



5000 MILES THROUGH ALASKA

By C.J. Hadley

THE ALCAN 5000 rally pitches and yaws through landscape as wild and remote as any on earth, shooting across British Columbia, Alberta and the Canadian Rockies, then arcing through the Northwest Territories, Yukon and Alaska.

Such a course breaks down ordinary rally cars and wears out ordinary drivers. It's a rally that requires a tough machine, flawless driving, inexhaustible endurance, dauntless humor, Einstein's math ability and a state-of-the-art computer.

Math ability? Computers in the wild?

It was the last two items that Rod Hall was unaware of when he came to Seattle to start the rally. He had plenty of endurance and humor, and no one in racing could doubt the skill of this winner of every famous desert race, including the Baja, Mint and Frontier. He had good equipment. Dodge Imports lent him a four-wheel-drive Raider and he bought a used Halda for \$25 to measure rally miles. And for a navigator he had his long-time friend and mechanic, Jim Fricker.

Hall knew the Alcan 5000 would be unforgiving. But even so, he didn't really understand what he was getting into. He thought he'd entered a simple long-distance race, where the best and fastest win. What he didn't know was that the Alcan was a TSD (Time/Speed/Distance) rally not designed

Rod Hall takes on the Alcan 5000 in a stock truck

for the fastest car and not necessarily benefitting the toughest competitor. Rally-master Jerry Hines offered this 12-day endurance trial to see who could last the more than 5000 miles of rough and rugged back country, and which teams and equipment could survive its awkward controls and enormous landscape.

Hall discovered that the Alcan is to rallies what computer chess is to board games. There are no pit crews, no service vehicles and no adoring crowds. It's a race that anyone can win, as long as that person makes no mistakes and knows how to handle a computer, calculator and precision timing equipment.

But none of that bothered the Raider team—at first.

Obviously, the veterans of this strange form of racing scored lowest and best with ones, twos and zeros, while Hall and Fricker tore through checkpoints waving at officials, until they saw their first scores and discovered they were often running barely ahead of a motorhome.

The first stage lasted 32 hours. From noon until eight the following night, Rod Hall drove on asphalt, mud, gravel, snow, ice and sand. He took the Raider gently past icy-green rivers

and glaciers and across mountain ranges, using no co-driver. He was the only one in the rally tough enough not to need one.

They passed peaks over 15,000 feet, eerie yellow and purple tundra, golden autumn hills, volcanic rock and forests of dark-green conifers. They drove through lumatic flocks of ptarmigans, which would throw themselves at the front wheels of the racers and generally act like kamikazes.

From the very beginning, the rugged country started claiming its casualties. On the first night during an untimed stage, Richard Hughes, co-driver for John Buffum and Tom Grimshaw, took a turn too fast, badly bending the Audi's front left corner. Al Schmit's racing VW started spewing oil. Dave and Pat Lewis, in a Toyota Supra, got lost during a timed stage, as did Wayne Saunders and Sam Coffin in a Porsche from Oklahoma. Richard Gordon, driving a specially prepared 29-foot Rockwood motorhome, took a corner too fast in the woods and soon found bushes in his windshield.

During one very wet day, the axle-deep mud at a construction zone temporarily claimed Susie Fouse's VW Golf GTI, while Rod, staying in two-



wheel drive "to preserve the transfer case" smoothly crossed the handicaps. And soon after that, Lee and Rod Sorensen in a Mazda RX7 took a wrong turn and gained so many points that they dropped from the lead to the back of the pack.

By the time they had enjoyed a few hundred miles of exquisite gold, red and green, the Raider team was already out of contention for the Uniroyal gold and accompanying glory. After barely a thousand bends and dips, turns and esses, cliffs and straightaways, they had racked up enough points to realize their need for more research.

"You need a split-second stop watch, a computer to analyze time, speed and distance, and possibly a Curta, which helps figure the correction factor," they were told by the leaders.

Correction factors? Early or late?

"I never raced this slow before," said Hall. "All I want to know is, if time comes first, are we going too fast or too slow?" But after seeing more scores,



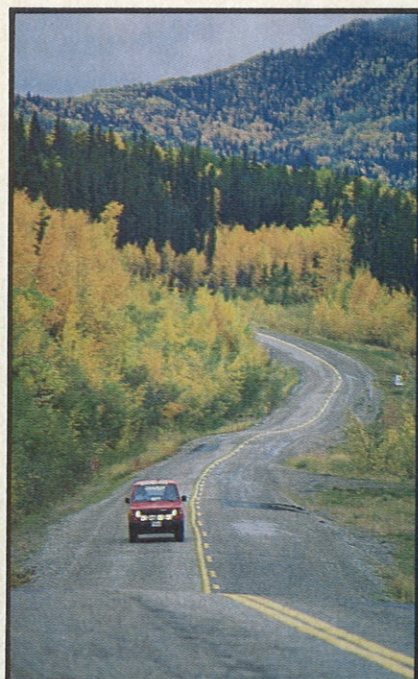
Rod requested more specifics. "We're supposed to be at this next milepost at 10:02 a.m. How close are we?"

"About 22 seconds off," Fricker replied, "but I don't know whether we're early or late."

Hall's rig turned out to be the slowest, most standard set of wheels in the rally. The Raider offered very little boost. On the first day, the team had been smoked by an old man in a Buick Riviera on the highway east of Seattle. The Raider

took more time to reach checkpoints, so it was on the road much longer. Also, its gas tank was small and needed filling more often.

But during the Alcan rally, looks and speed don't count, and without incident or flash, Rod and the Raider moved through mountain pass and plain, in rain, sleet and snow. He and Fricker enjoyed the scenery, saw caribou, elk, beaver and a grizzly bear, never got lost and usually arrived at



the start of each timed section in time for a nap.

During night stages, Rally Control found it easy to spot the team, because Fricker's map light was so bright. "It would frighten a moose," said Rod. "We can use it for a headlight. When the officials see this light, they're going to say, 'That's those two guys from Baja!'"

Once, as if anticipating the inevitable questions from friends and

relatives that would question the sanity of a person leaving Watson Lake at 12:03 a.m. to drive a 1500-mile loop via the Arctic Ocean, Rod said dryly as he climbed into the cab, "How else would we see it?" Then for 15 hours, they drove north in patchy fog and drizzle, past enormous bald-topped mountains, angry creeks and spindly black evergreens that got shorter and shorter as they traveled north. One



rustic cabin appeared before the tundra took over, with its miniature brush and purple and black rock. The back window was a sheet of brown slime.

The team slept a few hours at Eagle Plains, the only gas stop and lodging for 230 miles, but at 5:00 the next morning they continued onward. They crossed the Peel and MacKenzie rivers, 200 miles past the Arctic Circle, then drove through Fort McPherson and on to Inuvik, the northernmost city in the world that can be reached by road. After a 30-minute tour they headed back to Dawson to rejoin the rally.

Early the following morning, snowpacked, icy roads greeted racers on the "Top of the World" highway. Connecting the Yukon with Alaska, this gorgeous two-lane strip offered 360-degree views, no guard rails, steep dropoffs and some intimidation.

But the more difficult the Alcan 5000 became, the better Rod and the Raider performed. "At first you don't know whether to give it the gas or step on the brake, but we're going to be tough when we get down the road and figure out how to do this."

During the rally's second half, from Anchorage to Vancouver, the Raider crew, with the help of a pocket calculator and pencil and paper, equaled the pros with scores of ones, twos and zeros. "And we didn't break

any dishes," Rod said.

The last few days of the rally included two all-nighters. From Whitehorse to Prince Rupert, the race followed muddy logging roads through patches of thick fog. The occasional straightaways on the narrow, pothole-strewn gravel and dirt road doubled as landing strips for small planes, and the presence of wild horses, deer, logging trucks, game birds and wolves required the use of extensive avoidance tactics.

After a 14-hour ferry ride on the inland passage from Prince Rupert past the Queen Charlotte Islands, two of the toughest timed sections came about on Vancouver Island. Half of the drivers were either late or missed starting times. An official car broke its axle, the Flying Tigers Shelby had an ailing starter, and Carlson's Saab finally abandoned all its lubricant and had to be towed into Vancouver by the dented motorhome. The Nancy Elwood/Cathy Olson Honda high-centered on a rock, and Ken Maytag's team in another Audi, leaders by seven seconds, missed a turn on a narrow trail in a damp and dark British Columbia forest. Their eight-second delay due to that small error allowed Gene Henderson, Mike VanLoo and Subaru to win the race by a single point.

The country in the north is unforgiving, but men like Rod Hall and trucks

like the Dodge Raider can survive and flourish in it. With the exception of the dreadful early scores, neither had any problems. During the rally's last five days, after the toughest regularities from Anchorage and including four after-midnight stages, the Raider team ran third best, improving their lousy beginning, to finish the rally 12th overall.

"Some moments of that Alcan 5000 were tense and painful," Rod admitted. "Fricker and I discovered rallying makes your head throb, your heart beat faster and you get very sensitive. I never felt like I ever wanted to slug somebody in a race car before."

But after restudying the scores, filling the tank, washing the truck and demolishing an enormous steak, the off-road racing champion swallowed a mouthful of Yukon Jack and assured them all, "Rod and the Raider will be back."

But he may not be welcome. After members of several other rally teams analyzed the Raider's last few dozen scores, after they recognized Hall's ability to handle tremendous stress under great fatigue, and after they realized his little truck was at the start of all the TSDs—every time ahead of the fast cars—they all agreed that Rod and the Raider should stay in the desert. ●

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