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Duplessis leads rally back to Maine

By [Justin Pelletier, Assistant Sports Editor, Online](#)

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NEWRY — Winning is fun, and Chris Duplessis has done plenty of that already at 22.

But coming home can be even better.

"It's nice to be home again, sleep in my own bed, not have to pay for a hotel, the food's all there," Duplessis said.

The Telstar Regional High School graduate from Mason Township is back in the Bethel area for the 2009 New England Forest Rally, with stages in Rumford/Mexico, Newry and northern New Hampshire.

Duplessis won the two-wheel drive division of the race last year in his 1990 Volkswagon, and together with co-driver Catherine Woods is hoping he can do the same this time around, though things are a bit different this year.

"I co-drove in Pennsylvania, the round just before this one," Duplessis said. "Other than that, I only drove a regional event in Dalton, New Hampshire."

Duplessis and the rest of the drivers got a look at the course Thursday morning, and there was an air of familiarity about the trails in the northern woods.

"A lot of them are identical to the past years," Duplessis said. "We just went out this morning and got to take a look at it and take some notes on them. They're all the same roads, but some are in different orders, where they actually run and what roads loop to what."

The reason Duplessis has been quiet on the circuit this season — he has just 20 points as a co-driver and 30 as a driver in the most recent series standings — is his dedication to his most recent endeavor.

"I'm a full-time instructor at Team O'Neil Rally School," Duplessis said. "We train the best of the best; it's a good time."

But he still found a bit of time to practice his trade. He accepted an offer to be a co-driver for one of his students at the school, Gary Wiggin.



Daryn Slover/Sun Journal
Chris Duplessis of Mason Township and his co-driver Catherine Woods of Quebec charge up a "shake down" course in Newry on Thursday evening.

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Daryn Slover/Sun Journal
William Bacon of Nashua, NH, and his co-driver Peter Watt of Ontario let the rocks fly on the "shake down" course in Newry on Thursday evening. Two days of racing during the New England Forest Rally begins Friday at Sunday River.

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"I swore my first time co-driving would be my last, but Gary roped me into co-driving for him," Duplessis joked.

By far, though, Duplessis much prefers being behind the wheel himself.

"You have a co-driver telling you every turn, every little bump, from trees on the outside to the severity of the corners," Duplessis said. "You have to be able to listen and have the driving part of it be basically muscle memory."

And he's been good at it.

The extra practice he said he got growing up in rural Maine helped him to Group 2 National Championships in 2007 and 2008. He has also swept the Group 2 Eastern Regional Championship in 2005, 2007, and 2008. Also in 2007, he won Two-Wheel Driver Overall.

Before Chris started winning races he was involved with rally as a marshal at the Mt. Washington Hill Climb and Maine Forest Rally, the precursor to this race.

Also competing this week are nationally recognized X-Gamers such as Travis Pastrana — by far the series' national points leader — and Dave Mirra.

Based in Golden Valley, Minn., Rally America sanctions the premier rally racing series in the United States, the Rally America National Championship Series. This year, Rally America will conduct nine National Championship events at venues across the country, including the New England Forest Rally. The racers reach speeds well over 100 mph in modified street-legal rally cars on natural-terrain courses consisting of gravel, dirt or snow.

There will be several viewing opportunities during the various rally stages this weekend, including at Sunday River and in Mexico at the town's recreation park Friday. For more information on the rally, visit www.newenglandforestrally.com, or www.rally-america.com.

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