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DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER

THE "JEWEL" of Australian rallying, the Alpine Rally, celebrates its Diamond Jubliee this month. The 60th running of the Alpine on November 19/20 will decide the Australian Rally Championship.

The LCCA-run Alpine is the oldest perennial motor sport event in the Southern Hemisphere, pre-dating the Australian Grand Prix — the 48th running of which will be just a week earlier — by six years. In fact, agewise, it's one of the senior citizens of international motor sport. And the only rally that's seen more years than the Alpine is the Monte Carlo classic.

The first Alpine Rally in 1922 took in more than 1600km of Victorian Alps scenery and took a fortnight to complete. In those days, crews were penalised — via a points system — for lifting the bonnet, losing a wheel, and having to hand-crank.

In 1963 the event became fully route-charted, effectively doing away with the need for navigational skills. By this time it was no longer a reliability trial, having become more of a speed test.

Ten years later the Alpine adopted the special stage format. At the same time, the hub of interest moved away from Melbourne, from where it had previously started, to the small township of Bright in North-Eastern Victoria.

This year's rally route is very similar to last year's, with the bulk of the competitives contained in the same pine forests. The route totals 700 km (400 of which will be competitive, the remainder being transport stages).

Other sections of the event of particular spectator interest will be the "special stage spectaculars", one of which will take spectators back to the famous Hume Weir racing circuit, near Albury.

With sponsorship from Enka-fill — the Dutch firm responsible for the PVA car chamois in the Day-glo orange containers — and a close points tussle for the ARC, this year's "Battle of Bright" will be a hottie.

Despite Lady Luck deserting both Greg Carr and Geoff Portman virtually all this season, these two enter as favourites to win the rally. However, proving that consistency pays off, young Victorian David "Dinta" Officer finds himself at the head of the ARC points table after finishing in third place every round this year — on the first occasion, in a tied finish with West Aussie Ross Dunkerton.

None of the pre-season favourites feature among the top four pointscorers. Officer leads the title by just half a point from New South Welshman Peter Johnson, whose 40 points came by virtue of the CAMS points system favouring Group A competitors.

After Johnson on the points board is four-time ARC claimant Dunkerton on 36½. Also benefiting from the Group A incentive is Queenslander Russell Worthington, whose Mazda 626 has performed exceptionally well for a front-wheel-drive car.

The Group A points bias will make it very difficult for Officer to take the title. He must win the Enka-fill Alpine outright to claim the points bonus needed to assure him of the title. Otherwise, Johnson and his Mazda RX-7 need only to finish third in his class or better to win the ARC. Similarly, Dunk only needs a good finish, and Dinta to retire, to take his fifth title.