

Arguments supporting habitation in the north part of the country during Standard Time are few, centering around “six months of winter, six months of bad skiing”; that also means six months of fun driving, especially if you live where they plow dirt roads. John Buffum, chief conniver of the Winter Challenge, happens to live in Vermont, aka DRIVER HEAVEN, surrounded by a mapful of said roads: icy, dicey, twisty, humpy, bumpy and a whole bunch of other words ending in “y”. Vermont is also a NAVIGATOR HEAVEN, with a wealth of unusual road configurations that demand constant attention without a GPS guiding the way.

John, the rally legend who ran this event around his trip to Europe to compete in the 2019 Historique Rallye Monte-Carlo (anniversary of his 12th overall finish in the 1969 Monte), got back to Barre just in time to conduct his annual refresher course in how we played in the old days, when General Instructions ran one page, double-spaced, and the Main Road Rule was “do what the rallymaster wanted you to do”.

Many rally planners toil where the land is flat, the roads are straight and full of traffic, so there’s been a gradual drift toward “navigator” events. Timekeeping is crucial, so registration areas have crews huddling over calculators and speed charts, marking up the instructions with timing notes, charting up the rally before a wheel is turned.

“On time all the time” narrows down the driving fun to the last turn before a checkpoint and a dinosaur like me thinks that the numbers game is chasing away competitors for lack of adventure; after all, there are only so many folks who enjoy the mathematics during a dull drive.

JB wants teams out in the woods experiencing the rally as it is being driven in real time and has a head full of shenanigans that often distract competitors from their appointed rounds. This was my 10th Challenge (I have written excuses for missing the others), so I’ve had a ringside seat to all the ice and all-night snowstorms, penalties for time allowances, hard-to-read signs and other tricks, but they’ve become things of the past. John keeps making the WC’s easier (John’s word), yet this year’s route was a banquet of new challenges to identify who’s best and who’s the rest.

JB’s old tricks (utilizing dead-ends, for example) mixed with new technology (GPS transponders in each car that registered In-times at remote checkpoints) threw some course-following confusion into the time-keeping on Section 1 during daylight, engaging the navigators..

This is a good time to point out just how far technology has progressed: competitors were unaware that the magic transponder sitting on each dash was transmitting our location at all times to John’s computer with a map of the course. Green dot when we were moving, red when we stopped, allowing JB to monitor every car throughout the event! We were tracked in real time, and, stragglers and lost souls could be identified and located for rescue.

How handy this became when John noticed that the Equipped cars, running up front, were all going off-course at the same spot, recovering and getting back onto course, but slightly off time. Lots of head-scratching when we got our checkpoint slips with a mystery official time. A speed sign indicating an execution point for a route instruction had been dislodged by a snow plow and was sitting in a snowbank hidden from competitors. A similar sign down the road became the unintended execution point of the speed change. The situation was cleared up by eliminating the affected legs, much to relief of all.

Section 2, running after sundown, incorporated two maps with execution points of written instructions noted on the maps. Newer maps used this year were fairly clear once you realized that the scale on each map was different (John strikes again). The route wasn't drawn on the second map; you had to figure out the shortest distance between instructions in the woods.

Section 3 used straightforward tulip instructions over challenging roads in the dark on slippery stuff, requiring strategy to select time allowances. The GPS controls on this section weren't marked, so you had to hope you hadn't passed a GPS spot when you took the TA..

We moved through the final section, handicapped by a rare Winter Challenge condition: DUST. The snow has come irregularly this winter in the Northeast (the Ithaca Winter rally had to be postponed due to a blizzard) and, had the Challenge come the weekend before we would have been running in consistent snowfall. A thaw during the week left us driving on mostly frozen dirt and the lack of any wind left us trying to fly through clouds of brown.

A twist on the third section was a handicap system, eliminating your worst leg score from your total, plus discounting the scores of the two-wheel drive cars. After all, fair is fair.

Once again, the Challenge did its job, to identify the best teams: L Mark Stone and Marc (C-Marc?) Goldfarb had their usual uneventful (my description) drive to first place overall and equipped over Chris Regan & Michael Beliveau, 46 pts to 87. Andrew Chapin/Phil LaMoureaux, with 372 pts, took 4th overall, first in Class S, beating out Anthony Burden & Dana Killam in 5th o/a, 2nd Class S (501 pts).

Places one through four were Subaru, Mazda, Mitsubishi and Hyundai. Lots of diversity in the winter rally ranks. Twenty-eight starters, twenty-six finishers, including, in 26th the most noteworthy runner: Jeffery Wacker and Peter Paolillo in a 60's MERCURY COMET CALIENTE, decked out in Alcan Rally livery. Nice ride!

It was cold. The workers earned our thanks. And, thanks to John Buffum for continuing to keep old-style rallying alive, truly challenging everyone who made the effort to get up to Vermont for a nightful of wonderful driving roads, uncertain conditions, question marks and laughs.

Your running out of opportunities to compete on rallies like this; we need to support them. Do yourself a favor and plan on Barre in February next year.

The Top Ten:

- 1st, 1st Class A:: Stone/Goldfarb, 46 pts
- 2nd, 2nd A: Regan/M Beliveau, 87
- 3rd, 3rd A:: Thomas/Beyer, 191
- 4th, 1st Class S: Chapin/LaMoureaux, 372
- 5th, 2nd S: Burden/Killam, 501
- 6th, 4th A: Choiniere/Brodeur, 515
- 7th, 3rd S: Roddy/Praetorius, 697
- 8th, 4th S: Twombly/Barczynski, 736
- 9th, 5th S: Magner/Chilton, 835
- 10th, 6th S: P Yetmen/S Yetmen, 1077