

Adam & Ray Ripper
Nissan Micra 1.4
Class A2
MGJ Engineering Brands Hatch
Winter Stages
17th January 2020



Dancing in the Dark

A cold, crisp winter's morning leading to a bright sunny afternoon provided the backdrop to a great day's rallying at Brands Hatch, kindly hosted by the Chelmsford Motor Club.

With a field of 10 in Class A, certain to be dominated by the Newton brothers in their powerful orange Nova (we call it The SuperNova), our aim was to be 'best of the rest'. The conditions were expected to be icy and this was confirmed with me losing my footing on the way down to the drivers' briefing!

We were trying to achieve some consistency at this rally, not just overall, but also in each stage itself. With some thoughts and discussions on tyre pressures, brought to the fore by Nigel and Neal (our service crew), we decided to try something a little different to begin with.

The day started in the Rally School and the recently scraped damp

surface was indeed slippery, as expected. On the circuit itself, the layer of frost had largely disappeared by the time we got there, but there were some areas that needed special care and attention; we took it duly thus and finished the stage seven seconds adrift of our main rivals in the MSN Circuit Rally Championship Class A, Ron Walker and Amy McCubbin, piloting their ex-Works Ford Puma. However, it was quite encouraging to be unexpectedly close with our ex-shopping trolley Micra.

A 25-second improvement on Stage Two seemed pretty decent, especially after having to avoid a rejoining Chevette at Graham Hill bend (that threw us off line for Druids in the process). Adam was getting into the groove nicely and so was the purring Puma – a 27-second improvement there. We would need a “complete performance” and “level

heads” if we wanted to get close to a Championship win today. Adam remarked “I think if we can be within five seconds of the Puma going into the last two stages, we've got a chance”. Consistency became our watchword.

Stages Three and Four were just that: a 5:27 for each, followed by a 6:11 and 6:10 for Stages Five and Six, overtaking the slower, but charming green Mini in front of us, putting us five seconds ahead of the Puma! Amazing. Exhilarating too. “What a great little car this is!” Adam said on the way back to service, where our service team and roving supporters also reported that our Micra looked to be handling really well – Adam's driving particularly praised – and with the dark approaching, confidence was up and a good finish became a distinct possibility. Light pod fitted and raring to go, there was just a little impatience with the lingering daylight.

We tackled the rally school at the beginning of Stage Seven, which went well, and after flying up the hill over the jump, we joined the main circuit at the merge. Having been fortunate all day with 'clear' merges, on this occasion I called an oncoming car and Adam lifted off; we waited, and waited some more and finally Chris Keys and James Riley's Peugeot 205 passed by; 'five seconds lost there' was going through my mind and I know Adam





would have been thinking the same. We pressed on. Heavy traffic slowed us approaching the pit lane, and by taking the slippery Clark Curve for the first time somewhat hesitantly at the end of the stage, this gave us a time of 7:11. Really? A minute slower? It can't be! Our incredulity was soon dispelled as once back in service we discovered those around us posted similar times. Crucially though, the Puma had completed the stage six seconds faster than us – we were now trailing again.

The light curtain certainly dropped for the final Stage Eight and although I had some resignation at a missed opportunity, Adam was clearly having none of it. Straight off the start line, Adam was focused like I'd not seen before, determined to dance in the dark. A 'clear' merge off

of Paddock Hill Bend and a quick rounding of Druids and some straight-lining through Graham Hill and we were up into the pit complex, rounding the top hairpin, finding ourselves directly behind... a certain Puma – who would have believed it!

With some audible prompting at the next hairpin, the Puma sportingly pulled wide and Adam powered on through, flying round our second lap and after negotiating the pit gate alongside an Escort, who again sportingly left enough room to get through, Clark Curve beckoned. We finished with aplomb. "What a drive!" I said breathlessly, heart thumping in my chest. "If that doesn't take the win, I don't know what will!"

In fact, we'd only taken five seconds off our Stage Seven time, but it felt

like fifty, I can tell you. Unfortunately for the Puma, there was a stage maximum; we don't know why and I felt for Ron and Amy – it's a long way down from Scotland and to drop three places at the end must have been very disappointing. For us, our strategy worked as well as our little car – all things came together for an MSN Circuit Rally Championship Class win, a Class Second in the MGJ Engineering Brands Hatch Winter Stages Rally and 35th overall.

And the Newtons and their Super Nova? Beat every car in Classes A, B and C (that's everything up to 2L) with the exception of a single Mk II Escort, splitting the D1 and D2 classes and finishing 13th overall – not bad for 1400cc. Now that's a car ours can aspire to! Fantastic!

Ray Ripper, Co-Driver

