

National Champion would be crowned at PFR. Antoine L'Estage, from Quebec, in an all-wheel-drive Hyundai Tiburon, would have to hold off Matthew Iorio from Massachusetts, in his Subaru. Norm LeBlanc from Pemberton, B.C., with co-driver Keith Morison, from Calgary, Alberta, would try their best to push L'Estage and Iorio ever so gently, in their rally blue Subaru WRX, as would Gary Cavett from Washington and Paul Eklund from Oregon, both in Subarus.

Thirty-one cars were registered for the two-day event, some running only for Regional points, others for National. Off to a inauspicious start was a Neon, which failed to get running in time for the night stages, but would return to run in the daylight.

"Merritt by Night" began with a short run west to Comstock Stage, a familiar 5.83-km mix of gravel climb, rough hair-pin, downhill rev-limiter pavement along the highway, and twisting drops through the trees (with cows, horses and goats). Oh my!

Princeton Cut-off Stage followed, showing teams fast and narrow, twisting climbs and deep exposures, before topping out with a 90-right onto pavement in front of a good crowd of spectators. Princeton is showing some wear, and claimed several tires (including Car 00), two on Car 21 of Ryan Barker and Kevin Laase, up from Washington, and a tire and wheel (lost down a ravine) for Car 11 of Eric Grochowski and Leanne Junnila of Calgary. Small "offs" and big rocks claimed the Mazda 323GTX of Matt and Tracy Mannspeaker, with an "irreplaceable" control arm. We may never know if it was the tremendous power in Gord Olsen's '92 Golf GTI, but a broken drivetrain short-circuited he and Todd Patola's weekend at a Princeton 2 Start control zone.

Repeat runnings of Comstock and Princeton were separated by a Spectator Stage in the downtown Railyard Mall in Merritt. "Railyard" featured a short, fast, watered down street section and gravel parking area that provided close-up views for the crowd, and a new meaning to the term "pole-position" for two competitors, climbing a utility pole guy-wire near stage finish. No harm, no foul, no power outage.

Closing the first night, Car 1, Antoine L'Estage and Nathalie Richard, led Matt Iorio and Ole Holter in Open class, followed by LeBlanc-Morison in P4. Don't get ahead of the story here, there would



"Zebe" Szewczyk and Tomasz Karzynski drove their 2004 Mitsubishi Lancer Ralliart to fifth overall at the Pacific Forest Rally. It was good enough to give the pair the national Group 5 championship.

be more suspense on Day Two.

Saturday dawned a bit overcast, masking the bright sunlight in the windshield for competitors. Thynne Mountain Stage was southerly, climbing gradually from 1,100 meters to 1,600 meters through several gentle bends and sharp sweepers, ending over-crest off-camber downhill, loose, with a big rock in the short line through.

Brook Creek Stage began slightly downhill, into off-camber long right on marbles with exposure left. At 600 meters into Brook, a sharp right with exposure grabbed Car 12's crew, who managed to "hide" their Mazda RX-7 in the trees below the road. Neil Wright and

Lorna McInroy reported all was OK (that was all you could see of the incident, the "OK" in their warning triangle, coming into the corner). After a recovery, the car was drivable, but fairly wrinkled.

Brook Creek brought other news — something that even the most experienced competitors will admit has happened to them at some time — an error in checking into the control zone some six minutes early. Car 1 would have to be VERY much spot-on for the rest of the day. Brook runs 12.35 km northerly with the sun now coming over the trees

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