

# Mush YOU MINI!

**AFTER WINNING THE ALCAN WINTER RALLY  
IN A BMW X3, ONE DRIVER DECIDES TO TRY IT  
AGAIN—IN A FRONT-DRIVE MINI CLUBMAN.**



**STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY MARC GOLDFARB**

*Rally navigators are used to getting calls for unusual motorsports events, so when longtime friend Gary Webb, one of my stage-rally and endurance TSD (time-speed-distance) rally friends from the 1980s, calls to ask if I am interested in doing the Alcan Winter Rally, I know it is going to be an interesting time. Visions of trekking through the frozen tundra in a BMW X3, Webb's winning ride in 2004, reassuringly come to mind.*

*But then he explains. This time, it seems, he wants more of a challenge. "Let me get this straight," I say. "You want to drive 5,000 miles... in a two-wheel-drive Mini Cooper... through the Arctic... in winter?!"*

*Memories of previous rally exploits in vintage British cars—mostly disastrous—come flooding back. But Webb's Mini Cooper Clubman is new, and it's not exactly as mini as the first ones. And the portion of its design pedigree that really matters is now more Bavarian than British. But I am only slightly reassured; the Alcan Winter Rally has never been won by anything without four driving wheels, though it does have a class for two-wheel-drive vehicles. And I know that Webb is intent on a win.*

I arrive in Seattle in February, two days before the start of the event, to go over the car, install my navigational gear, an Alfa Elite rally computer—building Alfa gear is my day job—and get a little seat time with Webb before we start this odyssey. We had run the challenging Thunderbird Rally in 2011 in a front-drive 1982 Toyota, matching times with the AWD Subarus and ultimately winning the historic class—as well as placing third overall—so I am confident that with Webb's experience in the Arctic, we have the capability to do well, assuming the cooperation of Mother Nature—and a bit of luck.

Seattle's Steve Perret has done a great job of prepping the Mini; it's equipped with underbody protection, rally lighting, and a roof rack holding a spare tire and our emergency fuel supply. Endurance, experience, and planning are the primary determinants in the victory over physics and nature in the Arctic, so I am a bit concerned when I discover that this extra fuel supply consists of a single 2.5-gallon gas can. However, a quick fuel-load calculation based on a day of practice shows that we shouldn't even need that; our Clubman isn't the turbo-charged Cooper S or the insane John Cooper Works model, it's the base-model Mini Cooper Clubman, with its normally aspirated engine,

front-wheel drive, and cutesy—but ultimately very convenient—suicide doors on the co-driver's side. This thing has an impressive range of nearly 400 miles on a tank, which turns out to be more than sufficient for this event.

Thursday morning, the start of the 2012 Alcan Winter Rally, dawns clear. Unlike the stage rallies that I've run in previous years, there are no crowds or media, just a lone control worker and his clock—and we're off. As Car #1, in recognition of Webb's previous success in the Alcan Winter Rally, we're first on the road—and the first to discover that the first sign noted in the route book is missing.

This sets the tone for the rest of the event.

At the end of the odometer-calibration section, we earn our first Good Rally Karma points by helping Ohio Knox and Larry Bost from Albuquerque, New Mexico, get the timing sorted out in their BMW X5. This is going to be a long event, and I'll take any potential positive energy that I can get. There is only so much that duct tape, baling wire, and WD-40 can do for you—plus we may need these guys to break through the snowdrifts up north.

As the first car into the first TSD section, we should have a clear road ahead—in exchange for being the team that gets to

encounter wildlife first, and wake up the checkpoint workers. The first section in Washington State is straightforward, and we expect most teams to do well. But within half a minute, we are passed by another Mini, Car #14. Dave Rose and Ross Trusler of Suffern, New York, have decided to ignore the TSD calculations in favor of touring. We encounter them later in the section, parked in the middle of a one-lane bridge leading to the twisty uphill section where we know we will find several timing controls ready to penalize the tardy.

One of the challenges of this event is that there is no time-allowance policy, so if you get behind time, you have to make it up. Webb and I have discussed this possibility, but we don't really lose too much time to the sight-seeing Mini; the first TSD concludes without further incident and lunchtime finds us crossing into British Columbia, explaining to the attractive border guard what we and the 25 other cars equipped with spare tires and gas cans on their roofs plan to do in the Arctic. This lengthy discussion ends with a brief geographical description of Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories, and she dismisses us with a slightly confused look, apparently convinced that we are not a threat to national security north of the 49th Parallel.





A six-hour transit brings us to Soda Creek leg, our only competitive TSD section of the afternoon. In this leg, the surface begins on semi-frozen mud and rapidly turns to a snow-covered ice surface that should find the Mini at a bit of a disadvantage to the higher-performance vehicles. This is our first inkling of what lies ahead: ice, mud, darkness, and brisk speeds. Thirty minutes and a few penalty points later, we find ourselves on the way to our hotel in Quesnel, BC, to eat, drink and regale our new friends with our adventures of the day. Scores are posted at about 10:00 p.m., and we find ourselves in a dead heat for the lead with Alcan veterans Paul Eklund and R. Dale Kraushaar, pilots of Car #2, a Subaru Forester. Both teams have just six seconds in penalties. These guys are good; remember the Thunderbird Rally where we finished third overall? They finished first.

Overnight, Mother Nature brings us a winter preview by dusting the cars with snow, and we find ourselves beginning the second day at the first ice-racing venue, Gold Pan Speedway in Quesnel, a 3/8-mile oval, normally dirt. However, the unseasonably warm temperatures have made the track unusable, so we transit to the nearby Parkland School, where the elementary students have been given recess to meet the contestants and follow the course of

our upcoming journey. The children love the diminutive Mini Clubman, especially the younger students, who can actually reach the roof; they happily clean the snow off prior to our departure for the first TSD of the day. They especially like our mascot, Javi, a plush-toy javelina that adorns the dash; it's Javi, Webb insists, who is actually doing the navigating—at least when we zero the controls.

The day's first TSD section is complicated by the hard-packed snow surface, which is covered by last night's fresh snow. It's still falling rather steadily, making visibility—not to mention traction—an issue for us as we negotiate the challenging uphill switchbacks on the appropriately named TSD section: It's called 11% Grade. As we negotiate this course, I start to wonder how this section will treat some of our less experienced competitors; we are finding it a challenge to maintain the brisk average speeds, so the novices will probably fare even worse. Toward the end of the section, we are surprised to be passed by Car #2. While it's quite a feat of driving prowess by Eklund, it must be a tense moment in the Subaru when they realize that they are a full minute off in their timing calculations. We can relax a bit, at least for the time being; with a TSD rally won by mere seconds of error, being off a full minute would clearly eliminate them from further competition.

But our relaxation is short-lived, as we hear over the radio that a control worker has gone off the road, and that one of the main highways has also closed due to an unrelated accident. Our efforts for this morning have all been for naught, as today's TSD sections are subsequently cancelled. Car #2 has been blessed by the Rally Gods, and we are back to trading seconds with them. After a brief lunch in Prince George, we head west on the Yellowhead Highway for an afternoon transit of snow, snow, and more snow. We arrive in New Hazelton, BC, by early evening for the overnight break.

Saturday, Day Three, is a long transit day. A light snow greets us for our trek up the Cassiar "highway"—the term given to just about anything up here that gets plowed in the winter, regardless of surface width or composition. Halfway up the Cassiar, we pass through the section of the road that Mother Nature violently recycled during a wildfire during the summer of 2011. Our Cassiar journey enables some close interactions with a variety of the local fauna, with the myopic caribou particularly interested in our Mini Cooper—until they realize that it is too small to be a potential caribou love interest.



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The grated ice-and-gravel hardpack of the Cassiar provides surprisingly good grip for the studded Nokian snow tires. Unlike my part of the world, where the ice on the highways occasionally melts between winter storms, road maintenance in the Great White North consists of plowing off the snow and gouging deep lines in the ice with a special serrated grader blade, providing recesses that retain the subsequently applied gravel or ash. About thirteen hours from our morning start, we cross into the Yukon Territory and end our day at the Yukon Inn in Whitehorse.

As we pack our gear the morning of Day Four, we notice a police cruiser sitting in the parking lot with his lights flashing. Some of the teams have come out to find that the array of five-gallon fuel jugs on their roofs was just too tempting to some of the locals who live in this land of \$6 gas. Apparently the tiny 2.5-gallon gas can on our roof was too small to be worth taking.

The effects of marathon driving are beginning to be felt, especially by the novice teams. We start the day with clear skies and “moderate” temperatures, according to the local news station, of -10°F. About a quarter of the field opt to take the 200-point penalty for skipping the day’s TSD sections; instead, they rest, address mechanical issues, or just make sure they are adequately prepared before heading up the Klondike Highway to Dawson City, about 300 miles north. From there we will follow the Dempster Highway into the Northwest Territories, heading for the Arctic Circle and beyond, where emergency medical assistance is rare and mechanical assistance

consists of waiting until Spring.

But we are here to compete, so there will be no skipping any TSD sections in favor of rest and relaxation for us. It’s Sunday morning, and while Whitehorse is the largest city in the area, the day’s TSD sections are on two dead-end roads that probably won’t separate the scores too much. We run the first section, beginning in downtown Whitehorse, without incident, and finish the second section on time as well, just catching three teams of dogsled mushers using that section of the dead-end road to warm up their enthusiastically barking “engines” prior to heading out onto the tundra.

Our morning competition completed, we begin our transit to Dawson City, passing through towns like Carmacks, with their bilingual street signs—English and Tutchone—and the ever-present images of eagles and ravens, totems two significant First Nations clans. In Dawson City, the rallyists gather in the pub at the Dawson Inn, where the attire of the barmaid/waitress/cook—same person, Dawson is a really small town—reminds us of its frontier history. Some of the participants go on a pub crawl to another bar, which appears to be staffed by the sister of our server; however, we retire early, in preparation for the trek northward.

Dawson City is the point in the rally where preparation usually pays off. Overnight temperatures dip to -20°F, and a light snow greets our arrival at the junction of the Dempster Highway. Teams that had not previously driven the Dempster learn early that fresh snow isn’t required to make this road a challenge, because at this temperature, the snow doesn’t glaze over the way it does to the south; just a light breeze is necessary

to create windrows: foot-deep, bumper-smashing snowdrifts across the road that can unsettle a normal car. They will cause our Mini to get air, or worse. Car #16, a Toyota Yaris, has learned that lesson early this morning, just outside of Dawson. Their sudden detour off the road required assistance, fortunately supplied by a local and his big diesel pickup truck.

The Dempster is the first road where some of the teams are challenged by their fuel consumption. In previous years, it was possible to fuel up at the intersection at beginning of the Dempster, about 25 miles from Dawson; however, that gas station is no longer open, and the majority of the teams need to tap into their rooftop fuel supplies. We arrive at Eagle Plains, about twenty miles south of the Arctic circle, with about a quarter tank remaining in the Mini. Eagle Plains is the only fuel opportunity between Dawson and Inuvik, our goal for the day; it has several multi-thousand-gallon tanks of gasoline and diesel, a garage bay, a restaurant, and a hotel. It is prepared to be a survival station, where winter truckers to Inuvik—and the petroleum industry to the north—can stay for an indefinite period of time when Mother Nature gets really annoyed.

Apparently she’s more than a little irked already. When we arrive at Eagle Plains, we discover that the winds north of the Arctic Circle have been whipped up to near-hurricane force, obliterating any evidence of the road and trapping several tractor-trailers somewhere north of us. Our arrival is greeted by flashing red lights—and a gate across the road prohibiting any further northward progress. After discussions with the road crews, and a review of the

weather forecasts, rally organizers decide that it would be prudent for us to return to Dawson City before Mother Nature closes the road we have just traveled. The majority of the teams make it back to Dawson for the night, with a few intrepid adventurers remaining in Eagle Plains, hoping to make a trip to Inuvik the next day. An additional TSD section is added by the organizers in Dawson City to make up for the missing extreme checkpoint at Tuktoyaktuk, and the teams began their southward journey back to Whitehorse the next morning.

Day Six is a mostly harmless transit—“mostly harmless” in the Douglas Adams sense—to Whitehorse from Dawson, meaning that there is only deep snow, windrows, snowdrifts, wildlife, and the occasional white-out from passing massive oncoming snowplows marking our trip, and we make it back to Whitehorse with minimum drama. We plug in the Mini—preparation for the Alcan includes installing block and battery heaters to ensure that your car starts in the morning—and retire for the night.

Day Seven dawns clear with a brisk wind and temperatures hovering around 0°F. This isn’t particularly cold, so it is odd that the Mini refuses to start. However, we quickly get a jump from a competitor, and we’re on our way. Today’s TSD sections will be an exact repeat of Sunday’s, with two in-and-out dead-end sections. Just prior to the start, we learn that two of seven cars are still at Eagle Plains, hoping that the Dempster Highway will open and they will have a shot at reaching the Arctic Circle. The other cars that stayed overnight at Eagle

Plains are heading south to rejoin the event in Tok, Alaska. So only seventeen cars begin today’s TSD section.

While Sunday’s running of this section was uneventful, beginning a TSD in a downtown area during the weekday rush hours present some challenges that probably weren’t anticipated by the organizers. (Remember, there are no time allowances in this rally.) But once we get out of town, the remainder of the section goes smoothly, and shortly after noon we find ourselves on the way to the U.S. border. After an uneventful crossing, we roll into Tok, Alaska, around dinnertime.

On the morning of Day Eight, our Mini doesn’t seem to like the cold. Even after being plugged in all night on the battery heater, she refuses to start—for the second time. It’s a mystery: Nothing was left on overnight, but there’s not enough energy in the Mini battery to turn over the engine at -10°F. Another jump start gets us on our way; after a short TSD section, we are on our way to Valdez, where we understand they have had about 37 feet of snow already this season. This should make tomorrow’s TSD section—not to mention the scheduled ice-racing event—very interesting!

But we arrive at Valdez to find that the extreme amount of snow this winter has made it impossible to maintain the ice-racing course on the lake. Instead, the organizer has arranged a 0.4-mile road stage on a snow-covered, hard-packed ice road near town.

We empty the contents of the Mini into the hotel room in Valdez and get ready for the stage. The driver and co-driver of each car are to take two runs each, and the winner in each category will not get any penalty. There are only half a dozen instructions each way, with a hand-brake hairpin turn halfway in—and I realize that this will be the first time that I’ve run a stage by myself. Even on the few occasions that I sit on the side of the car with a brake pedal, I’ve had a co-driver beside me. Normally, I’m the co-driver; I rewrite the notes and memorize them. But now I have to drive.

Webb hands me his helmet. I recognize it; it is the same helmet that he wore when we competed in the New Brunswick Lobster stage rally in the 1980s, complete with SCCA logo, blood type, date of last tetanus shot, and birth date on the back. The rubber padding has decomposed long ago, and bits of it flake out of the helmet every time I pick it up. I opt to wear one of our team hats as a balaclava.

The normally aspirated front-drive Mini, combined with a hand-brake turn in the middle of the stage, pretty much ensures that we are not going to set any records here. The rules assess a maximum penalty of ten points for this competition, but with scores separated by only a couple of points, this can easily affect the results of the entire event. As expected, Eklund in Car #2 sets the fastest time of the day—and takes no penalty points. However, in doing so, he suffers a catastrophic failure of





the newly rebuilt Subaru engine: Car #2 ends its rally in Valdez.

They are not alone in their misery. Car #21 suffers a transmission failure that finishes their event, and Colin Stenhouse—Car #9—manages to run out of road before running out of turn, and parks his Audi A4 upside-down on the stage. But in true rally form, he gets on the radio and requests that he be permitted to restart the stage after righting the car with a bit of help from spectators and the sweep truck. A bit of duct tape and cardboard, and Car #9 continues the event.

The final morning dawns with 29°F temperatures that feel downright balmy after our recent sub-zero adventures. Day Nine calls for two TSD sections: one in Valdez, followed by a “short” 230-mile transit to the final TSD in Wasilla. But even with the warmer temperatures, the Mini refuses to start. Fortunately, Webb had wisely purchased a booster battery

pack the day before, and we are on our way without difficulty. (Analysis after the event shows that we had made an error in mounting the battery heater, causing a portion of the battery’s case to melt and buckle some of the plates.)

We are being particularly careful today, as our proximity to populated areas allows the organizers to recruit additional workers from local sports-car clubs—and place additional timing controls. The humongous twelve-foot snowbanks near Valdez offer many excellent hiding places, and we’ll need to be careful. A couple of timing locations offer us real challenges in keeping on time, and there is one tricky course-following instruction that we catch, but we complete the TSD without any major gaffes, and soon we are on our way to Wasilla and the final challenge.

The transit to Wasilla through Thompson Canyon Pass is snowy and difficult, with frequent whiteout conditions; these are not helped by the tractor-trailer that has chosen this particular day to transport a small house on a low-boy trailer through the pass. But we make it to the beginning of the final TSD section on time.

Now close enough to taste victory, we suffer cockpit paranoia throughout the final leg, our heads spinning around *Exorcist*-style as we scan the roadside for timing crews. All is well, however, and we finish the Wasilla TSD knowing that we can finally relax: After nine days and thousands of miles of snow-covered icy roads, we have clinched the win for the Mini Clubman—the first two-wheel-drive car ever to win the Alcan Winter Rally.

Of course, now we have to get home from Anchorage—but that’s definitely the easy part. ♦



Though Gary Webb reached Tuktoyaktuk in 2004, the 2012 Alcan Winter Rally was stopped short of the Arctic Circle by drifting snow.

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