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BANGOR DAILY NEWS

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Rally race fever drives Cassidy and Getchell

Local duo competing in N.H. nine-hour event
5/8/10

By [Nok-Noi Ricker](#)
BDN Staff

BANGOR, Maine — There was a time in John Cassidy's life when he didn't even know how to change his vehicle's oil and didn't know where its air filter was located.

Those who know the local physician's assistant, who spends his spare time nowadays as a professional performance rally race car driver, know that he's learned a lot in the last decade about how cars operate and the sport of performance rally racing.

"Now I can fabricate, weld, and perform most major system repairs," he said in a blog item he posted in his driving team's Web site, LastDitchRacing.net.

The Last Ditch Racing crew left the Queen City at around 4:30 p.m. Friday for a trip down to the Team O'Neil Rally in Dalton, N.H., a nine-hour rally that begins today at 9 a.m. and takes drivers through the woods of western New Hampshire.

Performance rally racing is all about racing souped-up cars down mostly dirt or ice covered roads and navigating the vehicle through unknown paths, all the while with your pedal to the metal, Cassidy said on Friday.

"Driving down a closed dirt road as fast as you can, with nothing between you and scenery is a huge adrenaline rush," he said.

The rallies are held on private lands or closed-off sections of road where drivers don't have to worry about speed limits.

"Day, night, rain, snow, ice, gravel, mud and tarmac — we do it all," said Cassidy, who is 43

His co-driver and navigator for the last eight years is Camden resident Dave Getchell, a writer who caught the performance rally bug when he wrote an article years ago about the Maine Forest Rally in Bethel, which is now known as the New England Forest Rally.

Getchell's job is to inform Cassidy when he sees obstacles — rocks, trees, potholes and sometimes snow banks — in the upcoming roadway, and to give directions that include where the sharp curves are.

"It's my job to tell John about what is over the next blind crest," said the 53-year-old Getchell. "I have a book with the all turns written down ... and all the jumps."

The navigator is needed to help take turns at higher than normal speeds, he said.

"At the speeds we're going, you have to start turning before the turn," Getchell said. "There is a lot of trust."

Combine the speed with all the unknowns and then throw in loyal spectators, and what you have is a lot of fun, he said.

"It's crazy," Getchell said. "No one said it had to make sense. It's really fun."

The Last Ditch Racing team went professional in 2003 after spending a couple years competing at the local Club Rally level and in Canada, and over

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the years has earned the Rally America Eastern Regional Champions title three times.

“We race in the top Open Class in the Rally America series as well as in the Canadian National Championship,” Cassidy said. “Open class cars are usually turbo-charged, all-wheel drive vehicles and are the fastest in the series.”

An on-board camera has recorded several of their races over the years for those interested in seeing a performance rally race from the driver’s point of view. Those videos are posted on the race team’s website.

The team, and its talented all-volunteer crew, have gone all over the world to race.

“We’re all very proud to be Mainers,” Cassidy said. “We’ve raced in Mexico, in a round of the World Rally Championship, in Newfoundland and coast-to-coast in both the US and Canada.”

The current crew includes Drew Simpson, Drew Gladu, Zach Sennett, Duncan Matlack and Bronson Crothers. Two former crew members, Erik Lee and Rob Sockalexis, have gone on to co-drive other teams and both teach driving and co-driving at the Team O’Neil Rally School.

“Adventure factors strongly into our sport,” Cassidy said. “We travel to remote, and often beautiful, places to race and always come back with stories. We have so many now that we get them mixed up sometimes.”

Cassidy, who is nicknamed “JOMO,” saw a performance rally race on ESPN in the late 1990s and was immediately hooked on the sport.

“I knew I had to race, and soon found that the most popular event in the [national] championship was in my back yard – The Maine Forest Rally,” he states on the Web page.

In 1999, he bought a 1987 Honda that he changed into a rally car.

“Our current car is a 2003 USDM WRX with a V7 STi drivetrain and Hydra EMS engine management,” the racing team’s Web site states.

Translated into English, that means it’s a modified 2003 Subaru Impreza sedan.

“The car’s in great shape and she’s ready to go play in the dirt,” Cassidy said.

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