

SRI LANKA 4X4 ACTION, "A LA RFC.



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The Pearl of the Indian Ocean has been an enchanting destination for travelers over the last 2,500 years. From its lush mountains, ancient cities, golden beaches and rich blend of Portuguese, Dutch, British influence with a right mix of local culture, warmth and hospitality; it's the place to be.

Lately, there's another attraction, it's in the form of 4x4 sports. I spent an inspiring weekend at MAS Fabric Park in Thulhiriya in the company of off-roaders, supporters and massive spectator crowds. It was the Rainforest Challenge (RFC) selection, round 1, organized by Four Wheel Drive Club (FWDC) of Sri Lanka under its 4x4 Jamboree umbrella. Sean Hameed and Rushiran Silva, of RFC 08 were the prime movers of this selection with the club solidly behind them.

The event attracted 25 extreme class entries, 45 novice entries and 8 ladies teams. Among the entries were familiar faces of RFC '06 & '07, Navin Marapana / Indika Sanjaya as well as Maligaspe Osanda / Malintha Kannangara and their supporters. The others came from the most hardcore 4x4 competitor teams from around the island. All were gathered for this inaugural selection event for RFC 09 at MAS Fabric Park vast outdoor venue to test themselves "a la RFC" style of competition.

"We wanted to give the participants a taste of what they will get in the actual event in Malaysia, to familiarize with the rules and style of RFC," said Sean. "Right down to the scorebooks," added Rushiran. "With the scorebook system implemented, there is no argument anymore how they have done in each Special Stage," commented Navin, "it's very transparent and well liked by everyone."

The hardware brought in for the event has all been well modified to suit the extreme action to come. The Jeep Wranglers, Toyotas and Land Rovers formed the core of the fighting machines. The Sri Lankan 4x4 fraternities have developed rapidly in a short span of only 6 years, from stock standard to present day fully modified 4x4s.

The oldest established club is none other than FWDC and they formed the backbone of this growing 4x4 adventure sports with dedicated marshals as well. In fact, the RFC was mentioned by Sean back in 2005 and the following year, the Sri Lankans made their debut in RFC. That's how fast they have reacted to live their passion in 4x4.

"Every off-road competitor here wants to make it to the RFC one day", remarked Sean again, it's the pinnacle of 4x4 sports, but not many know how to prepare for it. By having this kind of selection, they will learn how to cope with the SS and learn from their mistakes. Apart from the hardware, they also have to hone up their driving and recovery skills. They will need all these to go through the 10 days in the RFC," he concluded.

The extreme category kicked off first with 4 Special Stages (SS) on day one. The SS were varied from driving along undulating terrain to hard winching exercises, higher grade than previous years. Most made it through with some breakdowns, but by the second day, all were back in action again.

The second day was dedicated to hardcore action all the way in another four 4 SS - all of which needed winching to finish the SS. The two most memorable SS were The Rock & Roll which made the teams winched up a hill (which is rock solid) and the last SS of the day was called Vertical Limit a.k.a The Mother of all Winching – which the teams had to winch up a steep slope and coming down with tight twists and turns. All the SS were similar in style to RFC, which delighted the teams and the massive spectator crowds during the weekend.

To increase the pool of new blood into the sports, this year's event was also opened to the novices and the ladies. It was a great showing by the new recruits who drove through the tracks with gusto. No need for winching in these two categories. The twists and turns on the muddy tracks are enough encouragement for them to come back for more. From the look of things, the seed for 4x4 off-road sports has been sown, it was a promising start.

The second round will be this coming 1 - 4 October, the overall winner who has accumulated the most points in the two rounds will be declared the Champion to take on the RFC this Decemebr with shipping, carnet, air fares and entry fees all paid for.

This first round went to Navin and Indika in their Land Rover Defender 90. In close second was 1st Runner up Sam Chandrasoma and Amal Wickramarachi and 2nd Runner up was Deepthi Perera and Nishantha Ranasinghe, both teams in two superbly prepared Jeep Wranglers. But, the other top 5 teams were not far behind in points. The second round will be interesting to see who will emerge the overall champion.

The enthusiasm and sporting spirit shown by this hardcore class plus the new poll of enthusiasts is a harbinger of greater things to come for Sri Lanka for sure. Catch the RFC action this year, in the state of Johor (Malaysia), from 5-14 Dec.

See more pix of the Sri Lankan action in www.rainforest-challenge.com,

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