

WHEELSPIN

In an Off-Road Rally, the Cars Really Did Fly By

UP, UP . . . A Subaru WRX goes airborne at the New England Forest Rally.



. . . AND AWAY The Subaru has a little hang time before it slams back to earth.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTOPHER JENSEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

By CHRISTOPHER JENSEN

WHEN drivers talk about how well their cars fly, it is one clue that rally racing is a bit different from most other forms of auto competition.

Rally cars get airborne as they crest hills at high speeds. A flight of 100 feet or so is routine. This is perhaps like saying a cinder block flies when it is thrown out a window, but drivers still insist that some cars fly better than others.

Standing near his car this summer at the New England Forest Rally, Travis Pastrana, a driver sponsored by Subaru, noted that his 2008 Impreza WRX STI "flies a little more nose-heavy" than his previous anti-gravity machine.

The basic goal of rally racing, however, is to race production-based cars down roads — usually dirt, mud or snow-covered — as fast as one dares.

In the United States, rally racing has struggled for visibility for decades, while elsewhere in the world it is a big-league motor sport. For a few lucky drivers, it is a full-time job with corporate sponsorships, supported by a half dozen or so crew members. Most drivers, however, race on their own nickel with friends and family as their crew as they travel from race to race around the country, earning points toward the national championship. For them, it is an expensive passion.

And unlike most other forms of racing, there is no practice. Each two-person team gets some basic route instructions. Then they are allowed to drive the stage once in a regular vehicle, not a rally car, at street-legal speeds.

This injects a large element of uncertainty. By the time the race begins, changes in the weather may have made the road slippery. Other rally cars may have kicked rocks — sometimes large rocks — onto the road.

That requires improvisation from the

driver who knows that making a bad decision would be, well, very bad. There are no nice run-off areas or gravel pits to slow errant vehicles. Often rally cars lose momentum by less genteel methods, such as hitting trees or tumbling down an embankment.

Drivers have to use unusual techniques. Sometimes the brake and accelerator are applied at the same time with varying pressure on each pedal. Or, the hand-brake is used to turn the vehicle by locking up the rear wheels. Then, there is the pendulum turn, also known as the "Scandinavian flick," in which the driver points the car in the wrong direction, then swings it back around to make the turn.

"The driver and car are going up against physics and nature," said Marc Goldfarb of Atkinson, N.H., who has been rallying for 30 years. "We sometimes joke that we flirt with the laws of physics, and when you flirt sometimes you get slapped."

There are often crashes, but serious injuries or fatalities are usually prevented by safety equipment, although Mark Lovell and Roger Freeman were killed in Oregon in 2003 when their car struck a tree.

The New England Forest Rally was the sixth event in the nine-event series sanctioned by Rally America of Golden Valley, Minn. Competitors spent two days racing on 10 stages, competing on 103 miles of closed-to-the-public roads around northern Maine and Berlin, N.H.

Going into the event, Goldfarb and Andrew Comrie-Picard, of Toronto, were leading the Rally America national championship in their Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution. But close behind were



TIRED Jim McClelland after a long day preparing his Toyota.

Pastrana, of Davidsonville, Md., and Ken Block, of Encinitas, Calif.

Then there was Niall McShea, of Ireland, the winner of the production-car category in the 2004 World Rally Championship, the highest level of rally racing. It made him a serious contender.

Pastrana and Block's factory-sponsored Subarus are fielded by Vermont SportsCar of Colchester, which builds rally cars and supports teams. Chris Yandell, the marketing manager, said running Block's vehicle for one event would cost \$50,000 to \$75,000.

While there are huge variations in equipment, all the rally cars are based on production vehicles; the Subaru Impreza WRX and Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution models are especially popular. Classes vary depending on horsepower and modifications.

The fastest cars routinely exceed 100 miles per hour. After the rally is finished, the results will show that on some stages the top competitors averaged 65 m.p.h. to almost 80 m.p.h. Pretty quick for dirt and gravel forest roads.

The other end of the rally-racing fi-

nancial equation was represented by Jim McClelland, of Washington, Pa., who bought a 1987 Toyota MR2 for about \$3,000 and then fixed it up. Teamed with the co-driver Jon Price, of Martinez, Calif., he relied on family and friends and good luck to help fix the car.

By the end of the first day, McShea and his co-driver, Marshall Clarke, had taken the lead, with Block nine seconds back.

McClelland's support crew was Darlene Jones, McClelland's cousin and team manager, and 15-year-old Matt DeWees, a family friend. They looked a little lonely compared to the alpha-dog Subaru factory team nearby. With two trucks, 16 people and three tents, it looked as if a high-performance circus had come to town.

Luckily for McClelland, many of the teams look out for each other. On the second day the low-rider MR2 hit a rock churned onto the road by another vehicle. It cracked the transmission case.

"I thought we were out," McClelland said.

But another rally car towed them into the service area. Then another team's mechanic used some epoxy for a temporary fix and got the MR2 going.

While the drivers are the stars, rally racing is unusual because it is a team sport. The co-driver reads the driver the notes about the crests, dips and turns that are just out of sight. There may be 20 or 30 instructions per mile and it must all be presented at the right moment under awful circumstances, Goldfarb said.

"There is a continuous stream of information that gets presented in all sorts of conditions," he said. "Heat,

cold, rain, snow, ice. There is engine noise and rocks bouncing off the skid plate. All the while the cockpit is moving in all directions."

By midafternoon on the second day the last stages were being run. Block — hoping to catch McShea — slid wide on a turn, hit a rock and could not continue. A little later Pastrana rolled into the service area, knowing he could not make up enough time to beat McShea.

"I feel like I have driven like my grandma too much at this rally," he said.

Late in the afternoon, having just completed the last stage, McShea pulled into the service area. He and Clarke had won. They finished the last stage in two-wheel drive, having lost the center differential.

Andrew Pinker and Robbie Durant finished second in their Subaru Impreza WRX STI. Pastrana and the co-driver, Derek Ringer, took third over all. With a first-place finish at Rally Colorado last weekend, Pastrana and Ringer have locked up the Rally America national championship.

A little later, McClelland and Price's MR2 arrived at the service area and their team was thrilled. They finished while Block and some well-financed teams did not.

"I always find a great sense of accomplishment to finish a race that one of the top teams doesn't," McClelland said. "As we drive by, then there's Ken Block's car on the side of the road, it is like, 'Well, there's one down.'"



THE WINNER Niall McShea of Ireland.

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