Kris Psara/Michael Milos.

The second stage, also run northbound, provided even more action. Alas, Jason Copt's promising start was ended with a rollover - and he was out for the weekend (although he plans to repair the car). Evan Davis and Nick Roder, whose successful first two rallies at Idaho in June put them in second place in the CRS-Open Lite Championship and who had finished fifth overall on Stage 1 to lead their class, suffered fuel pump issues they could not overcome and they had to withdraw. And Jason Lightner and Tim Brown's Porsche 912 was having engine electrical problems that forced them to pull over twice. But on this stage - and the next one as well - David Ault got things together and finished a very close second-fastest overall behind Kris Psara/Michael Milos's Subaru STI.

The 11 remaining teams then transited around to the north end of Walker Ridge to run the stage twice going southbound. Unfortunately, David Easter and Jeff Andrews rolled their WRX on a tricky corner and were out for the weekend. One of the most impressive performances of the rally was turning out to be Markus and Alicia Saarinen in their CRS-2 Mini Cooper. By Stage 2 they were lying in second overall, four seconds ahead of John Trucks and Chris Fine in their Open Class Subaru. They just kept consolidating their position for the last two stages, in spite of the (very typical) clean run of their closest competition in 2WD, Andrew and Robin Lockhart in a CRS-2 VW Golf. The Saarinens did have a scare after Stage 3 when they discovered a torn CV boot - but they were able to overcome the problem without having to change an axle. Probably the most remarkable part of their story was the fact that Markus had run the New England Forest Rally - yes, on the other side of the country! - just the weekend before, and then towed the Mini all the way back to California in time for the Mendocino Rally!

The final stage proved a tough one for rookie David Ault, who suffered a left rear flat, went off the road, broke an axle, and damaged his brakes! He managed to struggle to the finish, at least.

Overall and Open Class winners for the first day were Kris Psara and Michael Milos, with a comfortable 2:40 minute lead over the Saarinen's CRS-2 Mini. John Trucks and Chris Fine were second in CRS Open, with Chuck Wilson/Brent Ellzey third in Open. The Lockharts were second fastest 2WD car and in CRS-2. Open Lite was won by Jeffrey and Mike Kulawiak.

Sunday's Cow Mountain stage road was eagerly anticipated by all. This year the road was very smooth although the loose layer of silt in many spots could prove slippery. The cars started from event sponsor Ken Fowler Subaru in Ukiah and headed up the hill to the OHV park. On the first stage, Kris Psara and Michael MIlos served notice that they intended to continue to dominate the rally, winning the stage by nearly a minute. However, the 2WD contingent again impressed, this time with Andrew and Robin Lockhart posting second fastest time, although the next three cars were all within 16 seconds. It was going to be a good race!

Evan Davis and Nick Roder had managed to buy a fuel pump at the car parts store when it opened in the morning and made it through Stage 1 with a good stage time placing him in fifth overall. They then towed the Porsche of Jason Lightner and Tim Brown into service - that team had decided to withdraw due to continuing electrical issues. However after service, Evan's Legacy didn't want to restart, an ominous sign.

Ten cars left the service at the Lakeport Family Fun Center and began stage 2, a longer version of the same stage, but run westbound to a turnaround at Oakwood Springs picnic area. Once again Kris Psara led, but the tight battle between David Ault and John Trucks grew more interesting as they tied in stage times. As the cars came in to the turnaround, reports varied: John Trucks's car was running a bit hot, Evan Davis decided to leave his car running in case it wouldn't start, and the Lockharts had a soft left rear tire which required them to use their only spare. The rally was running so smoothly that the organizing team decided to restart cars on Stage 3 (eastbound) 45 minutes early, which was much appreciated by the teams waiting in the heat, even though there was plenty of shade.

On Stage 3 reports soon came in that Evan Davis and Nick Roder's Legacy had pulled over - a different gremlin had gotten them and they were out for good this time. In the meantime, the battle between David Ault and John Trucks continued, and in 2WD, the Saarinens beat the Lockharts (but just barely) in an attempt to regain the 35 seconds they had lost to the Golf on the first stage.

After the final service, the teams ran a final, shorter version of the stage road westbound and headed into Ukiah. David Ault's final stage was just seven seconds slower than Open Class and Overall winner Kris Psara's time - but keep in mind that Kris, who has had rally-ending crashes early in his career, has developed into a mature driver that knows how to pace himself when he's ahead! David finished the event ahead of John Trucks, but by just 10 seconds, claiming second overall and second in Open class, just behind his former driver. In 2WD, the Lockharts maintained their lead to win CRS-2, while the Saarinens earned second in class. The Kulawiaks again claimed the Open Lite victory in their Impreza.

With the pair of events comprising the Mendocino Rally, Kris Psara, John Trucks, and Chuck Wilson move into second, third and fourth in the CRS Open Class Championship, respectively, behind Todd McAllister. In the Co-Driver Championship, Chris Fine and Brent Ellzey are second and third behind Trent Bateman. Evan Davis and Nick Roder's starting points move them into the lead in Open Lite, and in CRS-2, both Markus and Alicia Saarinen now lead, with both Andrew and Robin Lockhart second in the Championship.

A nice champagne splash finish in front of Crush, the hosting "Italian Steakhouse" in Ukiah, was a fun touch. All the teams that made it to the finish are to be congratulated! And so is the rally committee, who definitely reached their goal of making Mendocino well-organized, safe, and fun.

The California Rally Series is the premier performance rally championship in the southwestern United States. The Series incorporates events from various sanctioning bodies in order to create a meaningful regional championship for its members. The 2014 season marks the 40th anniversary of the California Rally Series, making it the longest running rally series in the United States. To learn more about the California Rally Series visit
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