

CARS

CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF RALLYSPORT
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2007 Pacific Forest Rally

by Keith Morison for CARS

The Pacific Forest Rally is one of our favourite events and was always going to be on our 2007 schedule. We consider PFR to be our 'home event' and Norm and I have enjoyed podium finishes the past two years. This year we expected a slow start to the event as our last event together was the Oregon Trail Rally in April.

We arrived in Merritt in plenty of time for registration, swapped the gravel tires onto my car and headed out to recce the Nicola and Princeton Cutoff stages. Nicola is a stage that we haven't really gotten a grip on, but our notes from last year, with a few adjustments, were good.

The start of Princeton 'drop-off' stage is a short uphill run with an increasing exposure on the co-driver's side (of course). The recent wet weather left that part of the stage extremely slippery and, with recce cars ranging from pick-ups to rental cars to rally cars with gravels, the climb was a real challenge. Once we got onto the stage, the only changes we made were directly related to the condition of the road. Our baseline notes were really good.

The next stage to recce was Helmer, one of our favourites. Norm and I have a lot of passes of Helmer under our belt. I've seen this stage on tulip notes, driven it in competition and co-driven it on notes with Norm many times. I've seen it dusty, I've seen it sloppy wet and I've seen it just about perfect, but I've never seen it like this before. When we reached the top of Helmer, we arrived in a winter wonderland. A 'solid' layer of snow was covering the road with tracks from a couple of marshal cars showing the way into the stage. Nobody was prepared for the conditions and, without a doubt, this was going to make it a challenge to recce. The sun was starting to set and, thankfully, our first pass of the stage proved our notes to be good enough. We called our crew and to get them to pack the Yokohama AO34s just in case the snow stayed with us.

Friday's recce started with the 'new' stages in Brookmere. This is the second year for these roads, and the familiarization and cleaning up of notes would be appreciated. We were among the first teams to arrive at the stage and, along with Antoine and Nathalie, were the first two cars to enter the stage. Our first pass of the two stages was uneventful. No marshals had been through, so the stop and start boards were missing from the middle portion of the two stages, and the end of the first and the start of the second stage had been changed from last year.

The other issue was the snow on these stages. Still on gravel tires, the WRX was happy in the tracks of the SUV Antoine was driving. The snow was deep enough in places that the differential of the SUV was leaving tracks. Our first pass was clean, with only a few changes. There were some areas we needed to focus on in the second pass, but we agreed that the notes were useable as they were. As we approached the end of the Thynne Mountain stage for our second pass, we started seeing cars stopped on the inclines. Many of the two wheel drive cars were having issues with the snow, and waved us past. We didn't get far. We found a complete blockage of the road, with over a dozen cars stopped in the middle of the road. After some discussion, a few of us decided to turn around and head for the Comstock stage. There were many teams that didn't get through their first pass so we were in better shape than many of the teams.

The problems only got worse where we turned around. After we left, a series of events left two rally cars stuck in the ditch and many hours devoted to getting them out. For the Zedril Brothers of Winnipeg and Eric Grochowski and Leanne Junnila of Calgary, their national events ended during recce. Local tow trucks refused to head into the back woods and event recovery vehicles were sliding off the road. It was 2AM before the teams finally got their cars back on the road and to the service park. (ed: The course closing car went back to the stage after the finish of the Friday night part of the event with a borrowed winch and spend an interesting 2-3 hours of winching the two cars out in the snow and very cold temperatures of Tynne Mountain.) Both crews entered the regional event on Saturday, a testament to the 'press on regardless' attitude.

The rally started on Friday evening with a run in and out on Nicola and then headed to three passes of Princeton Cutoff. The stages were in good condition, with no dust and only a couple of slippery spots. By the third running of Princeton, we were very comfortable and more committed to the notes. We set a time that was about 4 seconds faster than our record for the stage, but the stage had been shortened to get rid of a potentially slippery uphill climb.



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The day ended with two runs at the Railyard Mall spectator stage. It is a favourite for the locals, and is an interesting combination of pavement, gravel and wet pavement. As we waited for the parade lap, I lost count of the number of people that reminded us of our 'pole dancing' experience last year.

At the end of the day, we were happy with where we were: a familiar third overall, 1:22 behind ACP, 28 seconds ahead of Scott Trinder in fourth and 52 seconds ahead of Gord Olson in fifth.

On Saturday morning, the official announcement was exactly what I expected. The Brookmere stages would be replaced by two passes of Helmer. The call for the AO34s was the right one as we knew there would still be snow on the stage. Tire choice is a bit of a black art at times. Looking at our competition, we saw everything from mud tires, with a lot of narrow blocks, to ice tires and many of the regional teams were on gravels – their only choice.

We chose to run the AO34s as did Antoine while ACP was on muds. As we launched into the stage, Norm was tentative around the corners and was deliberate, but smooth in his actions. We definitely weren't spectacular, but we were clean. I wasn't at all prepared for what we were about to see. From the tracks on the road, it was clear that someone was having issues. At roughly 4 Km into a 22K stage, we caught ACP and Marc. We followed for about a full kilometre as he struggled with the conditions. There was little room to pull over and the Evo was unpredictable, so we sat back and waited. Before long, the back-end stepped out and ACP gently spun into the inside ditch. I recall Norm and Andrew giving each other a courteous wave as we passed the still spinning Evo. "Just like stock car racing," Norm quipped.

Andrew lost over three minutes to us on that stage, putting us 1:47 ahead of him on the road. Not a huge advantage for a P4 car to have on an open class car, but we were now cleanly in second place heading into the second morning pass of Helmer. Our gap to Scott in third place had dropped to only 14 seconds, so we definitely couldn't relax.

Our charge into the stage was much stronger the second time. Norm had figured out the handling and we knew we had to run at a similar commitment as our first run. The stage was going smoothly until about the halfway point. It was one of those moments that sort of come from nowhere, but isn't really unexpected. Ultimately, it would affect our rally much more than we thought. Essentially, the back end stepped out on a right-hander and we dipped into the ditch on the inside of the corner. I remember looking at the row of big rocks we were now driving over and worrying about our tires. We finally got some traction after about 400 feet worth of ditch and the car catapulted across the road and off a minor exposure. According to the radio marshal at that point, we hit two big rocks, went over a big log and mowed down a pile of big rocks that were holding the banner tape pole in place. We immediately knew we had a flat in the rear, suspected a second flat and Norm complained that the alignment was off a bit. The car was a handful, particularly in right corners, something we attributed to the flat, left rear tire. With 10K to go, the only option was to drive it out, and by the end, Norm was back up to speed for the most part and slowing only when he needed. Despite the excitement, we were nine seconds quicker the second time through the stage, but so were most people. ACP beat us by five seconds.

We changed the flat at the end of the stage and saw that we had at least one bent control arm. Thankfully, the first service of the day was the next stop, so we called our crew and had them prepare for 2 control arms and an overall inspection. We'd gotten off lucky, we thought.

With a 40 minute service in hand, the car received a good going over. The control arm was changed out and the crew even had time to do some cleaning of the car. We headed out to the next set of stages: 3 runs of the 6Km Comstock stage and twice around the Active Mountain Resort spectator stage.

The first right hand corner of Comstock had us realize we hadn't fixed all the problems. The car hopped like a kangaroo around the corner. When we came to the pavement section, the car was hopping in both directions. This stage features a very fast section of pavement with a rough section of broken pavement about half way along. Keep right and you can run through flat out, with a bit of a jump...usually. We hit the rough spot at 160 something and the back of the car rocketed skyward. On landing, the rear end went from side to side and it took everything Norm had to get it under control. The off on Helmer had bent both rear struts and shortly into Comstock, the left rear seized while compressed. The right rear failed shortly after that, leaving us with no dampers in the rear for the next 22Km of stage. By the end, Norm had a handle on picking the smooth lines, and we were still able to manage top 4 times on Comstock and top 6 times at AMR.

Our crew watched the first pass of AMR, and from several hundred feet away saw that we had no rear suspension. Senior steward, Luc Brunet, accused us of going for the 'low rider' look, so it was obvious to everyone that we had a problem to deal with. The Olemotive crew did an amazing job changing out both rear struts in 20 minutes! With less than a minute to spare, we clocked out and headed to Helmer for the last two stages.

Our lead over ACP had shrunk to 22 seconds in the gravel stages and he had moved into third. Our lead on the fourth place car was now up to 55 seconds. About half way through the stage, we saw ACP's taillights. As tempting as it was to push and try to catch him, we decided to run our own stage and let him run away on the more gravelly bottom half of the stage. Back at the top, we figured out we had exactly a one minute lead on ACP and a 3:30 lead on fourth place Trinder who gambled on gravels for the last pair of stages.

The last stage was a matter of running at our own pace. Experience has shown us that backing off too much makes the stage harder, so we hit the road in our comfort zone. The tires were working well and we caught ACP again. This time making it within 30 metres or so of the car. There was no point in passing, so we followed him to the finish, pulling another 49 seconds away from him. In the end, tire choice had played a major factor in the final results.

The event was a challenge for everyone involved. The organizers were hit with just about everything you could imagine and the competitors had a huge battle to overcome the conditions while the marshals were tested on their ability to pack for any kind of weather! Everyone should be thanked for their efforts!

This is our first time finishing second at a national event, and it definitely was not without its challenges. As Antoine said at the banquet, finishing this event was like finishing 10 events. The driving was hard work and while the gaps continued to grow, the conditions meant the race wasn't over until the last stage was done!