



# STYR

CHALLENGE

## Special Report

Season 2021 – Issue 7: Chris Jones – The Champion's Story

# CHAMPION CHRIS!



Photo: Jon Elsey

The story of 2021 Champion, Chris Jones

Chris Jones’ ambitions to win the 2021 ETSL ST-XR Challenge were severely dented at the very start of the season – just like his car! – but he went on to clinch the title at the final round after a tough year of racing. It was the first time that Jones had claimed the overall championship although he had taken a few class titles in the Noughties.

Jones headed into Croft’s opening round of the year full of confidence having built up his speed during testing on the Friday before the meeting. However, on his final flying lap during qualifying the nearside of his Fiesta ST was badly damaged when a slower car moved off-line to allow Jones through only to lose control on a dirty area of the track and smack into him.

Jones didn’t think that the required repairs could be made in time for him to take part in either of the weekend’s races but those around him had other ideas. His friend, Matt Williams, helped him to fix the mechanicals while fellow driver, Mark Robinson, knocked the front wing back into shape. He repaid their hard work by getting his championship campaign off to the best possible start with a double victory.

Robinson and his wife Kerry have been friends with Chris for a long time – indeed, they are so close they were due to be Godparents to his kids but sadly they did not survive childbirth.

Chris got to know Mark in the early Noughties when he was building a Ford Escort XR3i to take part in the XR Challenge – as it was known back then. He was a regular visitor to Demon Tweaks, where Mark worked, to buy parts. Robinson went on to become a stalwart competitor in the series himself, regularly racing alongside his brother Simon. So close is his friendship with Mark, Chris has become a member of the Robinson Motorsport “family”. They all park up in the paddock next to each other and collaborate on preparing their cars

between meetings. The trio have won 12 championships between them.

Jones’ father had been a regular at Oulton Park since the circuit opened in the early ‘50s and when Chris was young he used to go with his dad to watch “anything and everything” car-related at the Tarporley track which was a short distance from where they lived.

One of their favourite categories was the XR Challenge. At this time, there were enough entries for the Fiesta XR2s and Escort XR3is to run separately. Depending on how the timetable panned out, Chris and his father would happily wait until the end of a meeting to watch their favourite championship from

their preferred vantage point, the top right of the Lodge grandstand from where they could see part of Druids.

Time passed and in 2002 Chris found himself helping Paul Dobson when he was competing in the series. Jones thought to himself, “I could build one of these...”

...and so he did... which is how he ended up raiding the Demon Tweaks catalogue with the help of Mark Robinson to build an XR3i.

Jones made his debut in the XR Challenge during 2003 and two years later he took his Escort to the first of 3 class titles in 5 years. The last of these was particularly exciting as, having not taken part in the first 8 races, he

ended the year tied on points with Chris Flynn and only won on count back.

Jones competed in the XR Challenge through to 2012. During this time, there were 2 instances where he raced in another category. In 2007, he borrowed an Alfa 33 for an outing in a single-marque series which was very competitive at the time. He qualified third and finished second despite his 8 valve car competing against others that had 16.

Then in 2009, Chris took part in a CSCC race at Oulton Park where he shared his Escort with Jason Hennefer. With the duo well on the way to winning their class they were thwarted by a broken exhaust.



Chris rebuilt his Escort and returned to the series in 2020.  
Photo: Jon Elsey

More recently, there was another foray away from the ST-XR Challenge at the start of 2021 when he once again teamed up with Hennefer for another endurance race. This time Jones’ ST was entered in a Clubsport event at a very wet Croft.

At the end of the 2012 season, the Escort was sold to Jonathan Wells who raced it for the following 2 years, claiming the title at the second attempt.

Jones then bought the car back and fully rebuilt it in time for the 2020 ST-XR Challenge – this was of course delayed by the Covid pandemic. Usually, drivers can drop their worst scores when the final championship standings are calculated but due to the truncated calendar all 9 rounds counted. Despite missing a Triple Header meeting, Chris finished runner-up in Class B just 4 points behind his old friend Hennefer.

Up to 2020, points were awarded according to the driver’s on-track finishing position regardless of class which meant you really needed a car that ran in Class D – for Fiesta STs – to stand a chance of winning the overall title and so Jones took the decision to put his trusty Escort to one side and switch to the more recent model (although the rules then changed for 2021 with the points scored in each class deciding the overall champion). The XR3i is “turn key” ready and Chris may enjoy some track days in it next Summer.

He believes the older XRs are more of a racing car than the STs as the latter can be taken by the scruff of the neck and hurled into corners – his Escort would never allow such liberties to be taken. On the other hand, the XR3i is now old enough to have become a classic which means parts are difficult to obtain and very expensive when they become available.

Jones has always prepared his own cars at Mill Lane Garage in Kingsley where he has worked for the owner, Phil Starkey, since he was 17.

Chris is very grateful to Phil who has always supported his racing endeavours allowing him to use the facilities to prepare his racers in the evenings and on Sundays.

“With race cars you need to repair them before they break,” explains Jones, “so after every meeting the brakes get stripped down and inspected along with the suspension. The tyres are checked and are replaced or turned on the rims as required. The engine oil and power steering fluid are changed regularly. Before every race I check and double check the set up for each individual circuit. Finally, I give the car a good polish and clean. All this work is quite time consuming but the garage is only 1 mile from my home.” Of course, his friend Mark Robinson is always available if he needs an extra pair of hands – for example, when accident damage has been sustained.

After a hard season of ultra-competitive racing against several talented drivers in the ST Class, ahead of Donington Park’s final round of the season Chris was one of 3 competitors who were in contention for the title. Jones had won the first 4 rounds of the year but Michael Blackburn built up his speed as the campaign unfolded taking 5 wins.

Blackburn was thwarted at the final meeting of the season by an understeer problem which he couldn’t get to the bottom of whereas, despite not having the ideal set up, Jones coped best with the slippery conditions that drizzle produced for the final round which was staged as dusk fell on a cold November afternoon.

After an early Safety Car period, Jones managed to get some XR cars between him and the rest of the ST runners to cruise to a fairly comfortable victory as the track dried and became more suited to his set up.

As he hadn’t raced at the venue since 2005 he was delighted to secure the championship

with a win and fastest lap especially as he later found out that all the other drivers in the Top 6 had taken part in pre-event testing.

Jones has enormous respect for all those who take part in the series but especially his closest challenger, Blackburn, who he regards as a fierce competitor. Chris always has to bring his “A Game” when he races against him. The pair finished the year tied on 5 victories – the two wins with his battered car

at Croft proved crucial to Jones coming out on top in the overall standings.

As was the case when he was winning Class B in his XR3i, Jones began the season with no thoughts about winning the championship. As a club racer, his goal was to make at least one overtake, avoid finishing last and generally enjoy his motor sport. Ending the season with the title meant his racing exploits in 2021 far exceeded his expectations!

Although 3 drivers could have won the overall title heading into the final round, it was Chris who sealed the Championship by taking victory as the gloom descended on Donington Park.

Photo: PS Images

