



THE PERFECT SETUP

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HEADING INTO THE PENULTIMATE ROUND OF THE CHAMPIONSHIP, THE SKOPE CLASSIC AT RUAPUNA, THE FRONT RUNNERS OF ENZED CENTRAL MUSCLE CARS ONCE AGAIN SAW DRAMATIC CHANGES ACROSS THE POINTS TABLE

Given that the category seemingly races for chocolate fish, it was intriguing to watch the mentality of competition come to the fore. Human nature takes over and being in front of your rivals becomes more important than the clichés of 'I'm having a great time' and 'it's lots of fun'. It doesn't matter whether you are in a tier-one or grass-roots category; the instinct to win kicks in. It's quite rare to hear competitors talk about their struggles on the track — especially with humility being such a common attribute for New Zealanders. In fact, even though you wish

everyone the best of fortune and for them to do well, it makes a pleasing change when someone comes out and tells it like it is.

Clarke Hopkins is a case in point. He's brutally honest whenever you enquire how his day at the track is going. If he's ripping through the field or holding sway up front, he'll tell you how it feels. However, he is just as enthusiastic about sharing his feelings if things are not going to plan. Hopkins left the fifth round of the season at Timaru leading the Group 1 points table, but his gap was dramatically reduced. Other competitors were more dialled in for the 50th birthday celebration

round, while Hopkins struggled. Angus Fogg, Dean Hansen, Greg Honnor, Bruce Anderson, Grant Dalton, and Dean Perkins were all finishing in front of Hopkins — and, naturally, doing their own championship chances the world of good. "I'm hating it," Hopkins declared during his first day at Timaru. Yes, it was his first time there, but, even so, he was hoping to be fighting up front, at least. "The car is terrible at the moment. I'm not sure what the answer is, but it's fair to say I'm not happy," he continued. Again, it's refreshing to hear a driver being so open about his woes.





The same could almost be said for the Group 2 mob, whose championship has been affected heavily by did-not-finishes (DNFs). Steve Noyer was leading the points charge — but only because of consistency; he hasn't been the regular leader out on the track. However, this is the way championships are commonly won; it's not done by being in front for one or two events. Bruce Kett, in the No. 41 Camaro — which has been blisteringly quick for the last few rounds — suffered early in the championship, with a couple of no finishes, and it's been demoralizing for him. His joys are therefore coming from small victories rather than from being at the top of the table. "You don't wish it on the others," he stated with a sad shrug of the shoulders, "but I need them not to finish a race; it's the only way I'll really get back in the hunt." Therefore, as expected, the Christchurch round was incredibly important to many, before they headed back north to Manfeild and the championship decider. Fogg has become a points-stealer; so, too, has the

very experienced Hugh Gardiner in the Camaro. John Midgley missed Timaru. The handicap races have seen others take spoils. In all, it's making for a great run into the end of the season — for a spectator, that is. Sure, some of the competitors are not where they want to be — I hark back to my earlier point about human nature — but we watchers are loving it. Having drivers and their crews working hard for their gains is exactly what we want. We don't want a runaway points-leader. We don't want a boring ending. We don't want the championship decided earlier than in the final round. Hopkins came into Mike Pero Motorsport Park, Ruapuna on 872 points, and Perkins was on 863. Dean Hansen was the closest to them, on 809. Any issues at all would completely change their championship run. There were, and they did. Now, as they say, it's on for young and old. Each racetrack is different — they all have their special quirks — but Ruapuna is one of those tracks at which one mistake costs you almost an entire lap. You don't get a chance to make time back — quite simply, you mustn't stuff it up.

There were mistakes by drivers — that always happens — but there were also a fair few mechanical issues starting to plague the teams. At one time, it seemed that the Hopkins crew would have to rebuild the engine twice. It wasn't quite that bad, but it may well have been — broken valve springs not just once but ... yup, you guessed it. There were other issues as well. For what might seem like the first time ever, protests were submitted to the management regarding a race start — not surprising, because chocolate fish are exceptionally tasty. Coming out of Ruapuna and heading into Manfeild, the points were tight. With Perkins having a great run and Honnor taking a race win — and therefore taking points away from others — Hopkins has now dropped into second overall, a somewhat-frustrating 58 points behind. It actually gets worse for the A9X driver, as Dean Hansen has popped himself into third, only 18 points away from Hopkins. Quite simply, it means that not only does Clarke have to chase down Perkins but he must also, at the same time, look over his shoulder to ensure that Hansen doesn't ruin his party. >



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It doesn't stop there, though. Grant Dalton has been slowly but surely pushing his way into contention for silverware. He now sits in fourth spot, and his points deficit to Hansen is a tiny two — two little points. The penultimate round at Ruapuna set us up for a perfect showdown. Taking another quick look at the world of the Group 2 drivers, things are more spread out after the second South Island stint. Noyer was clean all sweekend, and actually won a race — but he broke out of his handicap time and was penalized.

His points didn't take too much of a hammering, though, and he still leads the pack by 68 points. That gap goes back to Tristan Teki, who, along with Mark Holland, had a fantastic weekend. In fact, Holland ended up winning a race even though he crossed the line in third position — because he didn't break out of his time as the front two did. What made it even better is that the win gave him the big trophy for the weekend — the Sir Robertson Stewart Grand Prix. To say that Holland was chuffed would be an understatement.

Bruce Kett has stayed in the top three for the Group 2 clan, but, again, unless Teki and Noyer fall out, he won't be able to earn enough points to take top spot. From there, the points tally falls away so much that the other regular competitor, Paul Boden, is simply going to be there to make life hard for the others. That's what he should do — have a whole lot of fun making the others fight. It's almost an enviable position to be in if you want the pure enjoyment factor while driving.

This is what Ruapuna produced. Great racing? Yes, without a doubt — in fact, some of the best seen all season. Great entertainment? Yes, again. The fans loved every second of it, and are already asking for Central Muscle Cars (CMC) to come back. It might have something to do with situations like the final race, which was decided on the final turn, with three cars going into the turn together, and the driver in third spot — Greg Honnor — stealing the win. It's stuff like that, race in, race out, that's pure gold for motorsport followers.

The best part is that even though the category is set up for a perfect finale, with regard to the championship, this is not just because of the front runners. Each and every one of the drivers and cars has been putting on a show. Midfielders, tailenders — it doesn't matter where they finish; they have entertained and wooed the crowds with their on-track performances and their exceptionally high presentation standards.

It's a hobby for the teams and drivers — a hobby that everyone else wants a part of. **V8**

