

NORTH *To Adventure*

A rookie crew tackles the AICan Winter Rally to learn more about the rally game, their BMW, and themselves.



STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY RENEE AND MARINUS DAMM

In golf, scoring a zero means you didn't play. By mid-afternoon on Day One of the AICan Winter Rally, Renee and I have already run the opening time-speed-distance section in Washington State and crossed the border into British Columbia; there, cruising east on Trans-Canada 1, we see golfers at a course just off the freeway, chasing their version of perfect execution. These players roam over the greens and fairways, finding infinite challenge in a relatively small and well-bounded arena. Their difficulties come partly from wind

and precipitation and fatigue and misjudgments... just as ours will.

But our course stretches out ahead of us to the northern horizon and beyond—and a single round of play will take ten days.

The standard golfers shoot for is “less than par.” In TSD rallying, scoring a zero means you were perfect; there's no such thing as par. And golfers play as individuals, even in a foursome. One golf pro's foibles won't directly affect her partners. But in the rally car, the dependency between driver and co-driver is explicit

and closely coupled. We'll sink or swim as a team, like escaped felons chained together, locked in this little red metal box.

We've already bobbled a bit. In that opening TSD section, the very first checkpoint catches us between marks, and we're a little rattled about our time—not as badly as the novices we see correcting wrong turns, or being passed by us and then re-passing, but we know we weren't perfect. *Par*, I suppose, means *no worse than the others*.

The second timed section of the day, run after dusk, presents the first slippery

roads, the first local traffic, and the first encounter with a snowbank—by another competitor. It pains my heart to drive past their hopefully offered tow strap, but we must be firm: There are two more checkpoints before the end of the section. We've had no major errors, and we're cautiously optimistic heading to the nightly drivers' meeting. Our perspective is soon restored: Car Number One, carrying three AICan veterans, sets par at three points for the day.

We shoot a 35.

That lead car carries a threesome that

includes veterans of the X3 squad that won this rally one-two in 2004. Gary Webb, who drove the winning X3, is now sharing the wheel of Greg Hightower's Subaru WRX. Behind the TimeWise rally computer in that car is Russ Kraushaar, who shared the *Roundel* X3 with Satch Carlson in 2004. With no X3s, no diesel X5s, no twin-turbo V8 X6s available to defend their victory, the invincible BMW team has been scattered and reassembled in a single Japanese four-wheeler, with Satch sitting this one out in San Diego. Defending the

honor of the marque, we are one of two E30 325iX's running in 2008.

But while the competition is fierce, the camaraderie is even stronger. Any crew from any car can get advice and help from the veterans on the rally, which first took to the icy winter roads of the North in 1988. (The AICan 5000 Rally, a more gentle summer event, began in 1984.) So when I describe our in-car work assignments to Russ Kraushaar and R. Dale Kraushaar—Russ' stepfather is in another Subaru—they're friendly and helpful, offering frank



This year the Dempster was actually dry in places.



The 325iX on Hakkapeliittas proved capable on ice, snow, or dry roads.

feedback on our practice, and we resolve to try some of their suggestions. Besides, we're running in the Equipped class, making our calculations on computers that can't be connected to the car, though we are allowed an accurate digital odometer. We should have a slight margin for error not afforded to the tightly competitive Unlimited class with their integrated computers.

Day Two we run beautifully. On a long section named 11% Grade—for literal reasons—we see the hairpin and the uphill section early, drop to second gear before the apex; then it's *hard hard hard* on the gas, straining for traction, up past the checkpoint crew that the hairpin telegraphed. A following hairpin, this one flat, is soft and mushy, and I sink in the turn—so we must again try to catch up before reaching another merciless timing crew just over the next crest.

Our ranking this day is better; the teams ahead of us have doubled or tripled their first-day scores—or worse—but we're 10% lower than the previous day.

On Day Three, encouraged by the change in our procedures, we try the same routine during the only TSD section in the 800-mile day—and we melt down immediately. The instructions are dense, there's too much going on, too many changes too close together. Our time reports are scrambled: "Three early!" then "Four late!" then "Way late!" as we pass the first checkpoint. It's not working to split the workload this way, but rationality fights an uphill battle against panic, and strong language is used in the cabin before we fall back to our original practice. We finish the section in better

You're Going *Where?! To Do What?! In A BMW?!*

The Alcan Winter Rally is an endurance event consisting of time-speed-distance legs, ice slaloms, and long transits. The rally covers roughly 5,000 miles in ten days, from Washington State to the Arctic Circle and beyond—far beyond. The lowest score wins.

In 2006, we ran Mountains To The Sea, an Oregon touring rally. We won the novice class that day, and we celebrated with Russ and Katy Kraushaar, the overall winners. Somehow the Alcan Winter Rally came up in conversation, and Katy's enthusiasm planted the seed. But it seemed like a pretty remote idea; we had been rallying for less than a year. Still, Katy made it seem attainable.

the Alcan? Anything that's not your car!"

What about a BMW? I'd had a 325e in the early 1990s and loved it—but it didn't handle well in the snow and ice of Colorado. I knew about the 325iX back then, but couldn't afford one new. Finally, after an extensive Internet search, Craigslist popped one up in Salem, a mere 50 miles away. The price was a reasonable \$5,000 for a 1990 Brilliant Red coupe, supposedly with only 75,000 miles on it. We drove down that night, took it for a drive, noted the timing-belt replacement sticker, heard that it had lately been driven by a grandma. We bought it on the spot and drove it home that night.

The car had several little

Ocean. The car sagged in the back. Fully loaded, it *really* sagged. The original springs were replaced with new BMW ones.

The automatic transmission was swapped out for a five-speed manual. The car performed much better.

Good tires are important to maintain control on the icy roads that we'd encounter. We chose studded Nokian Hakkapeliittas, as did many other teams.

We replaced the stock headlight wiring with large-gauge wire, short runs, and relays, added four auxiliary lights to the front bumper, and had a custom skid plate built to protect the oil pan.

New heavy-duty battery? Check. All fluids replaced with

Alcan: fewer spare parts, one less sleeping bag, shoe traction devices, fewer clothes. We learned to wear our waterproof, windproof biking pants and boots all the time. In event the car goes off the road, it is important to get the emergency triangle on the road. The next car is only one minute behind on the TSD sections. There isn't much time for getting ready to get out of the car.

The Alcan Winter Rally offered an incredible journey. We started in Kirkland, Washington, excited but terrified. Family and friends lined the start and cheered us on.

The car performed well. It was easy to manage on the ice. It had enough power to climb the hills and cross the mountain passes. We were fortunate to have good weather during the trip; the weeks leading up to the rally were cold, around -50°F, but the coldest we saw was a -10°F briefly on the Dempster Highway early one morning. Most of the time, temperatures were between 10°F and 34°F.

We saw Northern Lights in Inuvik.

We saw a steaming moose on the Dempster Highway; we also saw silver fox, deer, elk, bison, and caribou as we posted several first-time accomplishments: Mile 0 on the Alcan Highway, driving on the ice road from Inuvik to Tuktoyaktuk, crossing the Arctic Circle, geocaches in three provinces.

Katy Kraushaar was right. The camaraderie among the rallyists was reason enough to go.

Now the roof rack holding the shovel, hoe, gas can, and spare tires is gone. The studded snow tires have been replaced by the summer tires. The mud and muck have been washed off the car, the survival gear removed, sponsor stickers unstuck. There are a few new dings, and a headlight and fog light are cracked.

It looks like just any other commuter car. But we know better. —*Renee Damm*



After a few more events, we decided to buy a car and dedicate it to unpaved rallying. With a real rally car, we could go on the Alcan. First we made up a list of cars we *didn't* want to rally in: Audis, Subarus, big SUVs, trucks, two-wheel-drive rigs. We wanted a car not too new; after all, we'd be running the car on gravel and snow, so it should expect some rough treatment. But we wanted a car that would be dependable (like our Honda), require little maintenance (like the Honda), and have reasonable horsepower (err, not like the Honda).

Other rallyists offered advice. "What's the best car to take on

issues, and one big one: it was an automatic. We gritted our teeth and joked, "Hey, we'll have a free hand to drink coffee with." But the auto didn't leak, and it shifted well, and the car passed the viscous-coupling test, and we thought we'd give it a go on a rally. We prepared the car for the No Alibi rally held in eastern Washington in 2007. Partway through the rally, the brake caliper came off. (See *Roundel* August 2007) A faulty service while grandma owned it was to blame. We were able to make a quick repair and keep going, but it was obvious that more work was needed before we'd confidently aim the car toward the Arctic

synthetic versions rated for extreme cold? Check. Antifreeze good to -50°F? Check. Engine compartment sealed? Check. Additional power taps in the passenger compartment? You bet. We rubbed silicone on the rubber seals around the doors and trunk so they wouldn't freeze shut. We checked brake pads, wheel alignment, fixed several warning lights, aimed the headlights, and installed extra backup lights and two running lights on the roof rack for bad-visibility conditions.

The week before the Alcan, we ran the 2008 Thunderbird Rally in Canada. Anything we didn't need would be left behind for the



Marilyn poses at the Arctic Circle with Erik Horst's 325iX.

fashion, but it takes scores of miles after that to decompress from our failure. In a slow release of tension, like the groaning realignment of Bear Glacier on its underlying escarpment, apologies are offered and accepted, and we resolve to scan future TSD instructions for such troublesome spots to avoid a second Chernobyl.

But the damage may already be done. Already more than half of the timed sections are complete, so we'll have only a few more chances at perfection. Now we are truly north, in the Yukon and the Northwest Territories; for the next few days, the rally checkpoints are go/no-go style. If we make it to Inuvik several hundred miles above the Arctic Circle, and then Tuktoyaktuk, another 120 miles up the frozen Mackenzie River, and then back down to Eagle Plains, just twenty miles south of the Circle, we avoid 410 penalty points.

During these long transits, the rally travels in teams, using a buddy system to lessen risk. Our team of two iXs, a one-wheel drive Saab—an intercooled turbo four-valve motor plus open differential on a front-wheel-drive car equals one-wheel drive—and the obligatory Subaru travel closer together the farther north we go. The other cars on the team all have at least one veteran Alcanner; we're the rookies, and we had been worried about keeping up on the long transits. But different cars in our team share the lead, and different portions of the road seem to suit certain drivers better. Renee goes like hell on the lower Klondike, and eventually she must lift slightly to reconnect the team.



Rally enthusiasm undergoes some changes during a ten-day marathon.

Heading up into Inuvik, far into the Arctic, the twilight is impossibly long; the sun sets diagonally for two and a quarter hours. You can see the roundness of the globe. From the other iX, Eric Horst murmurs on the radio, "We live on a big old ball, folks." The sun's light glances off the atmosphere here, like the rebound of a skipped stone over the water, or a bullet's ricochet off stone, or the abrupt scattering of glass particles as a rock chips the windshield. We see a mirage of cliffs and fog banks, changing to fractured lines, like sandstone strata shifting horizontally. The fractured lines

don't shimmer, they shift. For the first five days we don't even turn on the audio system, overloaded by sights; we've reached visual maximum bandwidth. But later, running south atop the ridges on the middle Dempster, we've adjusted and go looking for a soundtrack, *Making Movies* by Dire Straits: *High on this world, c'mon and take a low ride with me... so far from home, don't you think of me... sometime?*

We've tiptoed north to Tuk and back again between freeze cycles. The local folks bemoan the -54°F last week, and we depart Inuvik just ahead of a coming bliz-

The Arctic has an awesome beauty that justifies any excuse to drive through it.

zard. Some of our car-preparation steps now seem unnecessary; but we plug in the block heater anyway, when there's power. The first falling snow of the trip comes at Kilo Marker 238 southbound on the Dempster. We can't exactly complain about the good weather, as it's let us cover miles with relative ease. Only our few tastes of obscurity in foggy sections, on the ice road and lower down, give hints about how slow and nerve-wracking it could have been.

The good visibility lets us drive to higher limits. There are few surprises on the Dempster, as its engineers have drafted gentle radii, and no unwarned curves over crests. The AlCan Rally is a ten-day road trip through rugged country with a bunch of people who've been on the roads before, and the veterans set a blistering pace. The goal of each day: the overnight stop. Sure, there are timed sections or ice-racing slaloms along the way, but we're all marching toward the horizon from the time we wake. Folks are a bit disoriented because the miles click by so easily. And we're getting a lot of practice in the slick stuff. After 1,200 miles on the Dempster Highway and the Mackenzie ice road, a driver's tolerance for lateral slip increases, and the radio warnings from our teammates—"a little slick there"—mean something very different than they did a week earlier. Big snowy downhill? Upshift. Sign says 50? Slow to 80. (Those are kilometers, folks; we've not entirely lost our minds.)

On the other hand, coming down from Inuvik, the other iX stays behind in town and we lose radio contact with them. At first our three cars notch back their speed, but as

Yukon Highway 5 is the Klondike Highway between Whitehorse and Dawson City.



other rallyists pass without having heard from the tardy ones, we finally pull over on a high ridge and wait. We kick the snow around for a quarter hour till even the sweep truck pulls up. Sure, we're fine, we tell Sweep, but we're looking for Car Four—

Cue the view of headlights over a hillock three humps back. The black iX slows barely a whisker as they pass us; we dash for our cars and set out in pursuit. They're out of sight, and we chase them for miles at supra-freeway speeds—but still within the range of comfort. That's a variable standard; near the end of the day, the whole pack steps it up. Our steering corrections have become quite delicate, like the color contrast of new snow on old, as much a probing for road feel as a directive. "Would you like to take this line, Niner?" The car generally says yes; but when the car suggests a correction, we mur-

mur, "Of course!" and the harmony continues. Ballet on ice. It's too slippery to walk on, so we'd better drive.

The middle and upper Dempster Highway lies atop the ridges of the Continental Divide, as the Rockies taper off into the sea at the edge of North America. The surrounding landscape cuts the furrowed brow of a morose teen-ager. Off the Dempster, the Klondike Highway runs through terrain rather more muted. It's impressive enough, wide and empty and sprinkled with minute trees and clinging snow as far as the eye can see—but compared to the scene around the Dempster, it's the smooth cheeks of a portly man. The Alaska Highway traverses rather than scales the Yukon, the terrain different again, more open somehow. Maybe the valleys are wider, or—possibly related—maybe there's more water throughput in a year. The Dempster is dry,



Hood up to keep cool, Marilyn waits her turn for another ice-racing lap.



Renee Damm models the latest in rally style.

dry, dry—in spite of being covered with ice. Here along the southern edge of the Yukon Territory, the look is more like lower B.C., or the Pacific Northwest of the USA.

Traveling as hard as we are, the degrees of latitude fall off quickly. Driving south from Tuk, the effect is like a time machine, accelerating the arrival of Spring, the roads clearer, the trees greener, the sun higher in the sky, and the return of signs of human endeavor. We cover months in days.

Down in Whitehorse again, I wash the car against co-driver's warning, and the surface freezes instantly once I leave the Mighty Wash. Things seem good that night—the doors open easily—but the next morning the trunk is immobile and the driver's door will open, but not latch. We drive around Whitehorse looking for breakfast

holding the door strap. Once my brain warms up enough, I cycle the power locks twice and things are back to normal.

The second ice slalom is much slipperier than the first. The iX has ABS, but for loose snow or gravel—or ice—ABS is a hindrance. We disconnect a sensor and the controller goes to fail-safe mode, normal power-assisted brakes. With the studs and the heavy siping, the Hakkapeliittas' straight-ahead stopping power on ice is impressive; with ABS engaged, however, it's terrifying: The brake is a pedal with no effect. We try to make the call at each stop whether we want the computer assist or not, and should probably just put a switch in the cabin to make it easier.

My co-driver is confused by the re-appearance of divider lines in the center of

the pavement when we near the lower end of the Klondike Highway. East of Whitehorse, there's generally both a center line and a fog line on the pavement. The Mounties show up once in a while now, but rally traffic has settled down into little convoys nicely spaced, and though we're running fast we're not a spectacle. It's some measure of this event that I have gone faster on the Alaska Highway, with the temperature well under freezing and the surface so variable only one line for either the left or right tires could be chosen, than I've ever driven the iX before.

The last four timed sections are widely spaced, and by Day Ten, we've got our routines figured out, our own procedures dialed in. We're running the Kraushaars' suggestions, and we take only seven points from eight checkpoints.

On the final day of the rally, the last car in the field, #24, finally gets it right. They run with zero error for each measured leg, and finish with an eight-part sum that's the same as each of its addends: 0. Twenty-four cars had ten chances each to run perfectly on time, but only one has done so. It's been a long road and a lot of effort chasing that zero—the rally equivalent of a hole in one.

In the final tally, we lead all other Equipped entrants by 38 points. "First In Class" is the etching on the highball-glass trophy. It's a precious treasure to be packed away for the long drive home. ♦