

10,000 Miles in a Month

By Marinus Damm

Targa Newfoundland 2016

This rally* started, for us, eighteen months ago. That's when the illustrious Frank McKinnon roped us into his scheme to run Targa "*while it's still around*".

Now Frank's done a lot of rallies - from AICan to the modern Carrera Panamerica - and even more racing. He's also helped organize big motorsports events, having run tech for the Silver State Classic in recent years. Frank's the most "in the loop" racing guy I know. So when Frank said, "This is the year to go to Newfoundland - John and I are entered, so we can help each other out there", we heard the knock of opportunity and answered the door.

We're not Targa racers, though - we're time-speed-distance ralliers. Our cars don't have roll cages; instead, they have high-precision odometers and lots of clocks. Good thing, then, that Targa Newfoundland includes a time-speed-distance division, called '*Grand Touring*' (or just GT). We signed up for the 2015 event, and started working on the logistics of getting to, and competing on, Newfoundland.

That visit was a roller-coaster of dashed hopes, tiny satisfactions, thwarted efforts, wild hopes, and ultimately a narrowly-won victory for us. Part of the problem was that we brought the wrong car, a station wagon, and part of the problem was that we brought the wrong habits.

It was an all-wheel-drive wagon, with powerful brakes and stable handling - but it just didn't have the *giddiup* we needed. Time-speed-distance events in the Pacific Northwest run on open roads, which keeps the speeds down. Targa runs on closed roads, and the speeds are brisk. Hell, they're more than brisk, even for the GT class. In 2015, I spent more time with the gas pedal pressed flat to the floor than not.

Our habits, also tuned to PNW-style events, emphasize being 'on time, all the time'. You daren't run too far ahead of perfect time lest some unseen control dock you points for your early arrival. But Targa sections have very few intermediate controls, and their finish lines are frequently set after a series of twisty, often blind, often wet, curves. If you are on-time at the start of that series, you'll be late into the finish. Targa Newfoundland must be run like a *Monte Carlo* style rally, and we didn't figure that out 'til mid-week last year.

The overall Targa experience so stunned us - especially the final result - that we put ourselves on the entry list for 2016. We were seeking clarity, and closure, and a kind of proof that we earned the 2015 win, and didn't just stumble into it when others faltered. So we were in St. John's this year as a direct result of Frank's call to action last Spring.

And this time, we brought a Porsche.

* a 'rally', generally, is a motoring competition carried out on roads (either closed or open) versus occurring on a track or course. The essence of rally is variation and surprise, versus perfecting a lap around a racetrack.

Getting There - And Back Again

Targa's a full week of competition, but that starts after you've reached the province. Since our car lives in Portland, Oregon, getting the car to the ferry dock in Nova Scotia takes another six days, minimum. And the ferry ride is 14 hours more... The trip home's a hard seven days.

Our time-off-work allotments were already strained, and we couldn't afford to make two cross-country road trips in a single month. It was easy, though, to find a couple willing to drive the Carrera 4, expenses paid, across the United States. We also found a volunteer to drive it back - all the way from Port Easton, the easternmost point in North America - in the first person we asked.

Aside from car preparation, which occupied every free weekend in June and July, our part in this play started when we flew to Boston, and met the couple who'd driven east. They were perfectly on time, the handoff was seamless, and we ran the 996 up to Portland, Maine, the same evening. Then things took an unexpected turn. First, ZZ Top was playing on the pier, and Portland was packed with people. The pubs'd run out of cod, so no Fish-n-Chips to be found. More disturbing, the ferry we'd booked from Maine to Nova Scotia for the next day was cancelled - for high swells - and we'd have to drive 'round through New Brunswick instead.

The cancellation was inconvenient, but not a real threat to our schedule. In the maritimes you're always at the mercy of the weather, and we'd built in extra time. Still, as we cruised up the Bay Of Fundy on Labor Day, we heard rumblings about the '*tail of the hurricane*' that'd raised the swell, and began to worry. What if our second ferry, two days hence, from Nova Scotia to Newfoundland, would likewise be trapped at the dock by heavy seas?

So we ran like chickens for the ferry dock, hoping to catch an earlier run while the waves allowed the passage. That we did, though we had to take the shorter cruise to Newfoundland, which leaves you on the sou'west edge of The Rock. Next day, we faced a 900km drive to St. John's.

By the way - when you're on the Trans-Canada Highway (TCH) from Port-aux-Basque, and you see a sign that says the town ahead is 220km away, you'll think, "*Okay, I'm going 110kph, so it's two hours away*". Not if there are 6km long 'construction zones' posted at 50kph every 30km. I don't begrudge the Newfies doing road improvements during the short summer, but I think the construction zones might have been a bit tighter around those bridges.

How's It Going?

Soon after we left Boston, I noticed that the Porsche's steering wheel was vibrating on the highway. The car has a lot of road feel - it's one of its strengths - but this I was something else. The vibes lessened at lower speed, and on smoother roads, but it felt **wrong**. I tried to reason out the cause while driving headlong to the east. The wheels were unmarked, and the tires near new. I was afraid it was a failing wheel bearing; I even started thinking about how to change it on the island... since there's no Porsche

dealer, the parts'd have to come from elsewhere, ...call Porsche dealer in the US, get 'em ordered, have our service guy pick them up before he flew out to meet us, AND figure out how to do the work on the only possible day, a Saturday, without a shop.... Brrrr, still makes me shudder.

I did not mention my fears to the co-driver 'cause she'd worry.

As it turned out, the vibration was just wheels out of balance. The fronts were each off by more than an ounce. Onward!

Saturday - Tech

Targa's organizers arranged for a beautiful facility this year. The building had copious parking and 4 spacious work bays. The inspection process was tremendously more orderly than 2015, and all the cars were cleared by 4 p.m. We were done in the morning, even, and had time to install the special Lucas oil.

Well, the oil itself was just good 0w-40 synthetic. What made it special was that Lucas gave us a dozen liters since we'd entered the Lucas Oil Challenge (more on that later). Our support guy, Larry, and I took the oil, a filter, a copper washer, and a filter wrench to a local service station to get it in the engine. The service station wouldn't let me use the lift; the best concession I got was to stand nearby while the '*Technician*' did the work.

It was going reasonably well, even when the tech used a Torx bit on the drain plug (which calls for an Allen bit). But then there was the problem with the *counting*. The M96 motor holds 8.75 liters with a filter change, and the tech dutifully poured bottle after bottle in, stopping short on the last one. He returned two full bottles and the partial one, and was getting ready to take the car off the lift. But the math wasn't working out...

Yes, he'd overfilled the engine by a quart: it wanted 8.75l, he put in 9.75l. I pointed out that only 2-point-something quarts were left from the twelve, and he reached the same conclusion after a minute. Then ... he 'removed' the excess oil by pulling the drain plug, spilling the fresh oil into the catch-pan, 'til he guessed that a liter'd come out. This quicker than we could stop him.

Support guy Larry was incredulous; I was just looking for the quickest way to escape with the car. I double-checked the drainplug torque, paid the bill, and we skedaddled. So, yeech. But the oil was in the engine.

In a questionable move, the Targa organizers didn't release the GT Class Target Times & Speeds books before the event. Those books were only handed out at registration. The result was that the GT class navigators had no free evenings for the majority of the event; they spend each night doing time calculations for the upcoming days.

Sunday - Prologue

The delayed delivery of the *Target Times and Speeds* book kept my co-driver up late Saturday night doing the math. At registration, we'd also been handed a page of routebook corrections, including

changes both within stages and to the order of stages. Such corrections need to be entered in the routebook, but some novice crews didn't realize their importance. "Just one more piece of paper...", I suspect.

On Prologue Day, the GT class runs in car-number order. That sorted us behind two other cars, both of which at least had previous Targa Newfoundland experience. Having those trailblazers eased our nervousness. Getting into the Targa rhythm takes a while - and not only for us; the stage & timing crews are working out the kinks, too.

Pretty quickly we realized that, like last year, the clock synchronization was spotty. For Targa cars, it's no big deal if successive stages' clocks aren't on the same beat. In the Targa classes, each stage's time stands alone: there are no 'road points' between stages, nor scheduled service check-in times, nor ATCs. So each stage only requires that its Start and Finish clocks agree.

In GT class, however, each stage might have extra timing controls, mid-stage. GT cars take penalty points if they're off-time at those mid-course controls. So for us, all the clocks - start, finish, and the intermediate controls' clocks - need to be synchronized. There there's some evidence that they're not all synchronized, and it's the intermediate controls that most worried us, because there's no way for us, passing at speed, to know what time is on that clock.

But time, you know, is not first priority in TSD. Good performance in time-speed-distance rally comes from following three rules:

#1 Stay on the road.

If you slide into a ditch or nose into a tree, you may not even finish.

#2 Stay on the route.

A missed turn will force you to back-track, and you lose time both ways. With competition tight, a single deviation can keep you off the podium.

#3 Stay on time.

Once you've taken care of #1 and #2, the real work begins. You have to match the official mileage, AND you have to calculate as the rallymaster did. Getting mileage right requires precise measuring devices and keen attention to their fidelity. Your rally odometer must be adjustable, both for initial calibration as well as for on-stage corrections. If the route was measured on a wet day at 30kph, and you're running on a dry day at 90kph, you'll notice.

Our odometer calibration wasn't bad, but we weren't the most precise team on prologue day. By the end of the day, we were barely in the top half of the field. A couple of other cars were briefly off course on Sunday, not having made the corrections to the routebook.

Monday - Leg 1

I thought our pitiful precision in the prologue had us 5th car on the road. But the Keeper Of The Records has corrected me. Here's what actually happened: On the first Prologue run, through the 'Flatrock' stage, there was a scoring error for the finish control.

The first car on the road - first car through the finish control - didn't get a time for the stage (it was blank). The second car on the road got a time that looked a lot like the time the first car should have had; and we, the third car on the road, got a time that looked a lot like what the second car should have had. Then, behind us on the scoring sheet was an extra-large window of time with no car...

and then the fourth car on the road had a sensible time, and so did the rest of the cars.

One plausible explanation is that the control crew saw the number of the first car on the road (1002), and figured that meant Car 2 on the scoresheet, so skipped the first line. They'd have been confused when the number on the next car was 1007, but they wrote it down on the next line, then they realized it was all wonky, and took a breath to catch up. By the time the fourth car approached, they had a grip and finished the set.

I describe that as 'plausible' because I've had similar feelings while working controls. :) There's a lot of pressure, man!

We didn't see the scores for Prologue 'til the starting order was already set for Monday, so we didn't have a chance to 'inquire' about it. And it being Prologue, not scored, it was an essentially harmless error -- except that it sorted us further down the field for Monday, but as you've already read, that turned out okay.

We started Monday directly behind a fully-original 1981 MGB. Do you know what motivates an '81 MGB? About 80 horsepower *when it was new*. We thought we'd catch the MG during a stage, and we did - but not until the last, long section of the day. In the short sections, the doctor (a G.P.) who was driving kept the little roadster well out of sight.

Leg 1 started on the same stage as last year, two runs through a short, narrow, country lane-and-a-half, dropping down to run along a harbor wall, rising around a church, and finishing with a chicane assembled from a triangle of bridges. Short, tight, concrete bridges. Last year, a wicked pothole in the chicane took out one of the favored Targa cars on the first run-through. **Bam!** Broken ball joint *in the first hour* of a week-long competition. No such bad luck this year, everyone made it through cleanly.

Renee and I were taking advantage of the 12-second timing window on Monday morning, trying to run a bunch ahead. Keenly watching for Intermediate Timing Controls, we were hashing out our in-car communications. How should the corners be called, When, What hack should be given, How do we handle emergencies, the lot. Targa generates different in-car messages than any other rally we do.

Next two stages were an in-and-out pair; the out, Turk's Gut, was also the scene of first-day retirements last year. In this context, 'retirement' means "*crashed so hard the cars didn't come back 'til Thursday*". I feared someone might crash this year, because the same dreadful off-camber jog over crest was in the stage, and excitement was building in all the cars as we got a taste of the rally. Happily, all cars came through to lunch at Brigus Town Hall.

In the early p.m., more short-ish stages. Speeds were pretty high, considering we were driving through neighborhoods, but it being Monday, not as high as they'd be later in the week. The rally was running a bit behind as we got to the final pair of stages in Leg 1. This was another mirror set, where all the cars run "in" to a turnaround point - often at the water's edge - and then regroup for a reverse run "out". Last year, these were the stages that showed us the pace required for Targa. In 2015, in a driving rain, we ran late into the finish of both.

This year, we brought more power, more brakes, more handling, and (I hope) more skill.

When the road's yours alone, from shoulder to shoulder, and the next curve's still some tenths away, the pipes wail tremalo and the digits roll up on the speedo. You know the pads and rotors and fluid are fresh, the middle pedal's got your back, there when you need it. Brake early because you should, slow in and fast out, open asphalt again and nail it...

Huh; caught up already. Okay, run just a little up - and that's how we finished the 'in' run.

At the turnaround, waiting, we were baffled by the appearance of the Fast Tour Lamborghini before all the GT cars are in. If anybody'd gone off, we'd have heard about it, and we hadn't. But... then how could the following class already be finishing?

Well, *Lamborghini*. And Fast Tour has no 'early penalty' - they do have a \$\$ penalty for exceeding the class's MaxSpeed, but that might not dissuade some folks. If you're in a Lambo and your Support Car is a Ferrari, \$\$ probably seems like ¢¢.

The MGB's navigator is another doctor, a gastroenterologist. His eyes are a bit wide, reflecting the torrid pace required to make the end-time. Then he released a confessional stream of self-diagnosis regarding sphincter control and et., reducing Renee to tears of laughter.

On the outbound leg, the sun's setting, and a couple of crests are facing a blaring Sol. We caught the MGB on this run, and had to go around 'em. My first passing attempt corresponded with them cresting a rise into that blinding sunset, and - unaware of our presence - the driver carved toward the left of a coming corner and I had to dive to the edge of the road, on the brakes. The next attempt, once he knew we were there, was clean. And the Porsche again made running on time possible.

To be continued