

Life in the other

LANE

Ah, the holidays! My favorite time of year. Too much food, too much to drink and a few uncluttered moments to try and pin down just what it was about this year that made it what it was. Like all years it went too fast but someone wise told me that it's more a function of being on the grinning side of forty than on some aberrant acceleration of the planet. Let's see now. We've survived MASS reincarnation with all our fingers and toes intact. We've managed to wheedle through three pro events and only lost the electrical system once (exactly half the number of times your humble scribe lost her lunch). Indications are that we'll avoid debtors prison (save an obtuse threat from the plastics industry for creative abuse). And my TH and I are still on speaking and hugging terms. In the vernacular of the day, that makes it a bull year, but I'm telling you, at times it was a bear to get through! In the Giving-Credit-Where-It-Is-Due Department I think it is only fair to publicly acknowledge the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA to you) for doing their part in assuring our place in international relations.

I knew that would get your attention so I'll explain. You see, by the simple act of doubling one figure, SCCA made it all but impossible for an unsponsored pro rally team to compete, with anything approaching regularity, at the national level during the 1987 season. By raising their event registration tariffs to the financial equivalent of the ozone layer, fledgling pro-rally teams like our Wolf Creek Racing were politely invited to go scratch. A terse explanation came in the form of a briefly worded diatribe pointing an expressive finger at the "Insurance Industry" and increased bonding requirements. Whoever or whatever the culprit, be it truth, fiction or a disturbing elitist attitude toward the sport, we had no choice but to put flyer after flyer to use as litter pan liner while seeking out a more fiscally responsible alternative.

Now understand, we knew going in that this was not going to be a cheap avocation. (That's the price for ALL FOUR struts, right?) We approached the whole thing using sound business formulas. (OK - the square root of the cost of a case of beer has a standard deviation of one if compared to the effort it takes to make a bologna sandwich.) So, we WERE prepared to forego a millenium of real vacations for the opportunity to beat out our brains and the MASS' brawn on dirt roads. What we had not considered was the possibility that SCCA would require Boardwalk and Park Place outright if we wanted to play on their board.

The whole thing left us frustrated and depressed until that glorious day a flyer from the Canadian Auto Sport Conference (CASC) arrived inviting us to enter the 1987 running of the Rallye of the Voyageurs. Behaving much like well-bred Rhesus monkeys, we immediately honed in on the asking price and for the first time were not immobilized with sticker shock.

The 1987 running of CASC's Voyageur National Pro was without question the highlight of our season. I can't say enough good things about it without appearing to have received a hefty gratuity for abusing the thesaurus in my song of praise. But I gotta be honest with you - this event, and everyone connected with it - was superior. Exchange rate notwithstanding, the entry fee was well within our meager change purse; the hotel accommodations were more than adequate (except for the postage stamp sized bath towels that looked like wash cloths to my TH)! Linda and Terry Epp's administration from reggie to results was impeccable in every sense of the word. They managed to gather a legion of workers whose singular goal was perfection and the whole thing ran like the cesium atomic clock in Colorado. All that aside, know what impressed us the most? The event ran on time! I'm not kidding, we were due at the finish at 12:24 am and, by cracky, we were there despite 23 good reasons I know of for delays along the route.

With a start and finish in beautiful, downtown North Bay, Ontario (turn left at the Laurentians and follow) it seemed as if the entire population dropped by for the Parc Ferme - Ceremonial Start at the town square. The town square is located on a one way brick road tailor made for showing off brightly colored vehicles and folks in Nomex from neck to ankle. After just a little hoopla, competing teams transited from North Bay to the first stage about 45 minutes due north. From then on it was full-tilt boogie using dirt logging roads, dirt mining roads and just good old dirt roads...the kind that most of us only dream about on a good night. As an eerie contrast a couple of the stages ran through the world's seventh largest taconite mine. Believe me when I tell you that at dusk this place is right out of a John Carpenter horror thriller.

The stages were the longest we had ever competed on from a short of 11+ kilometers

to the longest at 31+ k. In true pro fashion the mileages were imperfect but that is becoming less of a distraction to me than in previous events. Mileages are one of the real challenges in progressing from TSD to pro events. It can be downright hair-raising trying to interpolate that quickly and that often when the left side of one's brain is waiting to hear either, "got it," or the "S" word through the intercom.

Most of the service breaks were conducted in a spacious parking lot attached to the Canadian National Railroad station in a town called Temagami. There was plenty of room for everyone to affect minor and not so minor repairs plus the added bonus of real bathrooms in the station house. The CNRR employee on duty that day was a model of good will and understanding as I broke the all time one day record for visits to the plumbing. The combination of Orangina and adrenalin is devastating to say the least.

After eleven special stages and hundreds of kilometers of transits, the event finished up back at the host hotel. Space had been arranged for a sumptuous late night buffet and a cash bar. The posting of preliminary results kept everyone poised while the Protest Committee called upon a few of us to testify before ruling on a handful of inquiries. All of this administrivia was accomplished with quiet dispatch and none of the tantrums all of us have witnessed in the past. At the Sunday morning banquet, official results were handed out to each team, bound white paper style. Awards, both money and hardware were dispensed with a delightful flair for the obvious. It seems redundant to report that Messers. Buffum and Choinere snagged top honors for a come-from-behind victory in the reincarnated white Audi.

When it appeared that absolutely everything possible had been done to assure this event a place in our hall of fame, Linda Epp's closing remarks doted all the i's and crossed all the t's. After thanking the dozens of workers and other cooperatives she made a special point of thanking the nine teams from the United States for entering and adding a new dimension to the event. Those of us who have been rendered financially impotent by our own national organization now have a refreshing alternative to the high priced spread. This may seem an impossibly silly level to forge international relations but the Canucks know how to make a visitor feel like he can kick off his shoes and set awhile. Ay?