

127 PRESS ON REGARDLESS



What is rally? A newbie explains...

After 25 years of dreaming, I finally found myself behind the wheel of my own rally car – even though I had to borrow the actual wheel.

Way back in high school, in the heady days of the late 1980s, I sat on my couch one fine summer morning and saw a 30-second clip of a rally

race in Europe on ESPN. What the H is rally, I said. Was that an Audi with truck tires on it bombing through the woods at ludicrous speeds? That Lancia just crashed and the fans are rolling it back over, and the car is taking off again down the narrow lanes of Finland? Or cliff side in Monte Carlo?

More of this, please. More... of... this. When you crash in rally, or have an “off” or a “big moment,” you are expected to keep going at all costs, whenever, where ever possible. Press on regardless.

There are more than a few pictures online of a dedicated co-driver oper-

ating the throttle from *within the engine bay* after the accelerator cable had snapped.

This certainly wasn't NASCAR, where the fans were trapped in bleachers, drinking cheap beer and cheering

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Top: Newbie rallyist Kris Gove checks the condition of the underside of the car during service at the 2011 New England Forest Rally. **Middle:** Driver Kris Gove and Navigator Bill Hatem mug it up for the camera. **Bottom:** The cockpit of Gove's rally BMW, complete with borrowed steering wheel. *Photos by Stephanie Tolley*

for their favorite moonshine runner somewhere down South. No sir, this was rally. Fans lined the course, which was on a regular road. Like, a real road. And were those license plates on those race cars, that looked like they literally rolled off the showroom lot? Yes and yes.

Euro sports were always sort of my favorite, cycling, soccer, etc., and when I discovered rally, that sealed the deal.

But, I was in high school, on the wrong side of the tracks, and could barely afford my \$500 first car, never mind a race car.

Fast forward 20+ years. It's 2001, my birthday, and in my hands, my wife had placed a gift certificate for a track racing experience in Connecticut called Racing Reality. All

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my life, she had been hearing about my desire to race and she made it happen. “You’re going racing!” she said. I think, too, this may have been her solution for me to get this racing thing out of my system.

It didn’t take.

She was a dealer, and I was a brand-new junkie wacked out on speed.

Following my racing adventure, I discovered Skip Barber Racing School, a road-course based school in Limerock, Connecticut, where Paul Newman used to race.

Still not out of my system, I found the ultimate school in all of the known Universe: Team O’Neil Rally School. Located in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, snow-laden photos of rally cars flying through the woods jumped of the web page at me and might has well have been in Sweden.

I was instantly hooked. I must attend this school. Now.

So I wrote them a letter and before I knew it, I was sitting in a real rally car (I had never even seen a real rally car before) in the middle of the mountains. If I wasn’t a rally junkie yet, I was totally ready for rehab after the week-long class.

We learned the finer points of driving on gravel surfaces, using left-foot braking and something called the pendulum turn, or more accurately, The Scandinavian Flick. This particular maneuver goes against every natural driving instinct normal humans have and flicks it around a corner using – you guessed it

– a pendulum momentum to swing a car around a corner at butt puckering speeds.

That was 2004. In 2007, I was able to cover the Maine Forest Rally for my newspaper. After seeing a real, live event, where the cars, drivers and co-drivers, were immediately accessible in something called Parc Exposé, I was so hooked I would have dumped my 401k (if I had one) to be able to do this.

On the six-hour drive home, I dreamed, but the dream had turned into scheming, prioritizing and otherwise turning my world on its ear to get into racing – somehow. I learned about something called autocross, a high-performance event where a driver pilots any car (racing or street) through a course of cones on a closed off parking lot. I hit craigslist hard looking for a cheap car and came up with a list of VW Golfs and Jettas, liked they used at Team O’Neil and showed them to my wife. “No,” she said. “You need something more intimidating. How about a BMW?”

I almost renewed my vows on the spot.

So the search began anew and by late September, of that year, a 1988 BMW 325is sat in my driveway. The following April, I participated in my first-ever competitive automotive event, an SCCA-sanctioned autocross at Horseneck Beach, in Westport, Massachusetts.

The next day, a friend of mine came over, we had a few hundred beers, and started taking the car apart. Then, after an exhaustive

search for roll cage builders, I landed on Cage This, in Lynn, Massachusetts. Cage This owner Bill Doyle and I became fast friends, in part due to our both having the same car. Eventually, he agreed to sponsor me and my efforts with Slapdash Racing, my racing company. Bill was thoroughly influential in getting me to my first-ever stage rally, the New England Forest Rally.

Most people – and I would recommend this actually – take several years to build up their chops in autocross and rallycross before attempting a stage event. I went from autocross to full-on stage rally in two years, including the time it took to build the car. I had three autocrosses under my belt before I went to Maine. Somehow I had it in my head that I was going to get hit by a bus before I ever made it to stage rally. So I accelerated my plans.

Before I knew it, I was panic-stricken sitting in line for scrutineering (tech inspection) at the Sno-Cat shed at the Sunday River Ski Resort, the base camp for the New England Forest Rally. I passed tech with flying colors – a testament to all the hard work by all my team members, sponsor and myself – and ultimately found myself sitting at the start control, then gunning it through the Maine woods.

I had materialized a dream. Cloudy visions during sleepless nights finally descended from the ether and formed into the shape of a vintage BMW loaded up with go-fast bits.

I did it.
I made it happen.



The Before and After: Rather, the after, left, is the finished product as it rolled up to the line at the New England Forest Rally. At right, the Slapdash Racing BMW started its racing life as a bone-stock 1988 BMW 325is.



Rally 101: A beginner's guide

Rally is a unique form of motorsport that doesn't use a track. Commonly referred to as 'real cars, real roads, real fast', rally is a timed event that uses temporarily closed public roads as the track. These are called special stages. The cars must be street legal, registered and insured, because between special stages, they must transit on open public roads in regular traffic. During these transits, teams must follow all applicable traffic laws or they will be disqualified. Rally also uses a co-driver, or navigator, who shouts out directions to the driver on the course.

What's exciting about rally is that the teams press on regardless of what happens on the course. Lose a wheel? Keep going. Break a window? Keep going. Have a roll over? Fans

come out of the woods and roll you back over, then you keep going.

Rally is one of the most accessible motorsports out there. There's a pre-race event called Parc Exposé, where each team and car must line up to give access to the public. Fans can walk up and talk to their favorite drivers, look into the windows of the cars and ask questions. No barriers, no fences. You won't find that in NASCAR.

Rally started in Europe more than a century ago as a way for auto manufacturers to prove their cars could handle the elements. Rallies are run in all types of weather and in all types of conditions year-round; day, night, rain, snow, ice, blazing sun, gravel roads, and tarmac.



The night before the New England Forest Rally, the Slapdash Racing team had many loose ends to tie... like installing the tires.

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