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RALLY

M A G A Z I N E



ALCAN

**6,300 Miles of
Ptarmigans and
Freezing Temps**

PRECAUTIONS FOR RALLYISTS

ALCAN 5000 RALLY

Anchorage, Alaska / February 6-16, 1990

by Christopher Jensen



Is that all there is? Yup. With no prize money, this is what everyone went to see. The Arctic Circle as it crosses the Dempster Highway on the road to Inuvik. (Photo by Chris Jensen)

You might wonder who would be attracted to any event such as the 1990 Alcan Winter Rally, a 6,300-mile drive from Seattle to the Arctic Circle and back?

Does the fact that one competitor had an Alaska license plate that read "MORONS" help answer the question?

Seattle-based organizer, Jerry Hines, contends that the Alcan is the world's longest winter rally. You may draw your own conclusions from the fact that no one has apparently bothered to give him any competition.

Hines has stated that competitors in the Alcan Winter Rally "must possess substantial experience, resourcefulness and good judgment." He apparently got no interest from people meeting

all those requirements, but enough people to make up 17 teams showed up anyway.

This year, all the vehicles had four wheel drive. At the top of the risk-your-financial-investment scale was a Porsche Carrera Four. On the low end was a pair of Suzuki Sidekicks.

The most popular single model was Chrysler's new Eagle Talon TSi AWD. There were three Talons, including the one in which fellow Clevelander Greg Lester and I were competing (known by the CB moniker as Bald Eagle due to genetic circumstances beyond my control).

Most vehicles were stock. For example, the only changes to our Talon were a block heater, battery blanket, the installation of a

Timewise rally computer, a bank of Hella Rallye 2000 driving lights and some studded Michelin snows.

Before the rally, Hines required the competitors to sit through an afternoon session on winter survival. The thrust of it was the terrible things that frigid Mother Nature can do to your body in the winter. One of the biggest worries would be hypothermia, the potentially fatal loss of body heat. What kind of a rally is it when your first-aid kit includes not only air splints but a 172-page book with the heart-warming title "Death by Exposure."

One of the warning signs of hypothermia is that the person "acts dull," said guest speaker Alan Errington, a member of the Seattle Mountain Rescue Council. "Hopefully you know the person before, so you have a basis for comparison," he added.

We also have some helpful suggestions we gleaned from Jack London. In particular, we remember how a half-frozen character slit open his dog to warm his hands in the viscera so he could light a fire. We'd hate to do that to a dog, but we figure Hines might be nearby.

On February 6, the rally began and we headed north, wondering what grand misadventures await us in the Great Frozen-Solid North, the land of Jack London, to say nothing of Sgt. Preston and Dudley Do-Right.

Ask any of the drivers and we'd tell you that the best part of the Alcan Winter Rally is the transits, which range from 50 to about 1,300 miles in length. The transits connected the TSD sections on which the rally is scored and a competitive team clearly could not afford to be late starting a TSD. Hines required an average speed on the transits of about 52 mph. That is not too brisk, but there is not much time for dawdling since the average includes fuel stops, the roads tend to be a little slippery and there is a constant concern over bad weather. In any case the fear of being late was all the excuse we needed for some entertainingly brisk driving and 80 mph was a common speed. What's more, once we were clear of the towns, there was virtually no other traffic, much less police. That made the transits incredible, wonderful playgrounds, although making a serious driving error could have had tremendously chilling consequences.

Interestingly, while some of the sections were quite slick, the traction was much better at -40F than it would have been around zero degrees or warmer, said Kevin Clemens, a Michelin tire engineer who accompanied the rally. With the ultra-cold

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*A trio of Talons trying to traverse the terrible terrain in a tangle of times.
(Photo by Chris Jensen)*

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temperatures, the snow and ice crystals are not as easily turned to water by the pressure of the tire rolling over them.

Of course, in traffic one occasionally did encounter 18-wheelers which did present a challenge, since they threw up huge clouds of snow in their wake. That made passing them an interesting experience. At one point, Greg timed us at zero visibility for 10 seconds after a truck had passed our Talon.

On one transit, fellow Clevelanders Bill Sadataki and David Killian were driving their Talon (CB moniker "Spread Eagle") behind Gene Henderson and Ralph Beckman in a factory-backed Subaru Legacy station wagon. They came up on a 18-wheeler and Henderson pulled out to pass, disappearing into the cloud of snow thrown up by the truck. Literally a few second later, Sadataki and Killian saw another 18-wheeler come blasting out of the snow cloud. They couldn't figure out what happened to Henderson and Beckman except that they must have driven into the 18-wheeler's grill and come out the tail pipe.

In fact, Henderson finally discerned the oncoming truck with just enough time to get back into the proper lane, without being run down by the truck which he had previously passed. Then, Beckman explained later, the former PRO Rally National champion managed to keep control of the sliding vehicle through the next turn.

"You can't see diddly in a whiteout," Henderson observed on the CB radio.

"That wasn't too bad for me, but I bet that boy messed his pants," observed the truck driver on the CB.

Later, following some stops for fuel and a TSD section, Henderson and Beckman passed the same truck. "Much better that time, Subaru," radioed the approving truck driver.

Arctic creatures posed other problems. A Cherokee driven by Phil Berg of Michigan, Everett Smith of Texas and Jack Christensen of Chicago suddenly found the road exploding upwards. They were ptarmigans, a white, puffy bird renowned by locals for a stupidity rivaled only by Alcan Winter Rally competitors. Before

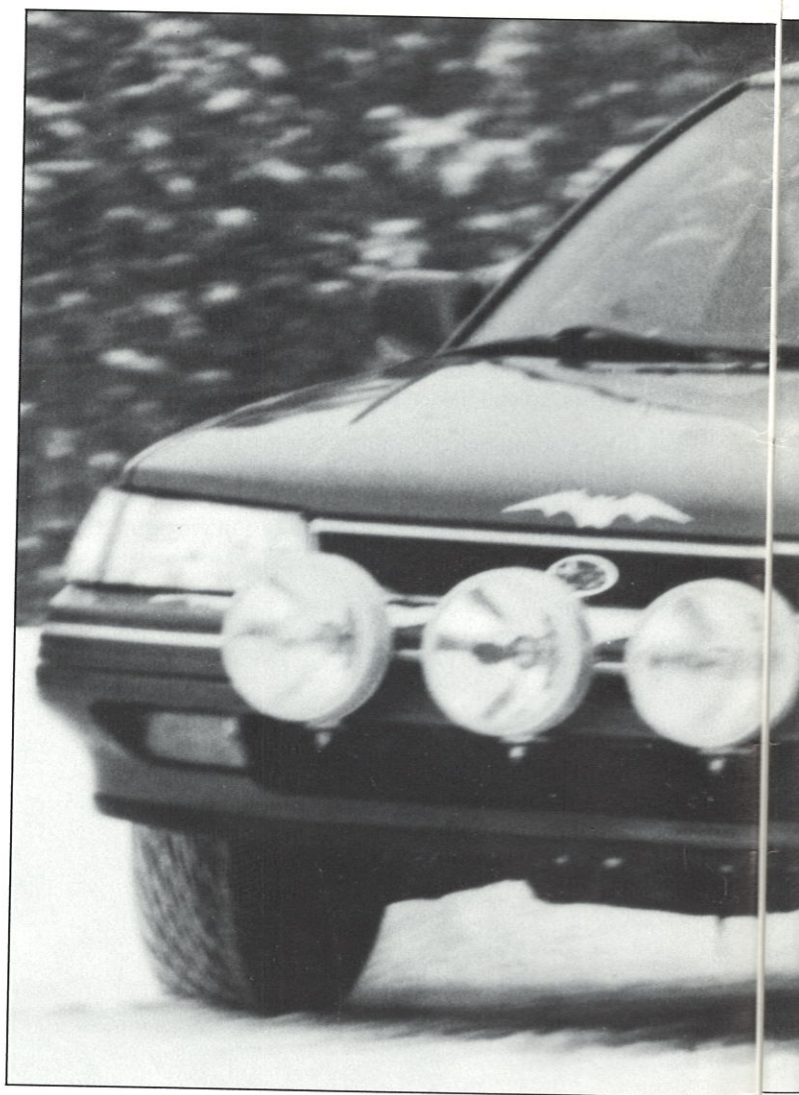
he could slow, Berg mowed down seven or eight of them. Later that day, the ptarmigans got their revenge. On a return trip, the driver of a 9,000 pound Suburban used by rally workers was startled by a ptarmigan. He drove off the road where the Suburban sank up to its axles.

Of the ten days spent driving, we stopped eight nights, staying at small motels in places like Dawson. A nightly contest involved finding enough outside (working) plugs to power our block heaters and battery blankets.

But two days required about 26 hours of virtually non-stop driving. The longest day was the 1,300-mile trek from Fort Nelson in the Yukon to Anchorage where

there was a one-day layover. We had a TSD section in Whitehorse at midnight and then headed west winding through the mountains towards Tok, Alaska. It was -35F outside which was about average for the trip. The driving was wonderful, the Talon beautifully balanced and stable and the Rallye 2000's augered through the night. The only concerns were a turn tightening up more quickly than expected or the crashingly real possibility of caribou or moose on the road.

Elsewhere, however, all was not well. Tim Paterson and Don Gibson in the Carrera Four (who used the CB moniker Road Warrior) did not refuel with everyone else. They had boldly chosen this trip to see if they did, indeed, have a 400-mile





SUBARU LEGACY FINISHES 1-2 IN ALCAN RALLY — Gene Henderson and Ralph Beckman drove their factory Sube to a win in sub-zero temps. Dave Harkcom and Ken Knight, in a second Legacy, were runners-up. (Photo courtesy of Subaru)

range. As the night wore on, they become the Road Worriers. Just short of Tok they finally ran out of gas, but were saved by the benevolence of factory Subaru team members Dave Harkcom and Ken who loaned them a few gallons.

On the seventh day we were headed for Eagle Plains, a motel, restaurant and fuel stop run by 12 people and located about 18 miles south of the Arctic Circle and 200 miles from anything that could remotely be called civilization.

Henderson and Beckman were leading, with second place held by a Jeep Cherokee driven by Berg, Smith and Christensen.

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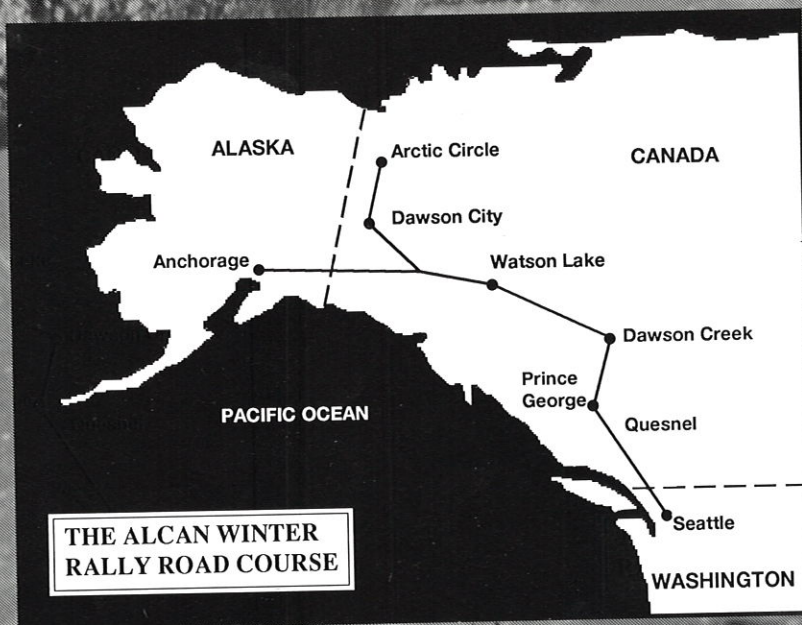
OA	Driver/Co-driver	Marque	Score
1	Henderson/Beckman	Subaru Legacy Wagon	41 points
2	Harkcom/Knight	Subaru Legacy Wagon	47 points
3	Sadataki/Killian	Eagle Talon TSi AWD	52 points
4	Berg/Christensen/Smith	Jeep Cherokee	53 points
5	Jensen/Lester	Eagle Talon TSi AWD	63 points
6	Biggins/Goodwin	Suzuki Sidekick	80 points
7	Issler/Botwick	Subaru Turbo Wagon	128 points
8	Carlson/Fouse/Fouse	Mazda 323 GTX	165 points
9	Davitt/Crane	Eagle Talon TSi AWD	191 points
10	DeLong/Grimshaw	Ford Bronco	220 points
11	Lucka/Ruge	Ford Ranger	312 points
12	Paterson/Gibson	Porsche Carrera Four	1,289 points
13	Bosher/Gladden	Chevrolet Blazer	1,366 points

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After a long, brisk night, we stopped for fuel at Stewart's Crossing, where the temperature was roughly 60 below. We saw Henderson and Beckman's Sube being pulled into the garage, having lost three quarts of oil. Although they avoided being squashed by the 18-wheeler, it seemed likely they would be out of the rally. Their one hope, however, was that the Eagle Plains stop was one of the few without a TSD section or deadline for arrival. They had still not arrived when we had dinner at Eagle Plains and read about the brutal history of the area.

One story dealt with the requirement at the turn of the century that the Mounties periodically make 1,000-mile circuits by dog sled to assert their authority in the area. One patrol made a wrong turn and were hit by extraordinarily bad weather, including "average temperatures of -60." They dug in, wound up eating the sled dogs and finally died. The walls of the Eagle Plains restaurant were covered with photos of The Lost Patrol, including one showing the will written by the patrol's leader when he knew he would die. Satch Carlson, the owner of the "MORONS" Mazda 323 GTX, would later suggest that the last will and testament included providing Hines with maps and mileages for the rally.



Later that night, Henderson and Beckman arrived. Henderson complained loudly about what he described as a major mechanical problem with the Legacy. However, a factory official said later that in a freak occurrence, the extended running in extremely cold weather caused a PCV valve to freeze up, causing a seal to blow. However benign the cause of the oil spill, it was an oil spill nevertheless and one rally wag dubbed Henderson's Legacy "the Subaru Valdez."

By Friday, the 16th, we reached the end of the rally at Harrison Hot Springs near Vancouver.

The formidable team of Henderson and Beckman won, with only 41 penalty points. In second place, with 47 points, was the Harkcom and Knight Legacy station wagon. Lester and I were fifth, with 63 points.

"It's been six weeks since I last touched ground. Lots of winding road, I take it a la mode and I wish I could say something more profound." From the song Husky Stop, the Rinkbinders' tale of truck driving the snow covered roads through the Great White North.

Fear and Loathing on the TSDs

by Christopher Jensen

Like the One Lap of America, the winners are determined by TSD sections, usually two a day. They are Monte Carlo type and range in length from about five to 35 miles. At the Alcan, they were also the source of anger, confusion and what-are-we-doing-here bewilderment. In fact, during the banquet after the Rally, Tom Grimshaw would suggest KY Jelly would be an appropriate sponsor.

In the first Alcan Winter Rally in 1988, competitors were dismayed to learn that their clocks were generally superior to those being used by Hines. For 1990, Hines had promised to fix the problem and run a first-rate TSD event. But as we left Seattle it was a little discouraging to discover that the official clock at the start was exactly one minute off. It was not, we think, a good sign.

As the rally progressed, there were several consistent problems. The first was that the "official" mileages were often erratic. Hines finally admitted that the various sections of the course were measured in different years, sometimes in different vehicles. It became routine for competitors to ask Hines in what year was the upcoming TSD measured. As we started one morning, someone came on the CB radio and asked, "Did you notice that the route instructions began this morning with 'Once upon a time...'"

Another problem was that there were no timing lines at the checkpoints, making it impossible for competitors to routinely doublecheck the workers' timing.

This year Hines decided to allow integrated computers and virtually every team was using a Timewise. Ohioan Lew DeLong and Tom Grimshaw were using two. Unfortunately, on a TSD section outside Whitehorse, Grimshaw was using one computer and DeLong was driving according to the other one. Penalty points abounded.

The general feeling among the competitors is that the Alcan Winter Rally has the potential to be the greatest TSD rally in North America. But the organizational problems and quirks make it hard for serious TSD rallyists to accept it as a legitimate event.

An Eagle Talon on the Dempster Highway. (Photo by Chris Jensen)