

TITLE FIGHT

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COULD THE PREVIOUS WINNERS TAKE THE TITLE ONCE MORE? WOULD FATE INTERVENE, OR THE PRESSURE ALL GET TOO MUCH? IT WAS ALL DOWN TO THE WIRE FOR THE FINAL ROUND OF THE 2017-2018 ENZED CMC SEASON

It was the most simple of requirements for two Enzed Central Muscle Cars (CMC) competitors when they headed into the final round of the season at Manfeild at the end of February — don't get a did-not-finish (DNF). Of course, given that this particular sport can be a cruel mistress, there was no guarantee that they would be able to meet that requirement.

Both Dean Perkins in his Group 1 Falcon and Steve Noyer in his Group 2 Mustang knew what was expected of them; they didn't need to be reminded by crew or other drivers. Practise, qualify, then go and race four times. Don't crash, and try not to get any penalties. If it's a mechanical problem and nothing can be done about it, your frustration is allowable, but if a DNF comes from

idiotic driving, then you'll need to go out the back and give yourself a massive uppercut. Yup, it was simple, really; there was absolutely no pressure at all. Aside from having their own demons to deal with, the pair had a handful of other minor issues: all the other drivers in the field, who were out there on the track doing their own thing. First, they were





driving as fast and as hard as they could to ensure that they would be as high up the finishing order as possible. Fair enough, too! Second, they were going to make the potential champions work extremely hard for their spoils. No gifting to be had here — not even in such a social category. When CMC headed to the South Island, Clarke Hopkins was in charge of the Group 1 field. Perkins was there and thereabouts, but he'd lost 50 points early in the season and was trying to claw his way back — and the way the points system works means that many things would need to go his way. When that happens, it's human nature, and understandable, to consider giving up on the title and just going for the racing, but Perkins had made the decision that he was not going to give up until the last moment. Steve Noyer in Group 2 was in the same situation as Hopkins when he went to Timaru and Ruapuna in Christchurch. His lead was reasonably

substantial, and he was probably the only Group 2 competitor who had finished all the season's races up to that point. Again, it meant that others were spending their time trying to dig their way out of a points hole. They weren't there just to make up the grid numbers, though, and they were certainly not just circulators; they were pushing Noyer hard, and often beating him. However much they despised their own desire to have him get a DNF, they needed it to happen — and it didn't. There is a point here that should be made very clear. Noyer could have lost the championship lead when his gearbox died at Ruapuna. However, Bruce Kett, one of his fierce on-track rivals, loaned him a gearbox so that he could remain in the game. Only a handful of competitors from an extremely small list of categories would do that, and it meant that Kett would not be able to win the championship himself. We need to think hard about sacrifices of that kind.

Perkins also got a helping hand of sorts. Shane Wigston, who was leading the series after the first two rounds, didn't travel to the third round in Taupo or the subsequent South Island meets. John Midgley didn't go to the mainland, either. Thus, two of the top challengers were instantly out of the points count. This didn't mean that the trophy was already effectively gifted to Perkins, though, because Dean Hansen, Grant Dalton, Bruce Anderson, and Steve Scoles were out on the tarmac and pouncing at every opportunity. At one stage, Anderson and Scoles were top-three potentials, but both of them had small issues at the southern tracks that lost them a handful of valuable points. This meant that Hansen and Dalton were a few steps forward in the hunt. The biggest loser from Timaru and Ruapuna was Clarke Hopkins. His championship lead was derailed across those two weekends. Breakdown after breakdown and wrong car set-ups would >



see his lead shrivel away to the point at which he wouldn't be able to get back to the top in the final round — well, not without some kind of glorious miracle or intervention. He was finishing way down in the pack, others were taking the honours, and the champagne box had clearly moved garages. By the time Hopkins reached Manfeild, it was too late to do anything about it, and knowing about his car set-ups at the final was of no help, as he candidly explained: "Down south, I broke valve springs, I broke the steering — in fact, I don't think there was anything I didn't break. We tinkered with the car a lot, made a lot of changes, and learnt the hard way. We've now gone back to basics, tuned the car to where it used to be — and now it works again. Everyone does it, though; we see the other cars' times and think we have to make a change. We've learnt from this."

Perkins, however, had a great trip south. He won the Ruapuna round and was second at Timaru. Points

were coming in for him by the bucketload. Even though Angus Fogg took out the round at Timaru, Perkins was smiling. Come Sunday morning at Manfeild, he had just one job to do — finish. Perkins didn't get the maximum points from the first day, either — Scoles managed to steal some numbers when he took a race win. For Scoles, that was a good thing, as he was in a battle with Anderson for fifth place overall. Hansen was also on fire — he took qualifying and had his yellow beast perfectly in sync with the circuit. He had, in fact, with a stealthy disposition, moved himself into third position on the table — one point ahead of Dalton. Yes, it was game on for the minor placings. "We're punching above our weight a bit," said a coy Hansen. "We were hoping to be in the top 10, so to be fighting for third with Dalts is pretty good." Dalton was well aware of the requirements for the run home.

"It's been my best season, I think," he said,

smiling. "I've had a really good crew, and, honestly, we've had a really good time. I threw Saturday's race away, though; I got off the line better than Dean, but I washed out in turn one. He got me. However, I know how to play the game, and Dean's pedalling really, really well. The last race is going to be interesting."

Back in Group 2, Noyer was again in the same situation as Perkins. He only needed to finish the Sunday morning race. He was lucky to be in that position, because he wasn't that quick on the track. His closest rival, Tristan Teki, was certainly quicker right across the season — he had, in fact, won three of the seven rounds, but, like others, he had lost valuable championship points from two earlier rounds and that was enough to hinder the run home. Therefore, Noyer took the long-known advantage in motorsport: consistency (and a spare gearbox from a generous competitor!).

For a couple of other competitors, the deciding Sunday race didn't start so well. During the warm-up lap for the handicap race, Janine Douglas' bonnet decided that it needed to meet the windscreen, and she had to leave the track — she was on pole, with Cam Crawford to start behind her. Crawford's own problem then commenced, because, when the first flag was dropped, it was actually the flag for Douglas — whether she was there or not. Since Crawford was now the first car, he assumed that it was his flag, so he started driving. Unfortunately, the result of his confusion — and there are still many debates going on about the situation — was a drive-through penalty for what was considered a false start. Plenty felt for him, but it's a lesson for all drivers that, rather than the starting procedures being changed to suit that particular situation, the drivers need to ensure that they follow the normal routines.

There were, however, no problems for Noyer and Perkins. They didn't win the race, but they had no need to. Cliché after cliché could be punched out at this time, but two facts about the whole scenario come to the fore: Perkins is a four-peat Group 1 champion; Noyer is a three-peat for Group 2. It's an awesome moment for both of them.

The rest of the field will need to wait until the end of 2018, when the next season starts. They will want to break the cycle; they will want to start their own. The Group 2 drivers know their competition, and will spend the next few months getting their cars fresh for the challenge.

The Group 1 drivers will be doing the same — but they'll also be pondering the fresh meat. Andrew Anderson is coming in with a Falcon. Brent Collins wants to join in. Kevin Williams is making noises. Nick Ross is entering. Hugh Gardiner will have his Camaro dialled in, Angus Fogg has already shown the new level — and don't forget Hansen. His claiming third overall, ahead of Dalton, was a brilliant performance.

If Perkins wants to make it five, he will need to drive out of his skin.

The category that is proudly partnered by Value Tyres Hankook, Game Over, Enzed, and NZV8 magazine has grown into a beast — a massive beast that we love. 

I BROKE VALVE SPRINGS, I BROKE THE STEERING — IN FACT, I DON'T THINK THERE WAS ANYTHING I DIDN'T BREAK

