

# LEITRIM'S OWN AUTOTESTING CHAMPION!

## *Bláithín Gallagher talks to David Thompson*

*DAVID THOMPSON from Manorhamilton has been winning competitions in Autotesting for many years now. In 2008 through his talent and successes in many competitions he secured a place on the Irish team. David keeps rather quiet about his achievements and so I was really delighted when he agreed to an interview so I could find out more about this sport and his role in it.*

### **BG David, let me start by asking you what exactly is Autotesting?**

DT: Autotesting is the ability to follow a defined route around a set of markers, with stop astride lines and changes of direction, necessitating the use of forward and reverse gears. All this is against the clock, so maintaining the momentum to minimise time loss during manoeuvres is essential. There are penalties for touching the markers, not crossing the lines correctly or in the wrong direction. There are 4 different classes: *Class A Front wheel drive Specials; Class B Rear wheel drive sports cars; Class C Small saloons* (under 11ft overall length); *Class D Large saloons* (over 11ft overall length).

### **BG: Is it expensive?**

#### **What do you need to be involved?**

DT: Autotesting is one of the most inexpensive motor sports available, but the keener you get and the more you want to win, then the more you will spend to have a competitive car. You will want to do more championships so travelling expense becomes greater. Autotesting is open to drivers over 16 years. In Northern Ireland those aged over 14 can take part but these must be accompanied by an adult with a full RTA license and are limited to a saloon car of not more than 1400cc. Then once you reach 16 years of age you can drive on your own and progress into other classes. To get started you are best to go for the large saloon class, these cars tend to be the cheapest and most available. You need very little special equipment, a knob on the steering wheel so you can steer with one hand and leave the



other free to use on the handbrake and gear lever.

### **BG: Is it safe?**

DT: The sport is very safe, the speeds are always low, max speed 40mph. On a normal test the driver only uses 1st and reverse gear. The events generally take place in open car parks or industrial estates with plenty of room. There are no safety equipment/gear required because the sport is so safe. All drivers do wear a lap belt to hold them tight in the seat and to stop them falling out if something did go wrong. By only using a lap belt it also allows the driver to turn in the seat easily when needing to look behind for reversing.

### **BG: Are males and females involved?**

DT: Both males and females can take part in the sport but it is mainly males.

### **BG: Is it exciting?**

DT: Yes the sport is exciting especially at the top level. Normally there might only be a few tenths of a second between drivers on a test but you get the odd test where one driver will be quicker than the others and might be a second to a second and a half quicker. With the times so close this leaves it exciting to

watch and be involved in, it can be nail biting at times.

### **BG: Does it teach young drivers safety or would it encourage recklessness?**

DT: It definitely teaches young drivers safety and skill over recklessness, the skill needed to drive a car on a test is something that you won't develop on your first day out or even after one year competing. It generally takes a driver 3 to 4 years to get on a championship competitive pace.

### **BG: Do you think it might be a good idea for those young drivers who tend towards the**



**"boy racer" scene to get involved in autotesting instead? If yes, how might it help?**

DT: Yes I think it would be good for the 'boy racer' type of driver to get involved in autotesting as it will teach them lots of driving skill, it will allow them do the driving in a controlled environment and safely. It will allow them to meet new friends, some famous drivers and it will also give them something to focus on i.e. preparing their car and maintaining it. While all the competitors are always out to try win and do their best they are also there to help each other. If a fellow competitor's car breaks down we all try to help each other and fix the problem or if they got lost on a test we would try help them find their way as quick as possible, even if it would mean that competitor beating you overall on the day or even in a championship. There would be a good friendship between all drivers both on and off the courses.

**BG: Is it expensive to be involved?**

DT: Autotesting is one of the most inexpensive motor sports available but the keener you get, and the more you want to win, then the more you will spend to have a competitive car. You will want to do more championships so travelling expense becomes greater.

**BG: What age can you start at?**

DT: Autotesting is open to drivers over 16 years. In Northern Ireland those aged over 14 may participate but these must be accompanied by an adult with a full RTA license and are limited to a saloon car of not more than 1400cc. Then once they reach 16 years of age they can drive alone and progress into other classes. To get started you are best to go for the large saloon class These cars tend to be the cheapest and most available. You need very little special equipment, a knob on the steering wheel so you can steer with one hand and leave the other free to use on the handbrake and gear lever.

**BG: Are there many involved in this sport in Ireland**

DT: Between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland there would be between 100-150 drivers between the different clubs and championships.

**BG:How did you first get involved?**

DT: I first got involved in autotesting in 2003. From a young age I was always interested in motor sport, rallying especially. My dream was always to be a rally driver but it is a very expensive sport. When I was younger I helped marshal at a few local autotests and was amazed at the skill that the drivers had and said to my dad when I was older I'd like to try the sport. Then, in early 2003, at the age of 16 I heard about a championship in Northern Ireland to encourage young drivers to start the sport. It was a low cost class set up, only road going cars allowed, standard tyres, the car was not allowed to be stripped or lightened. A knob on the steering was allowed. I entered this class and from the first day I was hooked.

**BG: Tell me about all the various prizes you won, can you list the competitions you won**

DT: In my first year I finished 2nd overall in the road going class. Then I progressed into the beginners class and built a modified large saloon car (a Vauxhall Nova). I finished 2nd that year, the following year I won that class. Then I moved to the semi experts class and I won that in my first year and I also was lucky enough to get a class win at one event in the expert large saloon class. I then progressed to the experts class and built a better and more competitive car, again a Vauxhall Nova, I brought the car development to a new level, I stripped the car lighter than anyone had done before. The above championships all took place in Northern Ireland. From 2007, when I became an expert, I started to take part in the Irish championship, the 'Hewison' which I won in my class in that year and every year subsequently to date. I have also won the Northern Ireland large saloon championship four times in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2013.

In 2010 I decided to do the British championship 'MSA' and the 'BTRDA'. I did both of these competitions for three years in a row and I won my class in the MSA in 2010 and 2011, I finished 3rd overall in 2010 and 2nd overall in 2011. In the BTRDA I won my class in 2010, 2011 and 2012. Doing these championships it took a lot of commitment and time but was worth it as I made a lot of new

friends, I got to see many places in England and added some great results to my achievements.

I have also competed in different club championships, the MG club and the Autotest Drivers Club "ADC". I have won my class in both championships throughout the years that I have been competing and also have won some of their events outright. I have won the ADC club championships outright 4 times which also includes this year. I just secured that championship on Saturday November 2, 2013 by winning the ADC final event of year outright.

Once a year there is an event held in England called the Ken Wharton. This is like the World Cup of the autotesting year. It is a team event and to get on your team you have to compete in the championship held by your country and win your respective classes. Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, England and Wales all enter a team each year. So at this event you have the best of the best autotest drivers battling it out to help their country win the most sought after award. I have being lucky enough to be on the Irish team since 2008 and since then as a team we have won the event twice.

**BG: Congratulations to you David and to the team you are with. All of these wins, and very little fuss about it! Really this is quite an achievement. I am sure I speak on behalf of many when I say that we in Leitrim are very proud of you.**

**Well done!**

