

TO ALASKA



Top, Paul Milnar and Ronald Weir out in front aboard their Dodge Shelby Turbo. Alcan Champ John Buffum follows in his Audi 5000 Quattro. Brian Davitt of Algonia, Wisconsin, in a VW Golf GTI brings up the rear. Above, Garry Sowerby drives the same beefed-up GMC Suburban he used to break the speed record from South Africa to the Arctic Circle. Right, the Czechoslovakian Skoda scurries through the British Columbian outback on its way to a fourth-place finish.



AND BACK

The good times roll on the Alcan 5000 motor rally, a hellbent blast through Canada's high country.

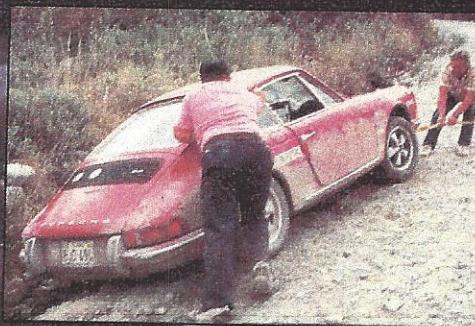
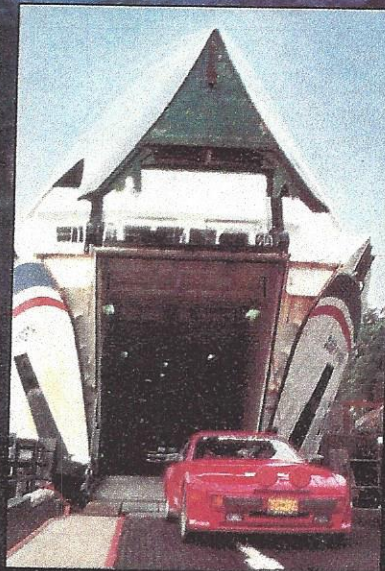
BY TIM COLE,
Boating/Outdoors Editor
Photos by Rich Cox

The idea looks simple on paper.

Gather an eclectic assortment of sport, utility, economy and family automobiles, bolt on the necessary appurtenances for motor rallying, and send them on a 5000-mile blast from Seattle to Anchorage, then back again to Canada's Vancouver Island. When the dust settles, award a prize to the driving team that comes closest to traveling this megacourse at the proper pre-established speeds.

Okay so far. But the mad genius who organized this backwoods barnstorm—appropriately named the Alcan 5000—failed to point out just how far 5000 miles really is. Consider it: 5000 miles (give or take a couple of hundred) is the same distance a crow might fly between New York and Istanbul, Cape Town and Cairo, Tierra del Fuego and Lake Maracaibo. Five thousand miles, friends, turns out to be one unholy piece of driving—reduced to manageable proportions this time by the heart-swelling

Below, Davitt's rally-prepared GTI plows through the ooze. Right, Anchorage ralliers Jerry Heckel and Tom Olson depart the British Columbia ferry *Queen of the North* in their Porsche 944 at Port Hardy, Vancouver Island. The Texas team of Willie Williams and Steve Batcha make a different kind of exit in Porsche 911E, bottom.





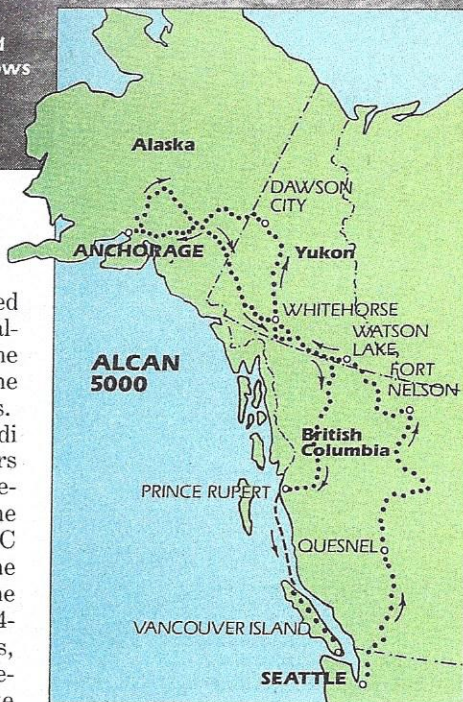
Sporting PM's colors on the front bumper, the Kopp/Martin Rolls roared to a fifth-place finish. Map (right) shows the 5000-mile route. Al Schmit (far right) repairs his '73 Bug, which was second at halfway point.

TO ALASKA AND BACK

vistas of glaciers and snow-capped mountains, the rough-and-ready challenges of the Alaska Highway and the camaraderie that seemed to fuel the Alcan's motley alliance of roadaholics.

Where else would you find an Audi 5000 Quattro vying for top rally honors with a reconstituted '73 VW Superbeetle, hijacked for the occasion from the driver's wife? Or a 9000-pound GMC Suburban that holds the record for the fastest transit from South Africa to the Arctic Circle? Or the world's only 4-wheel-drive Rolls-Royce? Architects, professional adventurers, entrepreneurs, airline pilots, an Alaska state trooper, a Southern California junk dealer, a retired Detroit vice cop—somehow they were all drawn to the mountainous complexities of preparing stock and custom rally cars and competing on one of the world's least forgiving highways.

The Alcan 5000, first staged in 1984, was conceived and executed by Seattle's Jerry Hines, one of this country's top motor sports organizers and the same Jerry Hines who helped conduct the One-Lap of America motor rally. Hines found financial support from Uniroyal and logistical support from members of the Sports Car Club of America's Northwest Region and the Rainier Auto Club. Hines also



enlisted help from auto clubs and rally enthusiasts along the route.

His objective was to develop a motor sports event reminiscent of rallying's early days—before the advent of high expense, no-holds-barred Pro Rallies—when ordinary folks holding down ordinary jobs could unleash their passion for safe, competitive driving on the open roadways. Consistency, endurance and efficiency could be tested in stock automobiles over pre-established time/speed/distance courses, and over "Monte Carlo" runs between these timed sections at a considerably accelerated pace. But 5000 miles is a pretty hefty distance to cover on good roads,

let alone the dirt and muck ralliers would encounter through British Columbia, the Yukon and Alaska.

Undaunted, Hines crept away in the summer of '84 to complete the immense task of surveying the course and establishing average speeds drivers would have to maintain through the rally's timed sections, called "regularities." Somehow, entrants (all otherwise sensible people) were captivated by the aura of scrambling hellbent through the Northwestern high country. The successful '84 Alcan inaugural was won by Tim Paterson of Renton, Washington, in

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(Continued from page 102)

a Mazda RX-7. The event's only mishap? One thoroughly crunched Saab.

Twelve months later for the 1985 edition, 27 vehicles sallied forth from Bellevue, Washington, just north of Seattle, for the first 2500-mile leg to Anchorage (like going all the way from Montreal to Venezuela for that flying crow). PM intercepted the Alcan in Courtenay, Vancouver Island, just north of Victoria.

The opening salvo

The first half was broken up into four legs of 541 miles (from Bellevue to Quesnel, B.C.), 621 miles (from Quesnel to Fort Nelson, B.C.), 993 miles (from Fort Nelson to Dawson City, Yukon Territory), and 504 miles (Dawson City to Anchorage).

Ralliers competed on Hines's time/speed/distance sections—most using sophisticated TerraTrip computers to keep a split-second tab on the odometer—and then bombed along the dusty tote roads leading north to pre-arranged overnight stops, with an optional nonscore dash to the Arctic circle and back, a little sidetrip covering almost 550 miles.

This extracurricular exercise was not without a bit of unexpected excitement. Paterson, last year's winner, drove his Mazda off the snow- and mud-slicked highway, ditching the vehicle on its side in the tundra. Doug Kopp and Charlie Martin, in the 4-wheel-drive Rolls, gamboled to the rescue with a set of bag jacks and righted the hapless Mazda to drive again. Throughout the Alcan's early stages, wherever the Rolls 4x4 stopped, the pair would be surrounded by gawkers, and Kopp would patiently recite the Rolls' hybrid lineage: "She's a '69 Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow with a 500-cu.-in. Caddy engine. The Jeep chassis with transfer case was fastened to the Rolls' unibody and she's got a Ford pickup rear end."

Kopp and Martin spent months preparing this rather eccentric piece of machinery. Other ralliers spent equal care, if not equal time, getting their own cars ready for the Alcan. Rows of high-intensity Marchal driving lights were standard equipment on most vehicles, and proved their worth on the murky, moonless nights. Fanatics fitted wire rock-stoppers to their grillework or around their headlights. True initiates bolted padded crash cages into their interiors and festooned their exteriors with decals. Spare parts usually included an assortment of belts, a pair of tires, brake pads, filters and various fluids. The human element maintained its competitive edge with

coffee, apples and granola bars. The planning paid off as the Alcan headed north.

Blown tires, depleted fuel reserves, rocks jamming in engine parts and close encounters with mother nature were the norm throughout this madcap jaunt to the 49th state, including a harrowing passage over snow and ice on the Top of the World Highway from Dawson City to Anchorage. The narrow road and frequent 4000-foot drop-offs served as nature's No Doz. As rallier John Fouse observed, "If you drop off the edge, you'll starve to death before you hit bottom."

Reigning national pro rally and One Lap of America champ John Buffum, driving the spanking new Audi 5000 Quattro with ace navigators Tom Grimshaw and Paul Choinerie, led the rally at Anchorage with a low-point score of 27. To the almost universal astonishment of ralliers and local press, New Jersey's Al Schmit and co-driver Bill Todd remained a scant two points out of first in their '73 Bug.

"You just can't make any mistakes," Schmit, a passenger service representative for Pan American Airways, explained following the 2-day Anchorage layover. "One tiny error in navigation, car preparation or driving and you're completely sunk."

Indeed, consistency rewarded the competitors in the top four at the halfway mark: Only eight seconds separated Buffum, Schmit, brothers Lee and Rod Sorenson of Sacramento, California, in their beautifully prepared Mazda RX-7, and Gene Henderson and Mike Van Loo of Pinckney, Michigan, in a new Subaru XT coupe.

The Kopp/Martin amalgamation rolled into the Anchorage halfway point in seventh place, respectable by the world and national standards taking shape in the upper ranks.

Derring-do on the Denali

Schmit's observations turned prophetic on the return leg out of Anchorage, a 1200-mile all-night, all-day run to Watson Lake, Yukon Territory (the same distance a crow might cover from, say, Berlin to Madrid).

As the fleet rumbled east along the Denali Highway heading for the Yukon border, Schmit blew an oil line and John Buffum captured the Class Act award for his efforts in getting the little bug going again—scurrying around in his T-shirt in the bitter chill, up to his elbows in Valvoline. Continuing oil-line problems and a cracked belt pulley on their retrofitted 2-liter powerplant eventually lowered the Schmit/Todd entry to an ignominious DNF.

Buffum's exploit on the Denali Highway was only one sample of the kind of anecdotes ralliers would collect en

route, embellish to taste and pass along. Consider the Denali Highway itself: cold, forbidding, surrounded by jagged snow-swept peaks. A mere 24 hours after the rally passed through, a snow squall hit, rendering it impassable 'til spring.

And what about rallier Ken Maytag's appeal to the heavens for new brakes? When the Carpenteria, California, native rolled into Dawson City, and very nearly rolled right back out, he remembered what his mother always told him. When you're in trouble, contact the nearest Episcopalian minister. Maytag found the Deacon of Dawson City's St. Paul's Anglican Church, who intervened with a Royal Canadian Mounted Police mechanic named Ernie, who in turn fixed Maytag's brakes. It pays to have connections.

Missed it by that much

Shortly after we left Buffum and Schmit puzzling out the VW's oil hemorrhage, POPULAR MECHANICS' faithful correspondent had a brush with catastrophe. There I was, riding through the Alaskan night in the back seat of the Rolls while Charlie Martin and Doug Kopp articulated their joint philosophy of life. Charlie was nearing a verbal crescendo when a she-moose bounded out of the left-hand ditch to cross the road, a single glowing eyeball towering over four massive legs. Charlie did his best to avoid a collision, but the Rolls clipped the creature in the kneecaps. Happily, she escaped into the forest without serious injury. Somehow, every segment of the Alcan 5000 produced its share of near misses.

After a well-earned overnight rest at Watson Lake, the Alcan 5000 moved south along the Cassiar Highway through British Columbia. We wound up in Prince Rupert after this all-day 599-mile run, and boarded the ferry for the 19-hour trip to Vancouver Island via the Inside Passage.

With Schmit out of the running, Buffum clung to first place if you counted the option granted each entry to throw out their worst score. (Buffum's throwout came early in the second half, when he was faced with the choice of picking up a 15 point penalty on his regularity or running into a school bus.) The slightest mistake on the 197-mile timed section down the spine of Vancouver Island could plunge the champ down in the standings and would elevate the incredibly consistent Sorenson brothers in their RX-7 and the Henderson/Van Loo team in their factory Subaru. Schmit's involuntary departure also breathed life into the Czechoslovakian Skoda driven by native Vancouver Islanders Derek Steel and Blake McGuffie. Rumbling sedately along in fifth place just 14 points back were

Kopp and Martin in the Rolls. As the indefatigable Martin put it when the ferry stopped in Port Hardy, "We're knocking on Skoda's door."

The Skoda was slightly more consistent than the Rolls on home turf, though, and the Steele/McGuffie team maintained its 12-point edge over Martin and Kopp. Strong showings by the Sorenson and Henderson teams couldn't unseat Buffum, and the champion rallier added the Alcan 5000 to an already impressive win list.

How did Buffum do it? PM had a chance to ride with the Buffum/Grimshaw/Choinierie team during one section between Whitehorse and Watson Lake. There's no questioning Buffum's knack for wrapping automobiles neatly around the curves, assisted no doubt by the Quattro's road-handling qualities. But there was a lot of teamwork in the winning vehicle. Tom Grimshaw would predetermine the time the Audi should hit precise points on the course, foregoing the more sophisticated TerraTrip computer for a simple LED odometer and split timer. Armed with the knowledge of precisely when the car should be at specified points, Tom would inform John every tenth of a mile how many seconds he was ahead of, or behind, the average speed. Paul Choinierie would keep an eye on directions in the route book prepared by the rallymaster and make sure the Quattro remained on course. Paul would also spot control vehicles (occupied by rallyworkers who did the scoring) and note the exact time and mileage they were observed so the team could double-check the rallyworkers final tally.

"The key," according to Grimshaw, "was matching our mileage to the mileage in the course book down to the hundredth of a mile. Nailing that down was the whole ball game."

Ready for the next one

The rest of the Alcan ralliers will have a chance for a rematch in the fall. Hines reports that preparations for the '86 Alcan 5000 are well under way and the event will be staged Sept. 20 to 30. Hines plans on running the initial legs up Vancouver Island, with a reverse trip up the Inside Passage on a British Columbia ferry to Prince Rupert before proceeding to Alaska. To provide the kind of flair the Alcan is fast becoming known for, the finish line tape will be at Canada's '86 Expo in Vancouver, British Columbia.

"It'll be just as tough as it's always been," Hines says, "providing adventure and a proving ground for drivers, navigators and automobiles."

It's already bigger. From now on, it looks like the Alcan 5000 is just going to get better. Tell that crowd to pack his bags.

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