

COLD REALITIES

Winning would have been terrific, but just surviving means a lot for new kids on the (ice) block in chilly challenge of the Alcan Rally

By Cynthia Claes



Cold weather, high winds, poor visibility and desolation are Dempster Highway's trademarks as it winds to Arctic Circle and beyond

They were people worth knowing and people worth remembering. For 11 days this eclectic Gang of 20 had forsaken computer programming, woodworking and film-making careers; faced isolation and freedom; played without conventions.

"Jerry's Kids" were on the road again.

You've read about rallymaster Jerry Hines and his stepchild, the Alcan 5000, on these pages before (AW, March 12, '90). Begun in 1984 as a summer event, since 1988 Hines has staged a winter version, too.

The 1992 winter tour covered 5705 miles, more or less, depending on how precise your apexes were. Over gravel trails that crested on glare ice and across snow-packed river beds in British Columbia, the Yukon and Alaska, the Alcan has always been more adventure than rally. This year more so, since there were only 11 TSD stages.

Major grumbling surrounded the lack of scoring options. Hines added three Solo II autocross sections, but by mid-rally teams with slight leads were crowing, knowing the rest couldn't make up the difference on the remaining TSDs.

So who were these Kids, lured north by freedom of road and speed? Defending champ Ken Knight, in-process

control manager at Subaru-Isuzu Automotive's Indiana plant, and his co-driver, Greg Lester, were back—this time in Subaru's latest—a Legacy Touring Wagon. SIA's Dave Hartcom, Alcan and One Lap of America vet, was paired with Mike Lingenfelter in a Legacy sedan.

Two-time Alcan winner Gene Henderson arrived, not in his traditional Subaru ride, but in a BMW 325ix. For insurance he had

Tom Grimschaw, the right half of the legendary Buffum/Grimschaw Audi Quattro duo, in the co-driver's seat.

Add ice-racing champs Susie Fouse and Steve Beddor in an Isuzu Rodeo, paired with associate editor Rich Homan of *Road & Track*. Mix in effusive Ron Clyborne, partner Howard Gray. Clyborne, an Alcan vet, has filmed and competed in such madcap madness as the Australian Safari, Trans-Amazon and Trans-Borneo rallies.

"Fast Eddie" Botwick and Mark Wojtkiewicz were back for a ninth Alcan. Eagle Talon driver Brian Davitt, tousle-haired, moustached—a kind of Marlboro Man—was aboard with bespectacled redhead Adrian Crane, a transplanted Englishman, who loves running as much as rallying.

These two paired up after they ran into each other (literally) on a previous Alcan. Brian decided Adrian would be less of a hazard in the Talon's right-hand seat. Camaraderie cannot be over-rated. Co-drivers' quirks into annoyances grow. As occasionally they did between Gordon Carlson, Russ Kraushaar and Bob Hui in the "Morons" license-plated Mazda 323 GTX.

Kraushaar and Hui were rookie little in snow, from Portland. They'd driven little in snow, but both deftly earned their white-knuckle merit badges, but not without enduring the occasional ire of their team leader.

Finally, there was the third Subaru entry—Pro Rally driver Gail Truess and this *Auto-Week* associate editor. Truess builds rally cars for Guy Light when she's not competing in the Subaru Pro Rally championship or conducting driver clinics for Mercedes-Benz.

Our SVX was No. 00031—the same SVX that Knight won with in the '91 Summer Alcan. For its second northern exposure, Subaru changed the oil, added a few decals and vacuumed the carpets.

"The brake pads were changed, weren't they?" we asked at tech inspection. "I didn't use the brakes much last summer," joked Knight. Only later, after following his Touring Wagon up the Peace River Highway in British Columbia, would

we learn he wasn't joking. Rumors were flying about our SVX; that it was to have been Henderson's car until he had a "misunderstanding" with the folks at Subaru; that he'd brought Grimshaw along to teach us a lesson. (Both untrue.) But if that wasn't enough to start the digestive juices flowing, when Team Subaru collected the three cars in Seattle, the SVX hadn't been shod. Not with studs, anyway. The mechanic at the Big O Tire store was apologetic. Sorry, he said, but the Michelin XM+S300's couldn't be drilled. Too many miles of whitewashed wilderness ahead, we were skeptical. No one had run the AlCan "studs" before. Until now.

But studs weren't our main concern as we headed north out of Kirkland, Wash. It was 50 degrees—and raining. We queued for 530 along the Stillaguamish River.

Here we should introduce the two subspecies of rallying—drivers and geeks. Drivers are talented. Drivers are the stars. Drivers spray champagne and taste victory. Geeks are the other guys. Geeks are known in polite company as navigators. Navigators allowed behind the wheel have their status elevated to co-driver. But don't be fooled by titles. They're still geeks. Geeks keep drivers on course. Geeks manipulate the red-eyed monster on the dash—the rally computer—interpreting the glowing numerals of time, speed, distance that change every hundredth of a second. Geeks don't look up as, in a calming monotone, they drone at their driver that he's early, early, still early, through a control.

Don't miss a speed change. Don't appear confused. And never, never, never show fear. That is the Code of the Geek.

As we pulled up to the paddleboard of the wooden bridge to start the first TSD, the SVX—driver and rookie geek—was ready. Pre-coached (which, unlike pre-running, is allowed) by fellow Subaru journeyman geeks Lester and Lingenfelter, four controls later at the end of Stage One our score was '3.3.' Or more importantly 0-0-0-3 late. We'd zeroed our first three controls. Lester and Lingenfelter weren't too amused. Had they given away too many geek secrets?

It was our one, brief, shining moment. We were tied for second; tied with perennial rally winner Gene Henderson and Geek Extraordinaire Tom Grimshaw. And a mere three points behind Knight and Lester, who'd zeroed all the controls. But more dread was at Camelot's gate.

At Dawson Creek, B.C., the Alaska Highway officially begins. There, our rally officially ended. At least as far as the serious stuff—like winning—was concerned.

We missed a TSD.

Doesn't matter the reason, be it bad Chinese food at the 6 p.m. dinner stop, (which we admitted to), bad fuel, bad brakes, or bad navigating (which we didn't admit to). When we learn he wasn't joking.

Eventual winner Ken Knight's Touring Wagon (below) arrives at Downton Hotel in Dawson City where musher Dale Braga (below right) swapped a ride on his dog sled for a spin in the SVX. Earlier, on the Dempster Highway, (right) Rodeo earned its "Double Stuff" nickname after taking yet another off-road excursion (far right)



we showed up five minutes late for the post-dinner TSD out of Dawson Creek. Rallymaster Hines, the demonic glint in his eyes evident even through his Ray-Bans, smiled, winked, and then with the flick of his Bic inked in a 1000-point penalty. Thanks, Jerry. Might as well be a zillion since this rallying game is scored like golf. At Dawson Creek the SVX flew the 3-wood out of bounds on the first tee. And couldn't find the fairway. No amount of pleading worked. Hines knew we'd be travelling warp speed to make up the minutes so he refused to let us start. In a heartbeat we'd driven into oblivion. Truss just shrugged, grinned and said, "Pressures off now, let's do it."

It was 7:30 p.m. We'd been on the road since 10 a.m. when we ran the autocross at Gold Pan Speedway in Quesnel (collecting seven points on the ice oval, no studs. Credit Truss, exceptional car control). We had one hour to make the next TSD.

This time we were on time. And lucky. Three cars—Henderson, Knight and the Morons—started ahead of us, each at one-minute intervals. But as we crested a hill we could see three sets of taillights—grouped together—a mile ahead. Around the next right-hand turn the Touring Wagon had stopped. For one second, Truss lifted. "What the...? No! Go. Go. Don't stop. We'll come back for them after the TSD!"

With team spirit reminiscent of the Pro-Senna days at McLaren, we left them parked in the dark at the road's edge. But

we did look back. Twice. A train had blocked the route forcing Henderson behind by two minutes. Knight one. The Morons were fighting for a piece of road with the other two. Because of the delay, all of them were facing serious if not maximum points on this stage. By the time we came through, the crossing was clear. Maybe we'd get back in this rally after all. But we'd forgotten Jerry's Rules: "If 20 percent of the field doesn't complete a stage, or is interfered with, the stage is eliminated." The train was deemed a *force majeure*. Knight had gambled on that, and parked mid-stage. He was grinning when the car pulled into Pink Mountain for fuel. The stage had been thrown. No points awarded.

But everyone's laughter turned to chagrin when we realized the 24-hour service station (sole building in Pink Mountain) was abandoned. Some had sufficient fuel to make Ft. Nelson. Others had flashing fuel readouts. Knight wasn't grinning now.

But unlike the Morons, who lived up to their nickname and tried a banzai run on tumes—only to run out of gas and then get the rescue vehicle's tow rope wrapped around the axle—Knight slowed and sweet-talked Gerald Hawley's chase car out of half the contents of its spare gas can. We'd already appropriated the other half.



People were tired. People were making mistakes. We'd been driving continuously since 10 a.m. Wednesday. And wouldn't stop until 5 p.m. Thursday.

But humor remained our constant. At Watson Lake, B.C., Team Subaru stopped again for fuel, about 6 a.m. The outside temperature gauge on the SVX flashed minus 3. There was one other vehicle idling at the pumps, a local in a pickup truck buying... ice! That's all. Just a 10-pound bag of ice. Strange, those Canadians. He's probably going to use the cubes as hand warmers, eh?" cracked Knight.

Beyond the limits of Whitehorse, Yukon's largest city, the highway skirted the St. Elias Mountains, the roadbed attached to the mountains on a projection of ledgerrock. Destruction Bay was our target—a motel/gas station/restaurant outpost. We arrived 31 hours, three TSDs and no sleep. And a death grip on last place.

Radio Adrian was broadcasting the next day as we left Destruction Bay behind: "Good... morning... Yukon! It's Friday, it's 5 a.m., the temperature is a crisp minus 35 and we're heading for..."

"Be quiet Adrian."

"Get off the radio, Adrian."

"Don't talk, Adrian."

The only member who didn't join the radio chorus was Fast Eddie. He wasn't with us. His Audi 4000's clutch had been diagnosed as terminal by Subaru pilot Hark-

ble if you followed too closely.

Trying to distinguish between the horizon and the sky and the road was difficult. Snow swirling off the leading car made it impossible if you followed too closely.

When we left Anchorage, Knight still led, with 30 points. Henderson was second with 41 points and a new nickname—Hat Trick. (It had everything to do with the number of times the RCMP had asked to see his photo.) The SVX? We were still eighth, but having maximum fun. On to the Arctic Circle.

But the only road north was the Dempster. Total desolation. Foothills, snow and rock for 250 miles, from the Klondike Inn to Eagle Plains. Here the sun rarely cut through the overcast and haze. The postcard-blue skies of the lower Yukon were replaced with a diffused light—like a flashlight beam held behind a gray flannel blanket, an eerie kind of twilight.

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Hotel; to join the Fur Rendezvous festivities; to let the mechanics at Continental Subaru pamper our cars.

We were told to give the dealership a repair list. After 3000 miles, our wish list read "check oil, check tires, wash car."

The sport coupe was behaving. Comfortable seats, a cozy 71-degree cockpit, the SVX suffered none of the northern maladies. No windows frosted-on-the-inside. No frozen locks. No sluggish starts. No complaints. And those studless Michelins? On hard-packed snow, on wet pavement, through muddy gravel we had maximum grip. Only at the ice races were we hampered.

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At the final checkpoint in Prince Rupert, Knight's Subaru (31 points) had won again, beating Henderson's BMW (48) with Davitt's Talon third (65). We'd been soundly beaten (785 points after throwing out our two worst control scores). But it didn't matter. We'd nearly driven under one of the largest moose on the continent, just missed a sprinting lynx and just didn't miss an unfortunate ptarmigan. We'd lunched above the Mianuskwa Glacier, driven to the Arctic Circle twice, held \$500,000 of recently mined gold nuggets in one hand and stopped on a silent stretch of nowhere to photograph the eerie green dance of the Northern Lights.

Clyborne had mooned everyone in 87-degrees below zero at the Circle. We'd stayed awake on the overnight transits playing a "Movie Trivia" on the CBS. We'd raced a train along the Skeena Inlet. And nearly everyone managed to get seasick on the car ferry during our awards banquet.

Actually, maybe it wasn't the rough seas. Who could forget the "Double Stuff" crew's jazz and blues routine with Homan on harmonica (Keep the day job, Rich) or Adrian's inspired poetry reading?

"Everyone should run this rally—at least once," confessed a former AlCan participant who skipped it this year. What he left unsaid was that one AlCan was all a *serious* SVX rookie, the competition was a bonus. Who cared about the miles or the stinking points? Only the memories mattered. ■



LAEL MORGAN PHOTO



GAIL TRUESD PHOTOS

com after an all-night teardown session. So Not-So-Fast-Now Eddie limped off after midnight on a solitary run to Anchorage, clutchless, hopeful he could replace the defective slave cylinder and rejoin the rally.

Botwick's misfortune moved us from ninth place to eighth. Then, on the pre-dawn Alaskan border stage, the SVX scored a "2." We beat everyone, surprising ourselves even more than our competition.

It was frustrating.

But Anchorage beckoned. We had one day to forget the rally; to forget points; to enjoy reindeer stew at the Captain Cook

As the Rodeo occupants discovered. Temperatures along the Dempster traditionally hover between 20 and 40 below. No one to call. No shelter. No escape. Not someplace to try off-roading.

But the Rodeo was in our mirrors, closing. As we crossed Red Creek and turned out of sight, the Rodeo was off—seriously off—on a right-hander, down a culvert, buried in snow up to its wheel wells.

This wasn't the first time or even the second time the "Off-Rodeo," as it had been nicknamed, was immobile. But this was the worst time. Five hours later, after a concerted dig-in-out effort organized by the Morons, the Isuzu was freed. But its oil filter had broken off. So it was towed to Dawson City to wait for the rally to arrive in two days. In the meantime Jerry's Kids christened the Rodeo "Double Stuff" and were determined to arrive in Dawson with a supply of Oreo cookies for Homan and Beddor.

In Dawson City, Truess won the impromptu drag race across the Yukon River ice bridge, roundly defeating Davitt's Eagle Talon and earning her the first annual "Drag Queen of the Yukon" plaque.

After the drag race we bartered a ride in the SVX for a ride on a dog sled, courtesy of musher Dale Braga and his seven huskies. (Note: Never scratch a husky's ears when it's resting. It's a signal for the dogs to leap into action and drag a frantic associate editor down the trail, out of control.)

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