



ICE STATION BRAVADA

Keeping the shiny
side up in the 1996
Alcan Winter Rally

BY DOUGLAS KOTT
PHOTOS BY JIM ELDER



SO THERE WE were, Feature Editor Andy Bornhop and I, a couple of traction-loving, Southern California-born first-time rallyists traversing an especially frozen stretch of the Dalton Highway. Actually, "highway" is far too kind a description—the Dalton is a notorious 28-ft.-wide, 441-mile graded gravel road built for the construction and maintenance of the Trans-Alaska pipeline, paralleling it from just north of Fairbanks to where the treeless, oil-rich North Slope slides into the icy Beaufort Sea. It's a haul road, really, ruled and respected by truckers and

only recently opened to the public; a road capable of chewing up and spitting out the unwary or ill-prepared. On this day, even the truckers were turning back.

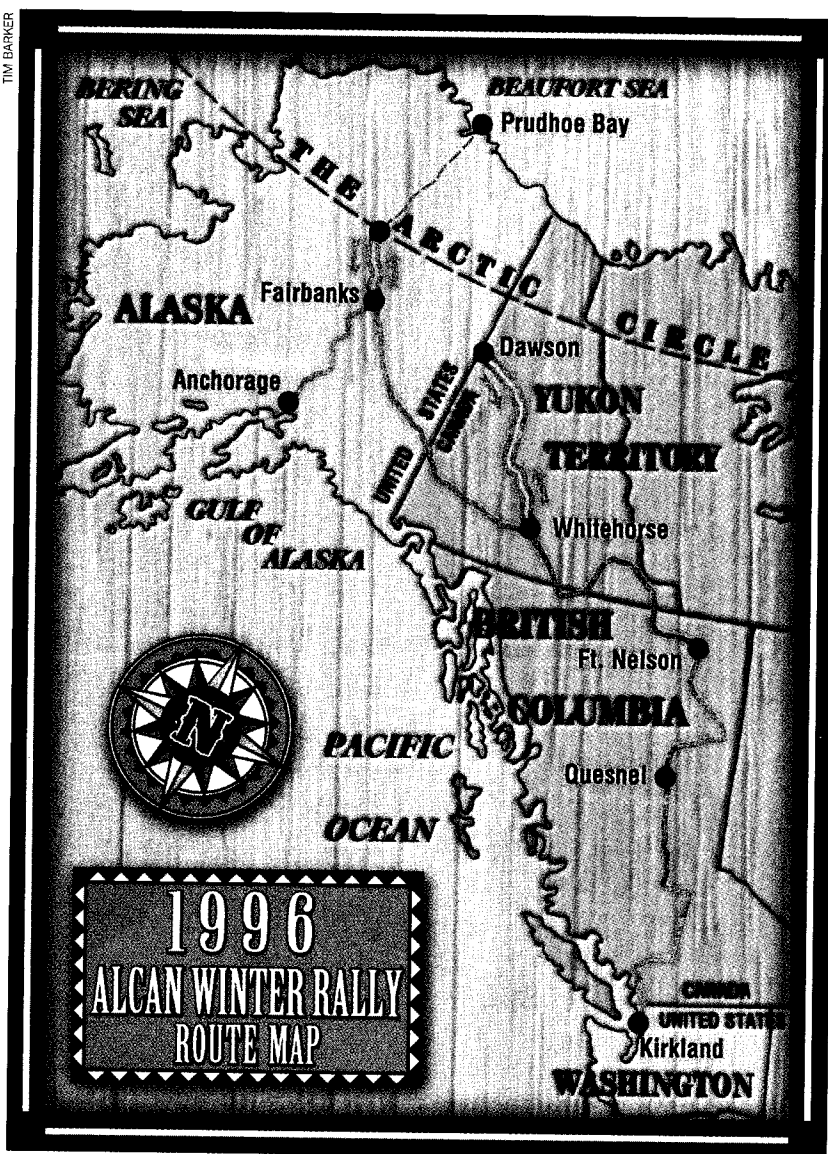
Here, close to the Arctic Circle, the landscape starts to change—full-size pine trees give way to scraggly, stunted ones in the rolling foothills of the Brooks range, all carpeted in a virgin blanket of snow. It's a whitewashed, barren world, bathed today in a cold blue light, and so silent that you can hear the snowflakes land and your heart thump inside your chest.

The stillness was broken by the

voice of the snowplow driver who had passed us minutes before, crackling in over the CB radio. "There's a treacherous section of ice over the next hill," he said with genuine urgency. "I suggest you take it *real* slow."

It turns out that section had already claimed a tractor-trailer rig that day, an omen that didn't exactly pump our hearts full of confidence. It would be bad form to be the day's second victim, I thought, as Andy led our convoy out onto the ice at roughly 15 mph. To properly set the stage, know that the Dalton's roadbed is raised above the tundra by as much as 10 feet, though





you can't see by exactly how much because of snow plowed off to the sides, flush with the road's surface. Nor is it obvious where the road's edges end and the white, fluffy stuff begins. And making matters worse, unseasonably warm temperatures were causing the ice to melt, and a light rain made the road even more slick.

Without warning, the wheel went limp in Andy's hands, as if someone had secretly nipped the steering shaft in two with bolt cutters. A heartbeat later, the slight crown of the road nudged our Bravada silently sideways. It slid, as if on a carpet of loose ball bearings, toward the road's edge—wherever *that* was! Andy fought to regain what little grip existed and somehow coaxed a scrap of adhesion out of the tires. We exhaled as we reached the other side, the tread blocks of our

Goodyears biting into a welcome, traction-enhancing crust of snow.

The lesson here? No matter how good your equipment (tires, all-wheel-drive system, reflexes, etc.), you *will* have moments like this on the Alcan Winter Rally, an 8-day, 4400-mile odyssey from Kirkland, Washington, to Alaska's North Slope and back to Anchorage. It's an event that challenges its participants with both TSD (Time-Speed-Distance) sections and against-the-clock racetrack outings. The brainchild of rally master Jerry Hines, the Alcan has been run since 1984, alternating between winter and summer events.

We, of course, were running in winter and had reason to believe it would be cold. Oh, we Sunbelt dwellers had encountered Jack Frost's nasty nip before—mostly through emptying ice

cube trays and the occasional chilly ski lift ride—but nothing to prepare us for lows that had plunged to -58 degrees Fahrenheit on previous Alcans. The sort of cold, we'd heard, that would instantly turn a steaming cup of Joe thrown into the air to so many caffeine-laden snowflakes, transform a car's lubricants and fuel into Jello-like masses...or freeze human flesh in seconds (aargh!).

So how exactly did we get to this desolate section of the Dalton, and eventually, into the Arctic Circle? Enter Jim Elder, resident of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, a 64-year-old cold-weather adventurer with the energy of a man half his age, a voice like a gnarled tree branch and a sharp mind that issues forth endless stories to reveal an arcane and increasingly fascinating past. ("Years ago, summer of '43, I believe, we were herding marmot just outside of Oslo.") It was he who approached Oldsmobile with the idea of running the Alcan (and our doing a story). Olds obliged, providing two pre-production Bravadas (its version of the Chevy Blazer/GMC Jimmy sport-ute), one for Andy and me, the other for Jim and his wife, Suzanne.

Our newfound team members slaved away for nearly a week before we arrived in Seattle, having the Bravadas fitted with sturdy front moose bars, PIAA driving and fog-lights, CBs and the rally-required VHF two-way radios (plus a satellite-link phone for several call-in radio interviews that Oldsmobile had planned), and a really trick Warn winch to be stored inside the vehicle but that could be plugged into either end of either Bravada, in the event that any Bravada driver showed too much bravado. Sorry, bad joke.

And on a personal equipment note, Andy and I augmented the jackets and sweaters that Olds gave us with fleece pants, expedition-strength thermal underwear and heat-retaining hats. For the record, Andy opted for the fashionable "Put-the-money-in-the-bag-and-nobody-gets-hurt" ski mask, while I chose the Elmer Fudd style with Velcro-closure earflaps.

At the start of the rally at the Clarion Hotel headquarters, we surveyed the competition, all making last-minute preparations and applying decals. The most serious appeared to be the two factory-sponsored Isuzus, competing in the no-holds-barred, rally-computer class. In one of them were the defending champs, Johnny Unser (nephew of Bobby; son of Jerry) and



■ A patch of asphalt occasionally peeks through the ice on the Alcan Highway. At right, Bornhop digs out from a harmless off-course excursion.

Paul Dallenbach (son of Wally, Indy Car's chief steward), with considerable navigational talent in the front passenger seat: Tom Grimshaw. A financial controller turned rally navigator and co-driver, Grimshaw is a man who's found himself upside-down 13 times, twice with the car on fire; a man who rode with John Buffum for his last three seasons of competition in the unstoppable Audi Quattros (in fact, Grimshaw, Buffum and stepson Paul Choiniere Jr. won the Alcan in a Quattro in 1985). Like I said, serious.

On the lighter side were a couple of rookies, quick-witted Washington newspaper journalists Mary Lowry and Sally Birks in a Land

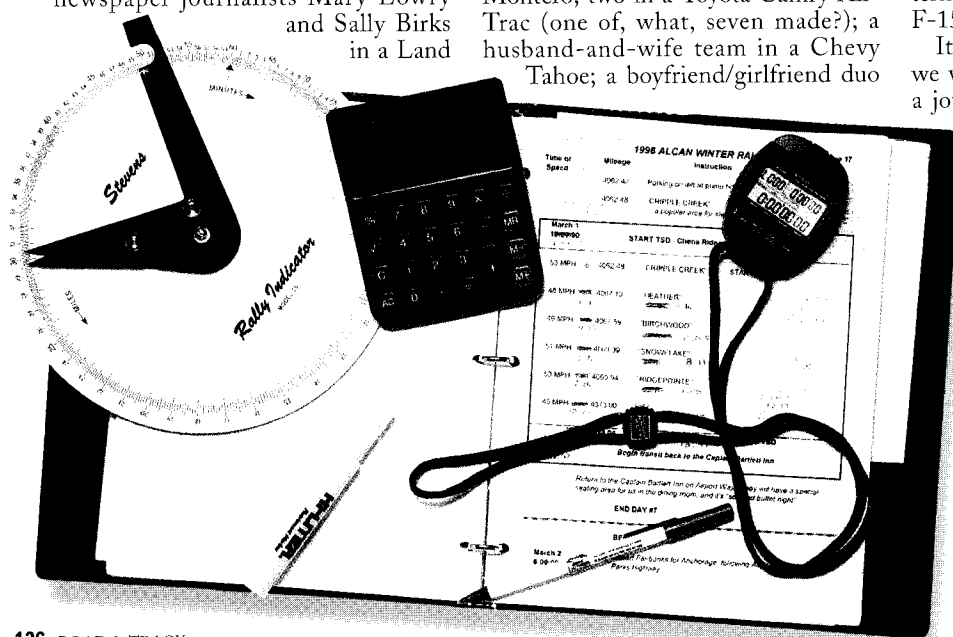


Rover Discovery, teamed with rally veteran/ice racer Susie Fouse. The rest of the field was rounded out by privates: three Ohioans in a Mitsubishi Montero; two in a Toyota Camry All-Trac (one of, what, seven made?); a husband-and-wife team in a Chevy Tahoe; a boyfriend/girlfriend duo

in an Audi Quattro (their "RAC" personalized plate suggested some experience); and three rally newcomers who came together in part through an Internet address, in a sharp-looking Ford F-150 Supercab.

It was at one-minute intervals that we were flagged off from the start, on a journey that would take us through some of the most remote, beautiful, unspoiled wilderness known...er, make that largely unknown, to man. Up into British Columbia, the Yukon Territory, and Alaska; through towns with names like Fort Nelson, Whitehorse, Fairbanks, Tok and Dawson; past craggy peaks, dense forests, frozen lakes, glaciers, herds of caribou

■ Tools of the trade for success in SOP (Seat Of the Pants) class: Stevens wheel, trusty calculator, stopwatch, assorted pens, rally instructions and (not shown) good fortune and proper planet alignment.





■ Top right, Team Bravada at the Arctic Circle—left to right: Jim and Suzanne Elder, Feature Editor Andrew Bornhop, the author and videographer Rich Christian. Below, Kott hangs it out.

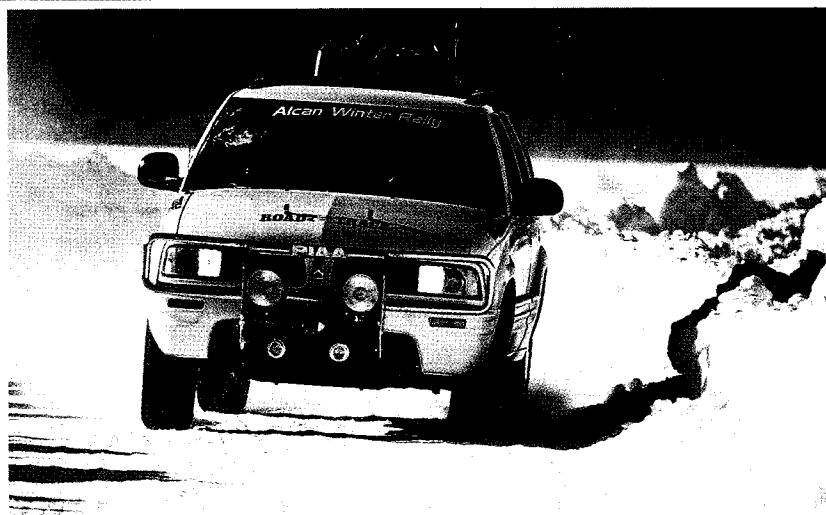
and the occasional spindly-legged moose. But first, a mere 80 miles into the rally, we faced our first TSD.

Now, seasoned rallyists know that a TSD is a wicked contrivance whose purpose is to play with your head and provide endless joy to the rally master as he imagines you cursing his very being. A typical Alcan TSD is a route about 15 miles long, requiring that you change your average speed maybe four or five times during its course at various reference points (typically road signs) that are clearly marked in your route book. We were given the route instructions well ahead of time, and with much calculator button-punching and spinning the dials of the Stevens Rally Indicator (sort of a giant rotary slide rule allowed in our Seat-of-the-Pants class), we determined the exact times we should arrive at these reference points. Scoring is determined by how early or late you arrive at hidden "control" points along the way. Sounds simple, eh?

Yeah, I thought as we came pretty close to nailing our target time at a stop sign. Now is that Mustang ahead of us going to go faster or slower than our new average speed of 40 mph?

"Punch it and get around him, Andy," I say, and we fly around him like madmen, only to jam on the brakes to bring it down to a nice, even 40, despite a nearby 50-mph speed limit sign. Meanwhile, the Mustang driver thinks we've completely lost it, and hangs inches off our rear bumper, his blood, I'd bet, at a nice, even boil. At this point, Andy coins a mantra that will serve us well through the remaining eight TSDs: "Don't worry—we'll never see him again."

There's blessed relief on the transit sections, with a chance to soak up some of the rugged, breathtaking terrain of British Columbia and cover



some serious miles—1150 in the first two days. Typically, our stops were only for fuel and, uh, relief, with meals coming out of a huge duffel bag we had stocked with sausage, oranges, apples, crackers and turkey jerky, plus gallons of Evian water, Gatorade and a vitamin-packed chocolate drink called Boost, a sponsor of the event. We could look forward to a nice sit-down dinner when we reached our hotel on most nights.

Falling asleep at the wheel was not the problem I had feared it might be. Icy roads negotiated at an average of 70 mph or so have a way of keeping one's attention from straying. Speed warnings for curves, usually ignored because they're so conservative for any modern, decent-handling car, take on real significance in this low-coefficient world. But there are those long, straight sections where you can let your guard down. I sense that Andy is bored on one of them, as he searches through a bag of Mother's iced animal cookies, trying to find one shaped like a caribou.

Suddenly, a chilling wake-up call: "We've rolled!" came the feeble voice over the rally radio. Indeed they had, Tim and Penny Paterson in the Chevy Tahoe, along with Susie Fouse (who

had made a mid-rally team swap from the Discovery). The scene looked a little like an airplane crash, because as the Tahoe left the road backward through the snowbank, down a 20-ft. embankment and rolled over onto its side, half its windows shattered and luggage, toolboxes and other provisions were flung out into the snow. Thankfully, no one was seriously hurt, the worst injuries being borne by Tim (incidentally, the author of DOS—yes, that DOS—and an employee of Microsoft) with a few minor facial cuts.

Seven or eight of us pushed the Tahoe back onto its wheels and in time, a winch-equipped tow truck from the town of Tok, maybe 25 miles north of us, hauled it back onto the road and into town. With blown-out windows, caved-in right-side sheet metal, a crumpled roof, two flat tires, a bent wheel and several extra degrees of negative camber in the right front suspension, the Tahoe looked to be a goner. And Paterson's homemade rally computer, the one that had helped put them decisively in the lead, was another casualty. Tim and Penny would go on to patch their rig with plywood "windows" secured with duct tape and re-enter the rally, but a 200-point

penalty for not reaching a check-in point on time was imposed, eliminating any possibility of their winning.

On the road again, through Fairbanks and onto the treacherous Dalton, where our story began. Like a bad science-fiction novel about global warming, it seemed to get toastier the farther north we traveled—the -20 temperatures in British Columbia gave way to +43 when we crossed into Alaska from the Yukon Territory; and when we finally reached the Arctic Circle, it was a balmy 34 degrees—and raining! Sadly, it was at this point we decided not to push on to Prudhoe Bay, even though the snowplow had come through. Our progress to this point had been so tediously snail-like that, even if we could average 35–40 mph from there on out, we'd be hopelessly behind schedule for the rest of the rally. So Jerry Hines made the executive decision to turn back, and it was off to Fairbanks for a good night's rest.

The final day consisted of a transit to the Anchorage area, a final TSD and the final racetrack event, hosted by the Alaska Sports Car Club in Wasilla. And what a fascinating winter motorsports complex they have there, with some lasting images: shrieking, modified snowmobiles tearing down an ice drag strip; a motorcyclist astride a spike-tired motocross bike ripping around an infield oval, a winter-won-

derland Gary Nixon.

The best was yet to come. We pulled into the paddock and were instantly sprayed by a shower of ice crystals from a VW Scirocco, an old Datsun 200SX and four or five other brightly painted club racers that hurtled past in varying states of oversteer, around the road course we were to run on. Rally master Hines had arranged for our timed runs to bracket the club racer's 10-lap main event, and it was good clean fun to watch a well hooked-up yellow Super Beetle trounce the showier, but slower, competition.

Time for our own runs. Andy put in a really solid performance, so the pressure was off. But it's my nature to press a bit, so off I charged, trying to brake in a straight line as much as possible off-line, where the snow offers better traction, and to avoid carrying too much speed into the corner. Easy on the throttle coming out—make sure it's straight—nail it! Repeat for the next corner. On ice, what feels slow is fast.

Exiting the final high-speed left-hander in a bit of a drift, I heard a cheer from the crowd. Yes! Turns out I had just nipped the times of Dallenbach and Unser for a brief moment of glory. Never mind that they beat us on the two other racetracks earlier in the rally (a snow-covered quarter-mile oval in Quesnel, and a 1½-mile snowmobile course on a frozen lake just out-

side Whitehorse), but it does say something about the Bravadas having a well-sorted-out all-wheel-drive system and a powerful V-6. And we were on non-studded tires!

At the awards banquet in Anchorage, what little tension that had arisen from competition melted away with friendly conversation and an open bar. The reigning champions Unser/Dallenbach/Grimshaw were the overall winners, with the second team Rodeo of John Corser/Greg Bartlett/Revere Jones taking 2nd overall. And we were more than pleased to take 3rd overall, 1st in the seat-of-the-pants class, with Jim and Suzanne in the second Bravada taking 7th overall, 2nd in class.

So I'll hang up my Stevens Rally Indicator for now, and Andy will undoubtedly tuck that ski mask into a dark corner of some drawer, but there's something that gnaws away at our psyches like so many moths at our cast-off thermal underwear: We never made it to Prudhoe Bay. Jerry Hines is planning another assault in winter, 2000. Are you game, Olds?

For more information on the Alcan Rally, contact Jerry Hines, Alcan 5000 Rally, 15 Central Way, #300, Kirkland, Wash. 98033, (206) 823-6343.

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PHOTO BY ANDREW BORNHOP

■ Our group of rally crazies on the remote Dalton Highway, some 20 miles south of the Arctic Circle, where heavy snow halted our progress.



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