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# 2008 Targa Newfoundland Rally on The Rock—a rough and rugged ride



**S**T. JOHN'S, Nfld. Motorsport is a business full of tough competitors. At every level, you find men and women with the single-mindedness needed to block out any thinking that's even remotely related to the unthinkable. You find competitors who are strong in their belief that the car will run perfectly at all times and that all the decisions made behind the wheel will prove unfailingly correct. In essence, you find people whose love, obsession or affliction with travelling at high speed surpasses all else.

Since it first appeared on the racing calendar back in 2002, the five-day tarmac car rally known as Targa Newfoundland has quickly become a favourite of diehard racers, a pure test of both man and machine, an event that rewards immaculate preparation and punishes anything less. Over the past seven years, the rally has only become tougher and faster. Competitors have responded in kind, bringing a more professional approach to what is an unquestionably gruelling rally.

**H**ere are the details: five days and 2,200 km, 500 km of that distance being Targa stages conducted over closed public roads. The roads are inherently challenging; although the course is run entirely on pavement, that pavement leaves much to be desired. Potholes, gravel cuts, ripples, tears and cracks are the norm. The joke among competitors is that the rally organizers bribe the local communities *not* to patch their roads.

There are two different kinds of Targa stages: the tight town stages, which see racers flash past all manner of obstacles including fences, houses and the Atlantic Ocean, and the more rural stages, littered with blind hills, long straights and incredibly fast sweeping turns.

In towns like Brigus, Fortune and Clarenville, spectators line the streets to watch the rally teams toss their cars just this side of disaster in a race against the clock. Through the glorious countryside surrounding Gooseberry Cove and Harbour Mille, teams easily reach the mandated speed limit of 200 km/h and, at times, blast right past it. In case it hasn't become obvious by this point, here's the not-so-subtle theme of this particular story: Competing at Targa Newfoundland is neither for the faint of heart nor the light of foot.

But beyond the speed and the danger far beyond, in fact there are certain elements of Targa Newfoundland that make the event truly special.

There are the fans that show up at the stages or the evening car shows held in local hockey arenas, the children whose faces light up at the smallest gesture like an autograph from a heretofore unknown rally hero scrawled across a hero card. They are, generally, a shy bunch, hesitant to approach the car or ask for anything other than a closer look. When you respond with an offer to lift a youngster into the driver's seat for a photo, the gratitude leaves you feeling, all at once, both humbled and content.

There are the competitors themselves, a haphazard bunch of speed freaks from all corners of the globe; racers who are, at times, portrayed as playboys with no regard for anything other than their own self-gratification. On the surface, this may appear to be true; for example, one of the better-funded teams, Pacione Motorsport, shows up every year with a fleet of race cars, a massive motorhome and a private chef. If any team was deserving of the motto "nothing exceeds like excess," this would be that team.

But Pacione also happens to raise significant amounts of money for charity, most notably through its "Racing Against MS" program. In this way, the team has become an indelible part of something called the "Targa community."

As tough as the competition may be, the vast majority of the people racing at Targa Newfoundland are a similarly special breed deserving of inclusion in this community. There may be grudges among certain racers and there may be an intense desire to win, but it is not a case of win at all costs. Most competitors advocate a "bring your best game and see how it stacks up" approach; most of them do not wish to benefit from the downfall of a fellow competitor and many of them will go out of their way to help a rival make it to the finish.

**I** use the word "most" because, in every group, you find people who choose another path. People who hear about a car that has crashed and whose first thoughts do not immediately spring to the safety of the driver and co-driver, but rather to what position this unfortunate occurrence has elevated them in the overall standings. It's regrettable that such people are out there, but it offers iron-clad proof that the Targa community is a microcosm for the world at large.

This year, my fourth in competition at Targa Newfoundland, was fraught with challenges of the mental, emotional and mechanical kind. It served to crystallize in my mind how difficult an event that combines endurance with speed can be, yet it also cemented a place for me in the Targa community.

Coming into the event, our team was as prepared as possible, but there were caveats. We were set to be the first race team in the world to campaign a 2009 Mitsubishi Lancer Ralliart. Little was known about how well the car would withstand five days of relentless punishment. The car was a pre-production model, an advance version of a vehicle that does not go on sale until later this year. But the Ralliart is also a Mitsubishi, a brand built on giving as much as it gets in even tougher events, such as the Dakar Rally. In two previous years of driving for Mitsubishi at Targa Newfoundland, here's what I've learned about its cars: They are tough, tough, tough.

Another thing: This would be my first time competing alongside a new co-driver, *Toronto Star* auto writer John LeBlanc, a serious car nut and all-around easy-going fellow. John co-drove a Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT8 to a top-10 finish in 2006, so he had experience with a much faster and scarier vehicle. We jumped in with both feet.

**D**ay one was tougher than expected. For the entire day, our rally computer was not calibrated properly, so John was unable to accurately predict the turns coming up in the route. A fully functioning computer is essential for success at Targa Newfoundland; the route book provides information on (most of) the turns on the



stages and the co-driver then tells the driver what to expect, for example, just over that blind crest we're approaching at a brisk 170 km/h.

Despite the wonky directions, we managed to match our target time on every one of the day's first four stages. Normally, the pace at Targa Newfoundland ramps up gradually over the course of the week, so scoring zero penalty seconds on the first day is attainable for many of the 70 teams. But the rally organizers adopted a slightly different approach this year, lulling the teams into a false sense of security and then dropping the hammer when least expected. This year, the hammer dropped on the final stage of the opening day: the times were tougher to meet and all but 14 teams, ours included, dropped time. We ended the day in 15<sup>th</sup> place overall, one second out of first place.

In retrospect, our strong performance on day one may have engendered in me a severe case of over-confidence. If this was true, the opening two stages of the second day didn't help: Run under damp conditions, we aced these two as well, dropping no additional time. The Ralliart thrived under the slick circumstances and the rally computer's accuracy was improving—we were looking good.

Then, on the third stage of the second day, I tossed the car into a ditch.

John had warned me about the turn—a crest that fed into an immediate hard left—and the road was slick, but I didn't slow down enough and we slid off at about 70 km/h. The first words out of my mouth: "John, I'm so sorry." My first thoughts: Was he hurt? The car had landed on top of some relatively soft shrubs and small trees, but it had also landed on the passenger side.

John was faster to react than me; he was unhurt, out of the car and up the road to warn following teams of our off-road excursion. I gave up on attempting to reverse out of the ditch—it turns out that the right front wheel was crushed and none of the other wheels were anywhere near the ground. My door was jammed shut by the trees, so I climbed out the passenger side and joined my co-driver on the sidelines.

The competitive aspect of our rally was over. Fail to complete a stage and the penalty time you accrue knocks you so far



down the order; you never get back up. We set our sights on a new target: survival, pure and simple. We convinced the rally organizers to drag us out of the ditch with their motorhome and called our service crew on the radio to rescue us.

**T**he crew raced to the scene of the accident and replaced the broken wheel, swapped out a bent suspension arm and straightened a tie rod, in about 45 minutes flat. It was incredible; we were back on the road through the hard work and undeniable skill of Aaron, Doug, Hollywood and Vadim. We knew then

and there that it was our job to complete the rally, a small gesture in honour of our crew—and we would do so even if it meant loading all the remaining parts in a wheelbarrow and pushing it across the finish line.

Given that our sights had been lowered, we expected that the rest of the rally would be far easier. This belief lasted for only about another hour before we learned that our brother-in-arms, veteran auto journalist Jim Kenzie, had also crashed on an earlier stage. His accident had been much more severe than ours; along the ultra-fast Leading Ticks stage, the MINI piloted



by Jim and co-driver Brian Bourbonniere had left the road at an estimated 160 km/h, flipping over multiple times and landing in the woods.

Thankfully, both men were unhurt, a testament to the incredibly high safety standards to which rally cars are built. We saw Jim and Brian at the car show that night; they looked pale, but otherwise fine. Jim has forged a hard-earned reputation at Targa Newfoundland for tidy, mistake-free performances, so his crash gave everyone a pause—everyone except Brian: “Jim has never scared me once with his driving, including today.” Both of them vowed to return next year.

Over the course of the final three days, we endured still more challenges. The combination of driving a pre-production car and some residual damage from our crash had left many of the systems on the Ralliart functioning at less-than-full capacity. Knowing this, we pushed the car to some decent stage times when we thought it would do no further harm and adopted a more conservative approach when it appeared something or other was acting up.

It was tough slugging, particularly as this year’s rally proved unforgiving from start to finish. On the final stage of the last day, two cars went into the ditch, including the Porsche 911 driven by the Easter Pastors, the Reverend Edison Wiltshire and his lovely wife, Marg-O. As we passed their stricken car, my heart went out to them even after they gave us the okay sign. To go out so late in the game was a cruel blow. (Afterwards, the Reverend would say: “Our crash proves that God doesn’t play favourites.”)

Ultimately, our battered and bruised Mitsubishi Ralliart made it to the end. We crossed the ceremonial finish line at the waterfront in St. John’s, received our medals for finishing the event and immediately passed them on to Aaron and Doug, the guys who built our car in the first place and effectively rebuilt it after our untimely encounter with the Newfoundland landscape.

To people outside the sport, a rally such as Targa Newfoundland must seem a senseless pursuit: the inherent danger, the cost, the reckless use of finite natural resources. But I love racing—always have

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and always will. I love the challenge of this rough and rugged event, what it demands from the individual and the team. I will be

back at Targa Newfoundland, better prepared and armed with more respect for this event than ever before.\*

*Special thanks to Mitsubishi Motor Sales of Canada, Alpinestars USA, Arai Helmet Americas, SIRIUS Satellite Radio Canada and our crew.*