

HIGH STAKES AND A COMPETITIVE FIELD FOR POPULAR SUGARBELT 400

The stakes will be high for the extremely competitive field in the Production Vehicle Category that will take on the traditional Sugarbelt 400, the second round of the 2021 South African National Cross Country Series (SACCS) on 21 and 22 May in the Eston / Mid Illovo area on the outskirts of Pietermaritzburg in KwaZulu-Natal as the battle for points towards the various championships will continue.

The fact that this event was last hosted in this area in 2015 and that it will be the first time for many teams to experience the unique racing conditions, adds to the challenge as does the situation where many teams will be hoping to score their first points of the season. The front-runners and teams with precious points already in the bag, will feel the pressure and it will be top of mind for all to receive the chequered flag after two days and a total of 320 kilometres of racing.

The Production Vehicle Category has received a robust entry and tense racing action can be expected in both the FIA and T Classes. The leaders of the FIA Class Championship, who are also the overall leaders, Lance Woolridge/Elvéne Vonk (Ford Castrol Cross Country Team), will not only aim for a second consecutive victory in their brand-new FIA Ford Ranger, but a win in their backyard for the Pietermaritzburg-based Woolridge family, will be the cherry on top. Lance and his then navigator, Ward Huxtable, finished third overall in this event in 2015 and another podium result will look good on his racing CV.

Another good result for their teammates in a similar Ford Ranger, Gareth Woolridge/Boyd Dreyer, will boost their championship challenge after they opened their 2021 scorecard with a third place overall. Local knowledge of the type of terrain might count in the favour of the Woolridge brothers, but that might also just add to extra pressure.

The Toyota Gazoo Racing SA team will be out in full force and will also aim for the top step of the podium. The defending champion, Henk Lategan, has recovered from his shoulder operation and has reunited with his navigator, Brett Cummings. The Sugarbelt 400 will be an all new challenge for the team and Lategan will be anxious to get his championship chase off the ground.

Giniel de Villiers (Toyota Gazoo Racing SA Hilux) is familiar with the Sugarbelt 400 conditions as he has won this event in 2001 with navigator Francois Jordaan. A victory 20 years later, this time with navigator Dennis Murphy, will be something to write home about while it will also boost their current standings. The navigator for team-mate, Shameer Variawa, is still to be announced with Variawa also in the running for his first points of the season.

Ernest Roberts/Henry Köhne lead the Red-Lined Motorsport brigade with their Red-Lined VK56 vehicle and will be looking for more points as will their team-mates newcomer Eben Basson and Gerhard Schutte (VK56) and Philip Botha/Roelof Janse van Vuren (VK50) while first points for Conrad Rautenbach/Riaan Greyling (VK56) will be just what the doctor ordered.

Under the Century Racing umbrella, Mark Corbett/Rodney Burke (Century Racing CR6) will also aim for another helping of points as will Dewald van Breda/Johann du Toit (CR5). Brian Baragwanath will have the voice of Leonard Cremer in his ear in the new CR6 as regular navigator, Taye Perry, will attend to international commitments. Baragwanath was the one of quickest during the Pirelli Qualifying Race at the season opener, but his luck ran out and if the team can keep it all together, they can depart from Eston with good results and valuable first points.

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Johan and his son, Sean van Staden (Moto-Netix KEC Racing Renault Duster) are the only other team in the FIA Class with points and will again be in action while the Schalk Burger Motorsport King Price Xtreme team of Thilo Himmel/Armand du Toit will give it another go after they had to go back to the drawing board with no points after the season opener.

The Sugarbelt 400 will be the first outing of the season for Gary Bertholdt/Siegfried Rousseau (Toyota Hilux); Chris Visser/Danie Stassen (Toyota Hilux) as well as for Jason Venter/Jaco van Aardt (4x4 Mega World ARB Toyota Hilux).

No doubt the sparks will be fly in the FIA Class where a few dark horses might just cause an upset.

The line-up in Class T is as interesting and here the ding-dong battle between the Ford Ranger and Toyota Hilux teams will continue. The Horn brothers, Johan and Werner (Malalane Toyota Hilux) are leading the championship after claiming their first victory of the season at the Mpumalanga 400 and all eyes will be on them to see if they can score back to back victories in their quest to defend their Class T championship.

Jason's brother, Dylan Venter, has teamed up with Donovan Lubbe in a second 4x4 Mega World ARB Toyota Hilux and will also be in action for the first time this season and together these two Hilux teams will be up against a gaggle of Ford Ranger crews, all competing under the Neil Woolridge Motorsport banner.

After finishing second behind the Horn brothers at the season opener, Malcolm and his son, Frans Kock, will hope for another podium result with points for a victory, first prize. Christo Rose/Arno Olivier changed from competing in the Class G Side-by-Side Championship in 2020 to the Production Vehicle Category and walked away with a third place after their first attempt at Dullstroom earlier this year. They will be happy with more silverware and a second consecutive podium result. Wors Prinsloo/André Vermeulen will also aim for more points as will Bernard Johnstone who has Jan Harm Hugo in the hot seat for this event.

The Neil Woolridge Motorsport Development Team will also look somewhat different with Baphumza Rubuluza getting back behind the wheel next to navigator Fanifani Meyiwa with the goal to finish the race. Rubuluza is no stranger to cross country racing and has previously raced for Ford Motorsport as a development driver.

The pressure will be on the teams to bag as many points as possible towards the title chase and this will result in red-hot action in the sugarcane fields in the Eston / Mid Illovo area. The event is still closed to spectators in accordance with COVID-19 protocols, but enthusiasts can follow the race on the RallySafe App that can be downloaded free of charge for Android and iOS devices.

The action will start at 13:00 on Friday, 21 May with the Pirelli Qualifying Race of 50km that will determine the starting order for the race on Saturday. The leading teams will tackle the challenging figure of eight route of two 160km loops at 08:00 on Saturday, 22 May with a compulsory 30-minute service break after the first loop. All the action will happen from the Beaumont Eston Farmers' Club where the Race Headquarters as well as the Start/Finish and Designated Service Point will be located.

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