

by Ron Sorem

Totem TSD Rally 2004

The West Coast Rally Association presented a spectacular mix of scenic roads, varying conditions and terrain, wrapped into a two-day package called The Totem Rally. First presented in 1962, this would be Version 2004.

The weather was questionable: Would there be "enough" snow? Web forums teased with snowy photos, reports of slush, mud, and ice, and of impassable water hazards.

Saturday morning's drivers' meeting brought the news that there would indeed be snow, but no snow banks to soften landings for errant cars ("winter-roads-summer-ditches"). There would also be mud, some icy mud, some snow over ice, some fresh snow over compact snow, and some dry gravel. Typical Totem. Road and weather conditions in Central British Columbia are unpredictable in November and provide arguably the most varied and difficult Time-Speed-Distance rally roads in North America.

The RallyMaster/Organizer team of Fred and Shelley Wiedemann sent 25 cars out onto the back roads south, then west of Cache Creek, for the Hat Creek Regularity, with the note to expect very icy conditions 12km into the first section. This notation seemed improbable as the section begins with a dusty uphill hairpin at 62km/h. The first checkpoint is hidden in the mix of pine trees, white-barked birch, and a blanket of yellow foliage. A moment or two later reality and concentration focus on the instruction: "Caution!!! Exposure left". (Single cautions ! are generally interpreted as corners or hazards that if ignored may cause you delay, double !! may cause damage to your car, triple !!! may cause damage to your person.) The dust is gone, the road is now rutted sticky mud. As the rally gains elevation through the conifer forest and crests a ridge there is snow, and a checkpoint, just short of the 12km mark at "Hairpin R Caution!! Exposure next 500km". Then, executing a series of hairpins on ice, dropping dramatically off the ridge there is another checkpoint, this one in a hairpin left.

With only a brief time to "relax" from the ice, competitors began a steady elevation gain within the rolling hills and valleys of Upper Hat Creek Ranch (...were those caribou?). Punctuated by "Caution!!! Road goes Right over crest with Exposure L", speeds are up to 68km/h here through the ranch, then dropping steadily, we pass two more checkpoints, to Highway 99 and the transit west through scenic Marble Canyon to Pavillion.

Pavillion-Clinton TSD begins with a steep switchback climb through several long hairpins at 52, then tops out into more ranchland at 72. Another drivers' meeting warning was here at 14km into the section: "Slow Down! Very Slippery!" The instruction read: "Hard Left - Caution!! Off Camber downhill! Straight ahead is not an option!" As the checkpoint crew for this corner was setting up, a wood cutter lost control of his pickup and trailer coming UP through the corner. Jack-knifed into the apex he was well and truly stuck, leaving only a narrow passage on the outside of the corner. The checkpoint crew's triangle warned on-coming rally cars, causing even slower approaches than intended. Managing to get past the big Ford's front bumper, noticing the checkpoint and cameraman, anxious teams would later be relieved to find the checkpoint would not be scored due to the congestion. The remainder of the section was Hairpin after Hairpin for 4km, down to two picturesque mountain lakes southwest of Clinton.

Big Bar Road to Dog Creek TSD covered 61.78km at a brisk pace northward past several guest ranch and resort areas with three checkpoints on the western-most loop of the rally.

A short transit brought the rally to the longest TSD of the day at 88.62km. Big Bar Road to 100 Mile House contains wet gravel, snow in the corners in the shade, rutted mud (think chocolate pudding), and snow over ice. At various points, the front runners all admitted to being very late, and luckily nearly every one was able to recover before the next checkpoint. That is, all but one team, who missed an instruction, were seven minutes late at one point, and after finding their mistake could only make up three minutes before a control and effectively the end of their hopes at a decent score. (Exhibiting great sportsmanship, this team volunteered to work checkpoints on Day Two.



Fuel and snacks in 100 Mile House, then north to Spring Lake TSD where the second leg of the rally begins eastward past Canim Lake. Spring Lake is a moderate to brisk 25.84km regularity, roughly split in half by a slower twisty section covering 4km at 32, and closing with just under 8km at 68.

The last TSD of the day is usually well populated by all the checkpoint crews that have been spread over the countryside, now concentrated in a smaller area. Totem was no exception, with six controls in 56km, including two within 2km - Pay Attention!! - and, the last checkpoint less than 2km from the end.

Wells Gray Inn at Clearwater was the overnight headquarters affording choices of quiet dining, spirited celebration, and a live band. Scores for Day One were tight, with a tie for first with SIX points. (Tie breaker would have been 18 zeroes each, then two ones each, then two twos each, etc, etc. Absolute zeroes went to car 1 with 9, over car 5 with only 8.)

Day Two drivers' meeting presents several notes about the route including a mention of snow scraping the bottom of the car for 5km on the second regularity, and a small tree across the road (too big to move, but not too big to drive over). The transit leaves Clearwater due south toward Kamloops and soon provides a stop in Little Fort for food and fuel, before the rally climbs steeply up Boulder Mountain. In the valley it is raining, but soon becomes mixed rain and snow over mud, snow in the shaded corners, and eventually settles for gravel mixing long straights with twisty sections through the trees. We were warned of cows and golf carts on the road, but both seemed to have sense enough to find shelter elsewhere from the near freezing drizzle.

A very short transit just north of Barriere takes us to the rally's first real test on snow. 85km Lake Road TSD begins with a steep gravel climb into the snow, hairpins, and a control. As the route winds through a recent forest fire area the snow deepens and of course the speed increases. The front running cars are all All-Wheel- or Four-Wheel-Drive and concentrate on tweaking the computers for "zeroes". Further back in the two-wheel drive group, the concentration is just to stay on the road. One did not. The resultant extrication (no damage, just late) delayed several cars.

Shortly after passing the third checkpoint of the section, speeds increase to 62, 68, 58, and back to 68 for nearly 30km of smooth open road, with only a few "non-rally" vehicles. A 90 right across a bridge is "a bit icy". But the next "KL, Caution! Tight" is just an ice rink and of course, the road immediately begins to climb. Wheel spin, no hard-points for odo correction, and a checkpoint, keep drivers and navigators busy.

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