

Vintage Car Rallying: Motorsport for Old Cars

As a Hemmings Motor News reader you already know that there are all kinds of ways to enjoy your old car hobby. Most of us have participated in plenty of shows and tours over the years, and we all have our favorite events. Often trying to make an event deadline is the only way that “project” in the garage gets finished. But if you really love to drive your car, and you’re getting a little bored of the same routine, you might want to check out “vintage rallying”.

A rally is a competition run on public roads that requires you to follow driving instructions while performing a task along the way. As a “car guy/gal” the chances are good you’ve already run a rally as part of a regional or national club event. Common forms include the “poker” or “question and answer” rally formats, where you gather playing cards or look for answers along the route. The competition often has more to do with luck than skill, and club events are usually low key and not hard on the car or the passengers. The routes are usually selected for their scenic value rather than long stretches of high speed running. Plaques or trophies are awarded to the winners with the additional element of bragging rights with your friends.

Most car buffs are also familiar with the Sports Car Club of America’s European style “time-speed-distance” (T-S-D) rallies that they’ve been running for over 50 years. These are based on precision: you are still driving on public roads and obeying all traffic laws, but in addition to staying on the route, the ultimate task to perform is to arrive at the finish exactly on time. You’re given the route, time, and distance, and from that you calculate the speed that you need to drive to get there on time. This requires some practice and specialized equipment, plus a navigator that’s good with both math and directions. Current T-S-D club rallies are often held at night and are designed for modern cars and electronic calculators.

Vintage Rallying sort of bashes those formats together to form an intriguing competition suitable for antique cars, while still requiring precision driving skills. This format eliminates the odometer; you’re given the speed and the time, but not the distance. No computers, maps, or calculators are permitted. You are given your route instructions, and you provide the pencil, a time of day clock, a stopwatch and your performance chart for your car, which provides you with a reference of precise time lost due to various maneuvers such as stopping, accelerating to speed, or turning at each speed. You work to stay right on course and make all the speed changes precisely, so that at any point on the route a surprise checkpoint can record your time and compare it to the perfect score. Seconds off, either early or late, dictates your score. The course instructions are not designed to trick you, the skill is in holding the right speed. Where it gets exciting is when you encounter a train, farm equipment, open range cattle, or other obstacle that forces you to slow down or stop. How well you compensate for that is how you win.

The really big difference between the rallies you’ve run on car club events and organized Vintage Rallies is that you’re racing for money. There can be trophies and plaques for success in different divisions (such as top rookie) but the purses are usually pretty generous, which elevates the level of competition and makes the game that much more exciting.

Vintage rally vehicles can be basic drivers, show-quality restorations, racecars, or modified production cars with early

speed parts. Cars are required to be authentic to the year they were built, or to the year they were modified. This means that street rods with modern engines, fiberglass bodies, and independent suspensions do not qualify, but a period correct hotrod using vintage parts would. Cars are also handicapped: the older the car, the more seconds are removed from your score: this is called "age factor" and helps keep the competition very close.

Your car should be completely reliable, not prone to overheat, and have enough power to hold speeds on steeper hills. The timed portions of the rally are usually held on remote two-lane roads at speeds at or below the posted speed limits, and often between 25 and 45 mph. Your car doesn't have to be fast, just consistent. Some limited modifications are permitted to enhance safety and reliability. 12-volt electrical systems, electric fans and fuel pumps, alternators, and electronic ignition systems all help with reliability. Four-wheel hydraulic brakes, two brake lights, reflectors, and turn signals are required for safety. The most event-specific piece of equipment needed is an electronic speedometer: made by Timewise expressly for these events, it has a calibration feature that makes it extremely accurate. Other than that it's pretty much a first aid kit, fire extinguisher, seat belts, mirrors, tow rope, flares, drinking water, tools, and spare parts.

Rookies are well advised to use a car you're very familiar with and enjoy driving. You're going to be putting a lot of hours in the seat for several days, so it had better be comfortable. The rally organizers always provide a sweep truck so that if you do break down on the route and can't fix it they will get you back to the hotel. You've got all night to get it ready for the next day's run!

The most popular cars to rally have been Fords, Model A's and prewar V8's in particular. Parts and cars are readily available and relatively inexpensive, and the cars are quick and reliable. Other choices include Packard 6's, Chevys, LaSalles, Dodges, and Buick 8's. Airflows and Terraplanes also do well alongside performance cars like Stutz and Mercer. Many folks like to run open bodies, just be aware that the rallies are run rain-or-shine, unless road conditions are too dangerous to maintain posted speeds. Basic sedans are inexpensive, more comfortable, and have room inside for ice chests and snacks. Exotics can be tricky: for example, Cords have great performance, but consistency with the preselector takes skill, and if it breaks down they can be tough to fix in a parking lot. Low powered cars such as Model T's are fun to drive but must be modified to be able to keep the pace. Real vintage racecars like Indy replicas or dirt track cars are welcome, but can be too fast for their own good. For example, high performance cars might have trouble maintaining 120 mph for 15 minutes at a stretch. The handicapping system makes it just as likely for a '37 coupe to win as an Indy car or a Jeep. The competition is all in how well the teams know their car - and each other.

Race teams can consist of a husband and wife, girlfriends, grandfather and grandson, army buddies, anything goes and it's a real family setting. Navigators as young as 10 have done really well: young eyes and quick brains can be a real strength. Want to get your kids involved in the hobby? This is a great way to do it. The trick is that you need to be able to work

together, and when something goes wrong and emotions run high you can still be friends at the end of the day.

Many teams bring a support crew and tow vehicle, with spare parts, tools, and help with labor. There is no shame in towing your car to these events since you'll be driving the heck out of it. The teams are very friendly and will work all night

to help a fellow competitor to get back on the road, even if it means getting beat by them. Rookies will find veteran teams

willing to help them learn how to play the game, and most start turning in good legs after just a few days.

Vintage Rallying will take you through wonderful scenery, you'll get to meet all kinds of great people from all walks of life

and from over the country, and you'll have a ball really driving your car. The variety of machines is always colorful, and the

camaraderie between the teams creates lasting friendships. You'll have great stories every night after a day's rallying.

It's

the epitome of family-friendly competition set in America's small towns and amazing back roads.

Sound like something you'd like to try? There are several events held around the country. You still have time to join the Hemmings staff and enter the Hemmings-Branson Vintage Rally. The checkered flag drops in Branson, Missouri on June 25-30, 2010, so tune up your old car and come join the fun. Details are available at Hemmings.com or Vintagecarrally.com.

Steve & Janet Hedke, vintage rallyists since 1999.