



Wheeler speeding right to the top

CHRIS WHEELER is leading the Ford Fiesta MS1 Championship this season and is feeling confident about stepping back up to the British Rally Championship when it resumes.

Rallying's British Championship has taken a year out to re-organise and so the 20-year-old Torquay driver is making waves in this new class with co-driver Yan Griffiths.

Then, it will be back to the Brits and a change of car with the speedster hoping to race a Citroen next time out.

"This is our least season with this car," said Wheeler. "Next year when we do go back up into the British Rally Championship we are going to upgrade to a Citroen DS3 R3.

"It is a more powerful car and it has a sequential gearbox and it comes with all the trick bits like the anti-lag system – so it is a whole new ball game, that car.

"The British Championship has been put on hold this year so they can refresh it for 2016 and I am racing currently at the highest place I can for rallying in the UK. So when 2016 comes and the British Championships returns we will be moving back up into the DS3s.

"This year I am getting more mileage under my belt and learning how to drive forestry – and I am getting to know gravel a lot better so that when

MOTOR RACING

RICHARD HUGHES

I go back I will hopefully be on the pace with all the top lads."

Wheeler, who attends South Devon College, and works as a mechanic – has taken part in the Wyden Rally, the Malcolm Wilson Rally in Cumbria – and, most recently, the Somerset Stages.

After round three of the championship, Wheeler is top of the table in his class.

His next race is the Plains Rally in Wales on May 16.

Wheeler said: "There is a lot of pressure for the rest of the season now to keep up the good work.

"There are nine main championship rounds this year – and we are also hoping to finish this year off at World Rally GB, which will be the last event for this at the top level."

If you happen to fancy a go at rally driving, now might be a good time to contact Wheeler. At the end of the season, he will be splashing out £60,000 on his new car and his Fiesta will be passed on to a new owner.

"It is a 160 brake horsepower Ford Fiesta MS1 which came from the M-Sport World Rally team. It has a quickshift ratio gearbox, just a pair of cams, and it is relatively standard for

the racing we are doing this year.

"It is the cars last year with us now and it will be sold on to someone else who is progressing through rallying. Rally cars are always sold down through the line.

"DS3 is the next step to where we need to be."

I did offer him a part exchange for my Ford Puma – but he was having none of it.

Wheeler is one of the up-and-coming stars in the British motorsport world and certainly one to look out for in the future.

Having learned to drive at the age of 11, Wheeler began racing rally cars at 15 following in his father Steve Wheeler's tracks – and last year he won one of British rallying's Stars of the Future awards.

Last year he told the *Herald Express* about his ambition to race on the World Rally calendar by the time he is 25.

"I've been around motorsport all my life, ever since I was little," he said.

"My dad has competed in all sorts of motorsport events and he began rallying in 2004, which is really what inspired me to take up the sport.

"I feel I'm getting better and better every year. I want to be the next Colin McRae."

There is an added pressure on Wheeler's young shoulders however as

he only has a limited time frame in which to realise his dream and take part in events on the WRC calendar – such as the Monte Carlo Rally and the gruelling Rally of Germany.

He said: "My target over the next few years is to make the World Rally Championships by the age of 25. Travelling all over the world and racing against the world's best would be a dream come true.

"It has to be before I'm 25 otherwise it's too late. They always want the young fast drivers, which hopefully I'm proving to be."

Sponsorship is key for Wheeler in this expensive sport, of course.

"Sponsors are always needed," said the young driver. "We do have some great sponsors including local hotels from Torquay – and one of our top sponsors at the minute are Schafer which are a German car part manufacturer.

"So without the sponsors we simply couldn't be where we are today – and as we progress through the sport, hopefully we will pick up more sponsors along the way."

If you are interested in helping Chris Wheeler with sponsorship – or can help him progress within the sport in another way, he will be more than happy to hear from you. Go to his website at www.chriswheelerrallying.com