

HIGHLAND FLING

Strathglass in the Scottish Highlands was the setting for the inaugural Ironman Enduro

THE THERMOMETER reads six degrees below freezing in Glencoe, Scotland, as the 4x4 barrels carefully down the gleaming black road. KCs flit pencil beams over rugged snow covered mountains, darkly brooding above the ice cold river.

In the hour before dawn, I'm stoked at the sight of snow gates, marker poles, mountain rescue helipads, and the quietness of the Great North West road. The sky lightens to a cloudless blue over the sparkling white Nevis range. It

by
Tony Scott

is going to be a brilliant day for the inaugural Ironman Enduro, set in Highland Strathglass.

Golden retrievers were first bred in the 1860s on nearby Guisachan estate, and Winston Churchill supposedly learned to drive there.

As a Land Rover driver himself, the great man would surely have approved of this weekend of Highland action, which took place on February 18-19.

Pre-race scrutineering gives a chance for competitors to adjust

Below: Well equipped Land Rovers, ready for demanding Enduro action, line up against a snowy highland background.





tyre pressures, stow gear safely, and put non-essential items into the support barges. Like all high profile events, I am struck by the pleasurable banter between competitors, perhaps more used to two vehicle challenge teams.

In this cruel wilderness, each Ironman Enduro team is on their own. There are two classes, standard and special. The standard class allows one winch and mud terrain pattern tyres up to 32 inches, while the special class has a wider remit, including 35 inch tyres, locking differentials, and twin winches. Portal axles, chains, and extra large tyres are forbidden on this event.

Young student Niall O'Mahony made the long journey from the Dingle peninsula in Ireland to marshal with father of triplets Darren McGuinness from Bury, and clearly loved every minute of it. Darren owns a fully caged 200Tdi Defender 90 fitted with ARB air lockers front and rear, a 24V Warn 8274 in a D44 winch bumper, a 12V M8000 rear, CB, terratrip, and GPS. Underbody armour, modified radius arms and suitable suspension modifications further enhance a very competent off-road package.

Aired down and raring to go, twenty six two-person crews lined up at 10am against a priceless view of impossibly clear mountains. In the specials class, the immaculately prepared silver Defender 90 Td5 of Irish ace JJ Kealy, crewed here by James Feeney and Partick Smart, set off at a cracking pace on one of the three stages.

steep special section

By 12.05pm they had reached stage three. Choosing a careful line up the steep special section, the expertly prepared Defender quickly reached the 408 metre mark. At 12.51, Simon Buck in his latest Devon 4x4 Defender 90 Td5 took off up the mountain, the distinctive V8-like song of his race-prepared diesel Td5 engine stopping all conversation until it disappeared from sight.

Race on, as Feeney and Smart were clearly on a flier of a lap on stage one, the warming ground now strewn with treacherous water filled holes under rapidly melting ice. Within 90 minutes of the first day finish, they had powered into a clear lead of fourteen points over Simon Buck and co driver Matt Cook, when disaster struck with a sheared panhard rod bracket. Buck



Above left: Defender 90 finds an unexpected soft spot in the gently yielding grass covered turf.

Above right: The smart V8 Discovery of Team 23 testing the recovery points on its winch bumper with an easy extraction of a bogged Defender 90.

Inset: Paul Martin and Martin Ecob tackle a slippery rising section in their 90 truck cab, on the way to an excellent second place finish in special class.

Below: Driving a BF Goodrich shod, Tdi 300 engined, modded body truck cab, Dave Williams and Gus Glazebrook quickly punch the card for section 29.

continued his spirited fightback to log ten more crucial points, ending the day only four points adrift on 80.

Overnight, the world changed to white, as snow fell steadily during the hours of darkness. The thunder of healthy V8s, the steady hum of tuned diesels, the bark of designer exhausts, became strangely muted in the folds and hollows of the snow speckled site.

Each team has a compulsory stop of fifteen minutes between stages, to let the navigator have some rest. I took the chance to chat with warmly clad Dave White and Andy Hogg, enjoying a brew beside Andy's awesome yellow lbex 6.2 Chevy diesel V8.

This fully prepared challenge machine puts its power down through a Chevy auto three speed transmission mated to an Australian conversion plate, onto a Land Rover transfer box. Dave, who normally pilots a bloodthirsty 100 inch Defender, smilingly pointed out both are best known as drivers. It was not the only anomaly, he added "JJ's motor has two people in it who normally navigate, not drive. James Feeney is driving again today, but it's a good call."

A genial Andy continued





► "we came for the fun and the experience of an Enduro. You don't realise how much you depend on the other half of a team. Every driver thinks he can get through a bog hole with a bit of speed. We've wrecked our ground anchor, in fact bent the fin well back. We've been lent a different type, but are a bit reluctant in case we do it again." I mentioned the almost total absence of trees. Andy grinned "we found one! We had a 420ft pull, made up 125ft on a winch drum, two spare ropes to 255ft, then a 40ft stop. The whole lot ran over a hill, and over the hill there was this tree. Unfortunately the rear winch has packed in, which makes it more difficult as a single vehicle."

I watched a thunderous orange and white Discovery successfully tackle section 39, a difficult angled gully near a remote loch. Innovative owner Nick Field and navigator Fiona Richardson finished a fighting fifth overall, in what is one of the Country's most competitive Discovery bobtails. Nick reflected: "it's been great. This suits us as we are used to working on our own. Some competitors only like two car events, where they can work with

Above, left to right: Team Yorkshire Off Road, the irrepressible Nick Parkes and Matthew Tate, put on a pacy performance in the standards category; discussing the best line to take at stage 14, team work clearly matters to southerners Nick Langley and Victor Bilkey in their very competitive Defender 90; getting ready to help with a stricken Jeep, a lively Niall O'Mahony checks out equipment in the back of tasty Defender Tdi J90MUD. Below: Patrick Smart checking out a special stage in JJ Kealy's scrupulously prepared challenge Defender Td5. Most Ironman competitors in the specials category had a weighty ground anchor on board, and this class winning team certainly used theirs to good effect.

someone else. We were doing single car events for years."

Nick chose Strathglass to try out the very latest BF Goodrich T/A tyres from the States, visually impressive with deep block tread and strong lugged sidewalls, measuring a sizable 35 x13 x15 on quality beaded rims. The engine is currently a 5.5-litre Rover V8 putting out 400 bhp with a stroker kit. Despite its superb performance, Nick is planning another Discovery special, possibly an LR3 bodied machine with a new 4.4-litre BMW V8 MTEC engine. Awesome.

The Enduro format means that one breakage or slight mistake can change the running order at any time. Feeney and Smart were on a roll, but got stuck on one special stage for almost forty minutes. Buck and Cook, by now in virtually unstoppable form, took the lead and

held it right to the finish at 2pm. They had covered a gruelling 45 off-road miles to secure the Ironman Trophy. Paul Martin and Martin Ecob were a creditable second in the special class, in their green and white Defender 90. In the standard class, Matt Blakey and Mark Riley in a 300-Tdi 90 just shaved it by a point on 42, over the 300 Tdi 90 crew of Nick Parkes and Matthew Tate.

stunning highlands

Helicopter pilot Hugh Balfour-Paul and son Oscar were flying high in their nicely prepped 110, until a broken half shaft slowed them down. Hugh suggested "with so many punches to be collected, there's plenty of driving as well as loads of winching. It's good to see the Highlands in such stunning weather, so a word of thanks to the land owner for the use of the site

