

LOCAL SPORTS

Teams gearing up for New England Forest Rally

By Phil Whipple, Staff Writer
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NEWRY — While most of the headlines this week will center around a certain short track stock car race, that won't be the only major motor sports event happening in Maine this weekend.

For those race fans who enjoy high-flying sports cars hurtling through the woods at high speeds, the 17th annual New England Forest Rally is a true highlight of summer. Formerly known as the Maine Forest Rally, the race now includes a stage in northern New Hampshire, prompting the name change.

This weekend's rally is the sixth and final round on the 2010 Rally America National Championship trail. Among the top-level drivers expected to compete is national point leader Antoine L'Estage. The Quebec-based racer is poised to win the title, as long as the Maine and New Hampshire woods are kind to him.

Also expected to compete is defending race winner Travis Pastrana, making a return to the United States after missing the last two events while performing in Australia.

During the two-day event, teams will compete for national and regional points on more than 130 miles of gravel and forest stages. While national teams earn a combined overall score for both days, regional drivers compete in two separate, one-day events on the same roads.

Drivers of local interest include Bethel's Chris Duplessis, making his sixth start in the rally. Duplessis locked up the Rally America National Two-Wheel-Drive Championship in June, earning his first invitation to compete at ESPN's X Games. Duplessis and co-driver Catherine Woods of Ontario will campaign a 2009 Toyota Scion in this year's rally.

"I'm really excited about the season finale in my home turf," Duplessis said via telephone Tuesday while driving back to Maine from Ohio with the new car. "The guys at O-60 Magazine put this whole deal together. They built a high-tech rally car ... (and) when they asked me if I'd like to race it, I jumped on the chance. I drove it a little earlier in the season, it handled well and should be excellent for this weekend's terrain. I've seen a lot of the country this season, but it sure will be nice to get back home."

While Duplessis says winning the title was rewarding, that wasn't the best part of his first year of full-time rally racing.

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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 "shakedown" course in Newry last year. Two days of racing during the New England Forest Rally begins Friday at Sunday River.

— Daryn Slover

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“Getting that invitation to compete at the X Games was huge,” the 23-year-old athlete said. “That event has become the spectacle of action sports. It was an honor to be invited.”

New Hampshire driver Bill Bacon is also anxious for this weekend’s rally, as he attempts to overtake L’ Estage for the 2010 points championship. Bacon, a firefighter from Nashua, has been on a tear this season, earning podium finishes at every Rally America event. He is now 13 points behind L’ Estage with only the finale remaining.

“I’m very proud of what we’ve accomplished this year on the rally circuit,” Bacon said. “My father and I have put in countless hours, and he spent a lot of money to keep us competitive. It isn’t likely that we’ll overtake Antoine for the championship, but we’re way ahead of the third place driver so second place is locked up. That’s pretty impressive for an equipment operator (his father) and a fireman from New Hampshire.”

Friday’s competition will begin at Sunday River at 10 a.m. The next stage will be known as the “Mexico Regional Rally.” This will include a great opportunity for fans to watch their favorite driver complete an entire gravel stage, including a jump.

Event organizers have partnered with Sunday River to make it easier for spectators to view this year’s New England Forest Rally. Several buses will be available to take fans from the Mexico Recreation Area to an ideal spot to view the Concord Pond Stage. Buses will depart the Mexico Rec Area at 5 p.m. and will return after the stage is completed.

On Saturday, the rally action moves north and west to Erroll, New Hampshire.

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