

Fast facts**WPS 12-Hour Showroom endurance race****When:** Qualifying today and race tomorrow**Start time:** 5.45am tomorrow**Where:** Mount Panorama, Bathurst**How much:** Today \$20; tomorrow \$25**Entries:** 32**Supporting categories:** Historic touring cars, Aussie racing cars, Commodore Cup cars, GT championship cars**Entertainment:** Freestyle motorcross, drifting**TV:** Channel 9, Sat April 28, noon-2pm

Impressive . . . the Subaru Impreza WRX STI entry to be driven by Australia's World Rally Championship star Chris Atkinson and co-drivers Dean Herridge and Cody Crocker in the Bathurst 12-hour at Mount Panorama



They're in for the long haul

By RAY KERSHLER

They are from all walks of life with one common passion. They like racing cars and The Mountain is calling. This weekend's revival of the Bathurst 12-hour at Mount Panorama has a magnetic attraction for anyone with oil in their blood.

Tens of thousands of tourists trek to the mountain every year just to drive the public roads which, when closed, comprise the racetrack. But very few get to race. These days the Bathurst 1000 is restricted to professional V8 Supercar drivers.

Until the V8s dominated, the Bathurst 1000 offered motor racing enthusiasts the chance to pit their skills against one of the toughest racetracks in the world.

Cars from showroom floors, old bangers lovingly restored in private garages, and semi-professional drivers all combined to give the Bathurst 1000 — The Great Race — the colour that initially made the event famous worldwide. The spectre of entertainment TV gradually undermined the fun of the chase

and by the mid-1990s only Holden and Ford were allowed to play. For a while in the '90s another 12-hour race offered enthusiasts the chance to test their mettle. But these things cost money and the last 12-hour race, which had been moved to Eastern Creek, was won by Dick Johnson and John Bowe in 1995, before the idea disappeared in red ink.

The shooting star of a 24-hour race in 2002 and 2003 briefly re-ignited the flame.

Last year The Bathurst International Motor Festival brought enthusiasts to the mountain but lacked a focus in that it lacked a race.

So the idea of the 2007 WPS Bathurst 12-hour Showroom Enduro was born. From V8 veteran John Bowe to Alfa Romeo salesman Rocco Rinaldo, the drivers are at the mountain to race and win.

Some 108 drivers will race 32 cars in eight classes. But more than likely the attention will focus on the overall winner which at a casual glance might bravely be predicted in a trifecta — cars featuring Chris Atkinson, Garry Holt and Jason Richards.

Atkinson, Australia's World Rally Championship star has flown back from

Portugal to head the Subaru Impreza WRX STI entry with co-drivers Dean Herridge and Cody Crocker. Holt, the Australian performance car champion has enlisted the aid of V8 Supercar star Paul Morris and the Kiwi Carrera Cup winner Craig Baird in a BMW 335i twin turbo, a world first for the car.

Holt gives his team a real show in this race although delays have hampered preparation.

"We expect the car to hit 280km/h to 290km/h down Conrod Straight, so it will be quick," he says. "But because it is turbocharged it also produces a lot of torque which makes it ideal for the mountain."

BMW is also represented by other models, including three smaller 130i models for drivers including Luke Searle and Andrew Moffat, son of Allan. The Holden and Ford rivalry is never far away, with Holden represented by two factory-backed Astras and Ford by a string of privateer entries. V8 Supercar stars Jason Richards, Shane Price, Jack Perkins and Nathan Pretty will drive Holden's Astra VXR Coupe with Pretty looking for a unique double after winning the inaugural 24-hour.

Holden has shown great faith in two of their young stars — Price and Perkins — who are rookies in the V8 Supercar championship this year. Two all-female crews will take on the boys. Leanne Tander heads Holden's second Astra challenge while Helen Stig will rev up the Thrifty Car Rentals Toyota Celica.

Alfa makes its diesel debut at Bathurst with an entry from one of Australia's leading dealers. Kean Booker, Rocco Rinaldo and David Stone will drive the Alfa 159 2.4 JTD for Thomson Alfa Romeo of Parramatta. "It's one thing to stand in the showroom and say Alfa Romeo is the best and another to put our money where our mouth is on the race track," says Rinaldo, the dealer's sales manager.

No fair-dinkum race at Mount Panorama would be complete without John Bowe. The V8 Supercar vet teams with ex-footy star and current V8 ute driver Jack Elsegood and team owner Chris Delfsma to race the Century 21 Hazelbrook Ford BF Falcon XR8.

"The car I will be driving is a normal car you can buy out of the showroom," Bowe says. "It is standard everything and while I don't expect us to be outright contenders, I do hope to go well in our class."



Outsider chance . . . Luke Searle and his BMW 130i



Big gun . . . Garry Holt in this BMW 335i



Girl power . . . Holden's all-female crew with their diesel Astra