

## Wildest Road Rally In the U.S. Attracts Lovers of Risk, Danger

Northern Michigan's 'Press on  
Regardless' Course Is Famed  
1,500-Mile, 3-Night Challenge

By GREG CONDERACCI

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

ALMA, Mich.—You're in the middle of a forest in the middle of the night. Through the blinding snowstorm, you can barely make out the single lane of the dirt road, which is the worst you have ever seen. There are mud, potholes, glare ice, foot-deep sand traps, hairpin turns. You are sitting in your brand new car and the man behind the wheel presses the gasoline pedal to the floor and you hurtle down the road.

For most people, this is a nightmare.

But for Jim Beatty, it's a dream come true.

Mr. Beatty works as a manager of an auto leasing firm, a job he finds "a challenge, but not like this."

Over this past weekend, he and a companion were whizzing at night through the backwaters and wilds of northern Michigan. They were competing in the wildest and most famous U.S. road rally, called Press on Regardless. And because of the risks, he was loving every minute of it.

Risks and danger are what Press on Regardless is all about. When the rally started last Thursday night, there were 53 cars. The object was to drive fast—500 miles a night—over a designated but punishing course, for three nights, without destroying yourself or your car.

Amazingly, nobody was hurt. And promoters of the event, which has been run yearly since 1948, claim that participants haven't ever been seriously injured.

**What Happens to the Cars**

But what happens to the cars is something else.

Only 21 finished the rally Sunday morning. The rest were left scattered along the 1,500-mile course of winding dirt and paved roads. The first night, Gene Henderson, a sergeant for the Dearborn, Mich., police, broke a wheel on his modified Ford Escort while he and his partner roared down a bumpy stretch of road. The Escort went off the road at 70 miles an hour and rolled over several times, Mr. Henderson says. The Escort, especially imported for the rally from England and modified to make it more durable, "was an \$8,000 car," laments Mr. Henderson. It's a total wreck.

Thomas J. Samida, 40 years old, an engineer for Kelsey-Hayes Co., was in the lead when he met up with what he calls a "rock-adillo," or large immovable obstruction in the road such as a rock, tree limb or stump. Moving at a fast clip, Mr. Samida's specially rigged Hornet hit one and broke an axle.

Some entrants seem to get a kick out of watching their cars disintegrate under them. James Walker, a 27-year-old foreign car salesman from Ann Arbor, Mich., stepped from his panting Volvo at the finish and cavalierly scrawled "Rest in Peace" in the grime across the hood. The mechanical systems of the car, such as the engine, were operating "only from habit," Mr. Walker joked. He had beaten the car so badly that its engine gobbled up a full case of oil (12 quarts) in the last 500 miles—42 miles to the quart.

**What Makes Rallyists Run**

What makes a Press On Regardless rallyist run?

Jim Beatty's wife explains it in two words: "He's crazy." For Mr. Beatty it is the "challenge." And a certain escape, or total diversion, from the humdrum of day-to-day life.

It is hard to tell how many of the Press on Regardless competitors fit this pattern. But many are business or professional men; many are engineers. And some frankly concede they turn to risky road rallying for the excitement their jobs don't afford.

William Braund, 51, and a competitor for eight years, is head of Detroit Edison Co.'s department in charge of disconnecting electricity to customers who don't pay their bills. "You get a lot of complaints," he says. So yearly he turns to the rally to relieve the frustrations inherent in his job.

The lure of rallying clearly isn't the prize, or even the chance to win. This year's rally was won by Scott Harvey, a Chrysler Corp. engineer whose expenses were picked up by the auto maker. He has won three years in a row. And the winner gets only \$1,500, which is what it costs the competitors on the average to get their cars ready for the rally, not to mention the after-rally repair costs, which can often run another \$1,500.

If rallying provides some kicks that are missing from the participants' jobs, all employers aren't overjoyed. Mr. Samida, the Kelsey-Hayes engineer, says his boss doesn't like him participating because of the dangers. Small wonder. Before the rally, Mr. Samida told about his techniques for handling deer when they wander onto the road during the event. Because the 200,000 candlepower lights mounted on the front of his car hypnotize deer, Mr. Samida says that when he spots a deer "frozen" in his path, he flicks a switch on the dashboard and cuts off all his lights. He keeps hurtling down the road, counting to three, and snaps the lights back on, "hoping the deer is gone."