



COMPETITORS Subarus of every stripe excelled in the Alcan rally.



SWAYING THE OUTCOME The X3 responded with precision and thrilled us.



LIKE CURLING TSD rallying makes peculiar demands, offers arcane charms.

MARATHON

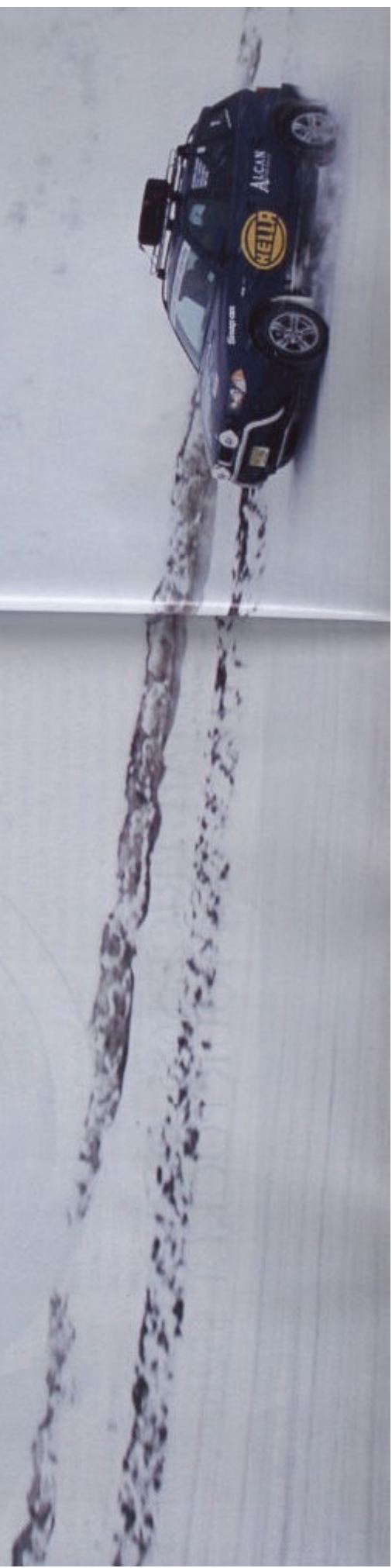
Three Zero

winning the **Alcan Winter Rally** pushes the BMW X3

ALD AHRENS PHOTOGRAPHY BY GUNNAR CONRAD

Hero

to the limit and helps us to find o





ON THE CLOCK Flats, more than a mere common nuisance, could cost points.

My horoscope said, "Spend some time alone to think things over." Instead, I was sharing 167.1 cubic feet of space for nine days and 4665 miles with a bear and a weasel. The bear was Gary Webb, one of America's finest time-speed-distance (TSD) rally drivers, and the weasel was Peter Schneider, a navigator without peer. Instead of driving their own car, they had landed a ride in one of three factory-backed BMW entries in the Alcan Winter Rally. The catch? They had to bring me. I was the skunk.

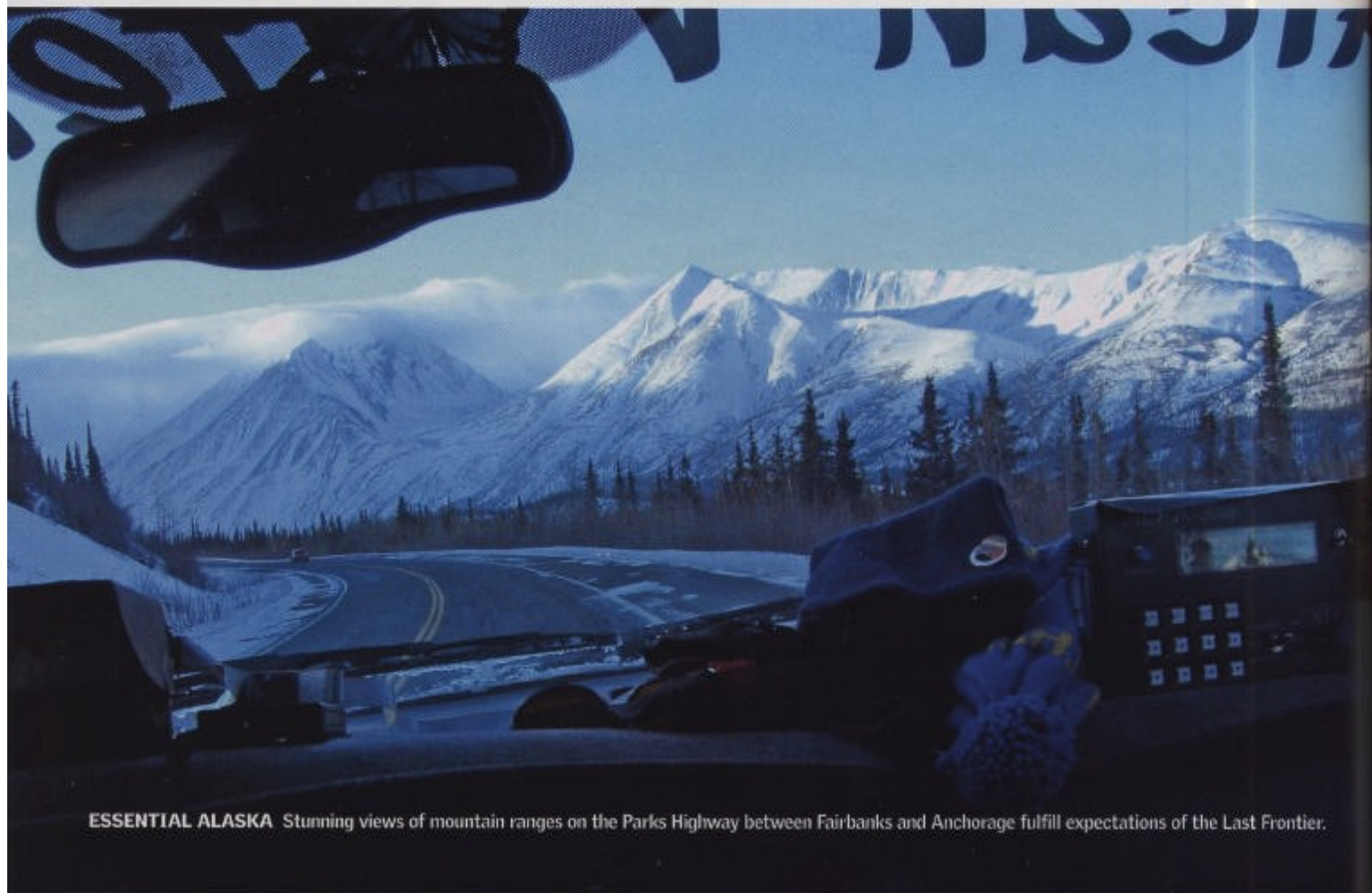
Even before we met, I had raised a stink with Schneider about driving the competitive segments myself. My predesignated role had been to grind out the long highway transits between segments; as a sop, I would be allowed half the attempts during three ice races, and although no one said it, mine were expected to be flops. After all, Webb had competed for fifteen years in SCCA ProRally, had done twelve years on Maine's frozen lakes, and even owned a winter driving school. As for my accomplishments, call me the Dennis Kucinich of motorsports campaigns.



ALASKA HIGHWAY HABITUÉS included bison, mountain goats, and moose.

These two men, each with thirty years' rallying experience, meant to win the Winter Alcan and would not countenance my sinking their chances. It was pointed out in the initial drivers' meeting that journalists have a less than distinguished record in this event, which was being contested for the seventh time since 1988. While we loaded the BMW X3 3.0i, I gave some thought to shuttling back to the airport for a home-bound flight. Why pursue this folly deep into the Canadian Arctic?

But a slow change began taking effect as soon as we rolled away at 8:00 a.m. on February 18, a warm, wet morning. We left Seattle and cruised north for the first TSD, "Paradise Road," marked out over easy Puget Sound Basin farmland. Once we had entered the section, Schneider worked his box, an Alfa rally computer, while Webb watched the null, or target speed, on his display and minutely adjusted the X3's pace, staying almost perfectly on the rally master's zero and picking up just one penalty point for missing a checkpoint by a second. This little prelude deceived me into thinking every TSD would be so easy.



ESSENTIAL ALASKA Stunning views of mountain ranges on the Parks Highway between Fairbanks and Anchorage fulfill expectations of the Last Frontier.



LIT SLALOM The Big Lake ice shimmers under low-angle, boreal rays as a BMW 325ix cooks along. In this winter rally, every discipline must be mastered.

Afterward, we crossed the Canadian border into British Columbia. Now lace curtains hung in the windows of houses, and the road signs included French instructions. Relaxing during the highway ride, Schneider tried explaining the techniques of navigation, and I recalled the observation made by Satch Carlson—editor of the BMW Car Club of America's *Roundel* magazine and the TSD driver in Car 3, the second X3—who had quipped, "TSD rallying is like curling. The only people who care are those who do it."

What it came down to was an algebraic ratio of the null to the x factor of unknown variables (e.g., differences in wheel rotation), pitted against the actual speed and distance traveled in the assigned time. Webb stamped out the solutions with his feet, the by-product of a decades-long obsession. "That's why we're not millionaires," Schneider said. "Our heads are full of this stuff."

The rally's field did include a Microsoft millionaire; Rene Baron von Richthofen, a claimed descendant of the World War I flying ace, in his Red Baron Audi S4; some SCCA ProRally veterans; and plenty of computer geeks who did the navigating. But my own teammates fascinated me most. Schneider, an IBM project manager from New Jersey, had rallied on the weekend of his wedding and used to compete up to thirty-five times a year. He had spent \$12,000 of his own money to officiate several Alcons and learn how rally master Jerry Hines thinks. His laptop contained all those records, ready for quick regurgitation.

Meticulousness would keep him up until 3:00 a.m., calculating and recalculating x factors, and his obsession for winning made him a stickler about rule violations. Other competitors reviled the pushy pest. Everyone picked on him.

Meanwhile, holding the wheel with his left hand (his right arm is weak), Webb took the logical view, and this offset Schneider's anxiety.



Webb liked to gamble but stuck to video poker rather than playing cards. His pragmatism superseded all. "I've never paid more than \$2.50 for a haircut in my life," he boasted. (The secret: barber colleges.) He explained that he got the ruffians to behave in his public-school driver-education classes in Mohave Valley, Arizona, his new home, by making deals and keeping them. He was unimpressed by the X3 and its highfalutin features, such as its Dynamic Stability Control (DSC), auto-



GET A ROOM The Ice Hotel, located near Fairbanks, drew exhausted competitors. Patrons could sip martinis, which cost \$18 each, from glasses made of ice.

matic climate system, and Panorama moonroof. In rallies, as he has proven many times, a rented Subaru is good enough. Compared with Schneider, he was social with other veteran competitors, who appreciated his raillery. The novices welcomed his solicitude, which was administered with an ambassadorial eye toward the sport's future.

On day one of the rally, Webb swallowed 1000 milligrams of penicillin, and he downed 1500 milligrams more on each succeeding day. "It's to knock out the big bugs," he explained. "You can't afford to get sick on a rally." Schneider had an entire clutch of pills and potions, including Bengay patches for his back and cod-liver oil capsules. The first two days, he grimaced from inside a turtleneck and forbade my opening the windows, lest his throat take a chill that would result in laryngitis.

So that's how we three rolled along the endless highway of British Columbia. A warm spell had nursed the temperature into the mid-for-

ties and wet the roads with meltwater. As the X3 snarled along, Webb and Schneider spoke on many subjects, but they went out of their way to indoctrinate me about staying on zero. For instance, in day two's treacherous "11 Percent Grade" segment, the challenge was to cover 22.895 miles in 34.09 minutes (each minute being divided into 100 units), with six prescribed speed changes at figures between 25 mph and 50 mph, steep climbs and snowy descents, stones in slide areas, a one-lane bridge (and sure checkpoint), and even, God forbid, local traffic, which requires an alarming ruthlessness. "Over the years," Webb said, "I've driven through front lawns and over sidewalks, run over puppy dogs and geese . . . just to stay on time."

The morning of day two, I left my hotel room at 6:25 a.m. and in the hallway found Schneider, looking downcast, a shirt over his shoulders and boxers poking out below its tails. Waiting for his cell phone to connect, he fretted about our being in first place overall, a scant three points ahead of R. Dale Kraushaar's Subaru Baja Turbo and Satch Carlson's X3. "I'd rather be second or third," he lamented.

He would soon have his wish. Outside the lumbering center of Quesnel, British Columbia, we faced the day's initial challenge at Gold Pan Speedway, a quarter-mile oval plowed several feet wide to expose a rutted track of glazed, compressed snow. Each of the sixteen cars would get four attempts, two laps per driver. The best pair of times for each car would be scored, with a point assessed for every second behind the leader and a maximum penalty of ten points.

Fulfilling the concession made to me, I rolled Car 1 onto the track first. Putting on my helmet made my heart slam around. I understood I'd better not wreck, which would doom my expert teammates' chances. Perhaps foolishly, I switched off the X3's DSC and stuck the manual transmission's lever in third, in manual mode. When competition and safety codirector Bill Banger waved his flag, I gulped air and took off on a bumpy, eventful run of 1:02.11. The studded Hakkapeliitta snow tires assisted mightily, and after my second attempt, in 1:00.32, I saw the tall figure of Car 3's ice-racing ringer, Henry Joy, clapping his hands, presumably because I had stayed off the snowbank.

The 4067-pound X3 was not exactly tossed as is a bouquet of roses at the diva's feet, but it handled predictably and steered with precision. Moments after my first run, Joy had flicked Car 3 around in an astounding 0:58.04. Even more astounding, my experienced teammate Webb clocked his two attempts at 1:02.68 and 1:00.53. How could I have been faster? "Sun ruined the track," someone said. Meanwhile, Joy slid off on his second try and bent a tie-rod, which Carlson later described as being "the size of a paper drinking straw." They would spend their lunch

The Dempster: Canada's Northernmost Highway

Most likely, your aunt and uncle helped tame the Alaska Highway, long ago in their motorhome. But the Dempster Highway, named for Jack Dempster of the Royal North West Mounted Police, would not even have been finished then—not until 1979. This narrow gravel notion of a road opened the Arctic to truckloads of freight and fuel. And, of course, to car rallies. It keeps crossing and recrossing the divide between the Pacific and Arctic Oceans before settling into the lowlands of the Peel and Mackenzie Rivers. In the 469-mile stretch between Dempster Corner, southeast of Dawson City, and Inuvik—conceived by the Canadian government as a new town in 1953—fuel and food are found only at Eagle Plains and Fort McPherson. The scenery fluctuates from dazzling sun dogs to whiteouts, and the Tombstone Range that the highway crosses seems too appropriately named. All this, and the fact that it connects with the ice road to Tuktoyaktuk, makes the Dempster the greatest adventure route remaining in North America.

—RA





ICE ROAD Either terrifying or transforming, 105 mph over the Beaufort Sea.

break looking for an alignment shop, but Schneider's wish was granted, thanks to Carlson's fine second run of 0:59.28. Car 3 assumed the lead, holding the advantage by 18.7 to 21.3 points that night.

At 6:00 a.m. on day three, outside Fort Saint John, the field undertook a TSD called "Looks Like Kansas to Me, Toto," and Webb kept us in second place by audaciously passing a convoy of trucks in a series of uphill switchbacks. Snow and dirt and probably curses swirled behind us, but he marked the hilltop checkpoint and proclaimed, "Zero!" Failing to pass those interlopers would have cost us thirty points, he reckoned. After that, we breezed through the day's remaining two segments, and sometime late in the 842-mile rally, we crossed into the Yukon Territory, larger than California but with a population of 30,000 people. Warm weather still blessed us, and the coniferous, rugged splendor remained unchanged.

Car 3 now led by 21.7 to 25.3 points, and our two X3s—which everyone but me called trucks—had separated from the field. I remembered what Carlson had said of rallying at the first drivers' meeting: "It's very much like being at war." That truth was increasingly obvious. We would need to scratch and claw to avoid losing a tick. Besides which, I then understood how the rally was designed to expose any weakness in several driving disciplines, any character flaws, failure of teamwork, or softness of intellect. We were on the clock fifteen hours a day; our moods swung from despair to exhilaration in increasingly rapid cycles. And most competitors were using up vacation time for this!

Day four began with the "Long Lake" TSD at 8:00 a.m., just as twilight revealed the Yukon River and the environs of Whitehorse. A tiny miscalculation cost Car 3 nine points, and we took a narrow lead into the rally's second ice race. It was going to be hard to keep. The three-quarter-mile track over Fish Lake featured a front-straight chicane and then a tight hairpin left. There followed a kink in a long straightaway, a right-hand bend, and a final, treacherous left-hander of 120 degrees. Mercifully, each attempt would consist of a single lap.

As always, Car 1 led off, and that first lap of mine in 1:20.90 seconds would prove fifth fastest of the session's sixty-two attempts. My second lap of 1:24.70 was a top-twelve effort; the combined total of 2:45.60 tied for fourth in the slalom with ProRally veteran Paul Eklund, in a Subaru Forester Turbo. Best of all, it put another crucial point on Joy and Car 3, which clocked 2:46.70. In the pits, relief flooded over Schneider's face at having kept the lead, which we would never again surrender. "I'm pleased," he said, shaking my hand. As for Webb (1:25.70 and 1:38.40), sullen silence prevailed until evening, when the scores came out and he shook my hand, too.

For the next three days, competition was suspended while the rally followed a long digression northeastward over the Dempster Highway, leading us through vertiginously white mountains and unexpectedly hazy valleys, over frozen crossings of the Peel and Mackenzie Rivers, and finally to Inuvik, Northwest Territories. The temperature plunged to ten below zero, and the wind freshened. The X3's fuel economy fell below 14 mpg, and when the info display read twelve miles to empty, we added the two gallons from the roof in order to make the Eagle Plains survival station. Anyone sitting in the back seat



JUST REWARD Rally master Jerry Hines, left, presents winners' hardware.

suffered from cold feet, but the ride comfort, criticized in press reviews, suited us very well, perhaps because our X3 was not equipped with the Sport package and ran on seventeen-inch wheels. The cold was erroneously blamed for breaking Car 3's weary tie-rod, which had been bent at Gold Pan Speedway, and Carlson and his boys scavenged the part from Car 12, the third X3, putting it out of the rally.

So we ventured together with Carlson, Joy, and navigator Kraushaar over an ice road, traversing the 116 miles from Inuvik to the coastal village of Tuktoyaktuk, leaving in morning dark, jouncing and wending some ninety miles up the frozen Mackenzie River. Several officials' and competitors' cars lost tires to the deep cracks or plowed into snowbanks on the sharp turns, but we got through. The pink-candy sunrise lasted an hour, and even then, the sun barely lofted above the sketchy bluffs. Patches of aqua and azure ice distinguished themselves from the predominant dove-gray flooring. Upon at last reaching the Beaufort Sea, we merely turned right and found ourselves roaring across the Arctic Ocean, as far north as can be driven in Canada, an entire continent—mostly empty, it turns out—lying beneath our wheels!

There was a pit stop in Tuktoyaktuk, so frozen a place that I walked right over the tops of snowdrifts. Everybody fueled up for the equivalent of \$4.20 per gallon—no plastic, no U.S. currency. The all-in-one market also sold us souvenir caps for less than \$40. We soon left, pushed along by the long noonday shadows, and on the smooth Beaufort Sea, bold Joy pushed to 111 mph, while 105 mph satiated me. I loved hitting the little eyebrows of drifted snow, feeling the X3 quiver, and hearing Schneider squeal in terror of being knocked out of the rally. Later in the day, back on the Dempster, I steered around a flock of ptarmigan—they somehow survive on the snow-flanneled tundra—and he cried, "What're you swerving to avoid a stupid ptarmigan for? It's gonna be dead in another month anyway!"

Schneider had no reason to worry. After rallying resumed, he and Webb ran nearly flawless TSD sections. There remained one outside chance for Car 3: the final day's Big Lake slalom outside Anchorage. Perfect laps by Joy and a bad performance by us could make a ten-point swing. Going off first, I poked my foot in it too hard, spun, and felt awfully stupid; but my second attempt of 1:38.90 on the wide, three-eighths-mile oval was excelled by only two drivers in the session and put up a nice target for our pursuers. Fate was already hammering Car 3, though: the DSC refused to deactivate. Joy's best, electronically nannied attempt was 1:48.50. We had won the Alcan Winter Rally by eight and a half points, the equivalent of taking the Indianapolis 500 by a single second.

Everything had gone according to plan. That night at the awards banquet, my skunk's tail was carried jubilantly high. But the best that could be elicited from the logical bear was that he felt "OK" about winning (upbeat emphasis on the "K"). "We were only picking up about three points a day in the TSDs," Webb reasoned.

As for the weasel, Schneider—held back by collective disapprobation—rusted himself into a seat beside me at the rear of the room, muttering, "I hate this."

"What do you hate?" I asked.

"Everything. I hate everything," he said, proving that even winning has its limitations.

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