

Written by Erik Christiansen
Wednesday, 02 May 2018 19:46

Los Angeles – The 2018 California Rally Series (CRS) Rally Championship kicks off this weekend, May 4th and 5th, with the High Desert Trails Rally. The rally takes place on smooth dirt roads outside of Ridgecrest, CA where teams race from the floor of a wide desert valley up a forested mountain, and back down again. New for this year is a two day format, which offers a double-points (coefficient 2) event on Friday night and a triple points (coefficient 3) event on Saturday.



Twenty-six teams are scheduled to take the start Friday, with last year's Open Class driver champion Flynn Baglin seeded at the top of the list in his Subaru Impreza WRX STI. Baglin finished second here last year, so expect him to be pushing for the overall win. He is joined by veteran co-driver Alix Hakala. They will see tough competition from Deke Williams, also in a Subaru Impreza WRX STI, who has teamed up with the very experienced co-driver Rhianon Gelsomino for this event. Williams finished third in both last year's rally and the Open Class championship, and will seek to improve on that in 2018.

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In the normally-aspirated four-wheel drive Open Lite class, the current favorites are 2017 champions Kurt Northrup and co-driver Will Smith in their Subaru Impreza. Northrup/Smith managed to take the top spot in Open Lite in every CRS event last year, so they will be determined to keep that streak alive. Ernie Manansala and co-driver Chong Pak are back after their rookie season in 2017. Manansala got faster with each event last year; perhaps High Desert Trails will be his breakthrough event.



The large-displacement two-wheel drive CRS-5 class is experiencing something of a revival in the CRS with healthy participation last season extending into this rally. Last year's CRS-5 champion Andrew Cowan will be back in his VR6 VW Jetta, with a new co-driver for this event Nathan Lumley. The husband and wife team of Markus and Alicia Saarinen have been very fast in their supercharged Mini Cooper, but were plagued by mechanical issues last season. Either one of these teams are fast enough to be battling for the overall podium.

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