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By Spencer Hall - Contributor

There are many sports out there. SB Nation's Spencer Hall isn't good at any of them. Join him as he shows off his athletic anti-prowess while attempting various sporting activities for the first time in the "The Amateur."

In this edition, Hall travels to Maine to ride in a rally car, driven by EXTREEM sports star Travis Pastrana.



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Jul 21, 2010 - MAINE: The southernmost Province in Canada and Northernmost state in the United States, and a halfway house for those attempting to move from one to the other.

A huge sign looms in the woods: MOOSE. Maine is not the United States, but rather some transitional state for those wanting a gentle introduction to Canadian life, a conversion pipeline where actors and comedians go south and hippies go north and acclimate along the way. Other signs pepper the two lane roads where I am stuck behind people driving far too slowly for my taste: LOSTER ROLL, BOAT RENTAL, DUNKIN' DONUTS.

This is alien territory: lakes, people with large New England accents, and small postcard towns that are quaint, picturesque, and utterly devoid of trouble. Driving up to Nehry it's easy to see why Stephen King happened: when there's nothing to fear, the mind invents tentacled monsters and zombie toddlers to put in the shadows.

The growling noises in the woods outside of Newry, Maine are very real, though. Rally America's New England Forest Rally is in town, and tiny cars are snarling down logging trails. You can't see all of them, but you can certainly hear them all the way from the deck of the Phoenix House, the axis around which the New England Forest Rally rotates.

RALLY CAR: a type of racing invented by malevolent, highly intelligent trees who crave the taste of metal and thus encourage men to race recklessly on roads so they fly into the trees and feed them.

Rally car is not a mystery to most Americans. They might, however, assume it is an exotic method of feeding cars to metal-eating trees, because rally cars happen on mixed terrain with drivers taking turns at a full drift at ridiculous speeds.

Most rally car experience comes exclusively from internet videos of rally car crashes, some of the most kinetically violent metalstorms one will ever see, and a favorite of the portion of the online community that enjoys watching things explode/catch on fire/die/burn/implode/fly off mountains.

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Sometimes when cars go 70 miles per hour on an old logging road around a curb they clip an edge of the roadway. When this happens, cars get fed to those aforementioned hungry trees.

On the internet, this is usually set to horrible European techno music.

In real life there is a sickening crunch and pop of body panels, and then hopefully the sight of a rider clambering out of the car looking angry or sheepish depending on the circumstances. There are other dangers, however, both for spectator and rider. Spectators stand dangerously close to the course, helpless pins waiting to be picked off by a very angry 320 horsepower bowling ball. Courses run along both mountainsides and rolling countryside, where a single misread direction from a co-driver can mean disaster. (Think hitting a speed bump at 70 miles per hour on uneven terrain. It's enough force to rip an engine off its blocks on landing.)

Animals pay little respect to the course, as well, something Subaru's Travis Pastrana and Christian Edstrom found out in a very immediate and personal way in Michigan in 2008's SnoDrift rally.

Edstrom is the co-driver for Pastrana when he's not working for JP Morgan or racing motorcycles. He's also the man screaming like a woman in that video. The crew likes to remind him of this frequently, something they do when I mention the now very dead Michigan deer that killed Subaru's chances of winning the SnoDrift Rally a few miles short of the finish line with a huge lead.

(Did you notice the deer hitting the car? Did it distract you enough to make you ignore the racing on snow? Did you also see the open basket of rattlesnakes in the backseat? The halo of flame surrounding the car because they only race on fire? That this is a ridiculously dangerous method of racing of cars occurring in all weathers day or night? You did? Good, good. You're getting the big picture here.)

Christian is explaining things: the co-driver's role, the vast manuals the co-drivers collate and boil down into sheets of jargon they read off as the driver slides around the ten to twelve separate stages making up a rally course. He shows me one:

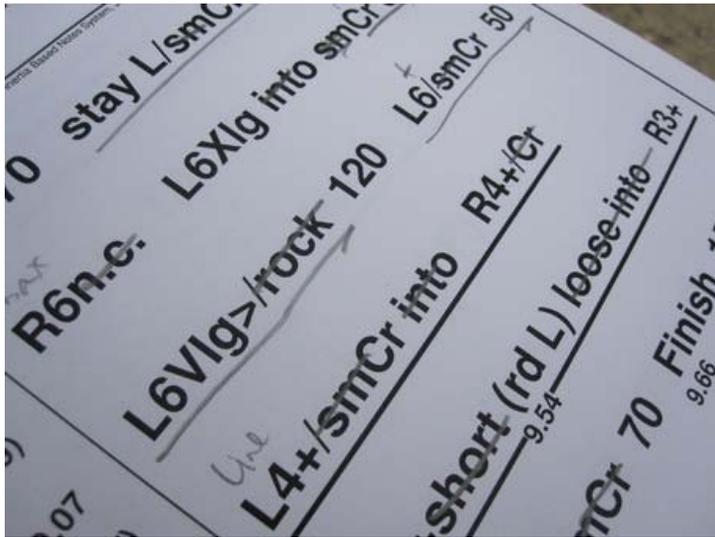


Fantasy Baseball: Matt Wieters, Carlos Santana Or Buster Posey??

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Christian translates this gibberish while looking down and looking up while the driver brakes not with their right foot but with their left, creating the drifting motion rally drivers use to gun through hairpin turns and twisty rural tracks without losing speed. The gas is never, ever let off in rally, and switching feet to brake would waste precious seconds in a sport that lives and dies off a series of time trials. This means the directions are accurate and accurately read, or you end up on the internet rolling eight times in slow motion while a bad club remix of "The Logical Song" plays in the background.

FAMOUS DRIVER TYPE PEOPLE: Those whose lives, while painful and dangerous, are just as effortless in the arrangement as you would think they are.

Travis Pastrana is asleep when I walk into the trailer, his feet sticking out from the trailer. Christian and the team manager review notes on the course: tire choice, surface consistency, the weather. Test runs are set to start at 7:30. It is 7:15, and the team's driver is still asleep. No one demonstrates the slightest bit of concern.

Five minutes later he's up. A huge, spotty bruise runs across one side of his face.



"Foam pit. Did a jump, landed, and my hand flew off the handlebars and caught me in the face." He looks delighted to tell you this, but Travis Pastrana has an engine that can be cold-started with little to no damage. Two minutes after he wakes up he's in his jumpsuit, taller than you might think and moving with the gleeful determination of someone with a very well-adapted case of ADD thumping in his skull.

He goes out and signs autographs while the team works on the Subaru STI underneath a blue tent between the van and the team trailer. Pastrana smiles manically and signs like he's stabbing each hat and photo with the pen. He then has a brief conversation with the team manager and Christian, and the car roars to life. There is surprisingly little preparation: the driver puts on a jumpsuit, musses his hair, signs a few autographs, and then jumps in the Drifty Death Machine to tear ass on a road and look awesome.

It's all just as effortless and unfair as you imagine it should be.



RALLY CAR (Definition two): n. A car of indeterminate age somewhere between 1 and 50 years old and \$5.00-\$250K in price.

I'm supposed to ride with Travis on the second test run, so in the meantime I wander around the parking lot. Rally Car has different divisions. Travis races with the other sponsored drivers in custom cars that, while all still street legal, are loaded with expensive parts and are tuned within inches of perfection. (Within inches is an important margin to leave here: even with all that support and expertise behind him, Pastrana's engine would later fail in the New England Rally, costing him a potential victory.)

The other classes are open for whomever can pay the entrance fee and field a street-legal car that passes inspection by class. Remember that 1990 VW you had in high school? Someone's racing it on a rally car course this weekend.



This is part of the charm of rally car. The riders are often pinwheeling through the forest in impossibly small cars rigged with giant internal roll cages that appear to have been stolen from a high school parking lot, but appearances are deceptive. Gearheads often skeletonize cars in desperate condition and retrofit them with high end gear, turning thousand dollar cars into fifteen thousand dollar monsters on the rally circuit.

These labors of love can dominate in the right hands. Bill Caswell, an unemployed automotive freak with time to burn and a tiny pool of excess cash, took a BMW he bought for \$500 bucks off Craigslist and **turned it into a third place car in a World Rally Championship Race in Mexico**. Racers in rally car need gear, but a keen eye for finding the line between controlled chaos and total disaster goes a very long way. A lot of \$10K drivers can flat whip an inferior driver with superior gear, giving rally car an element of meritocracy other gear-heavy sports lack.

I walk down to the restaurant parking lot, where the team is borrowing helmets from other teams to accommodate my 7 5/8 size skull. I slip a fire hood on, and then pull the tiny helmet (the biggest they had) down around my ears. I'm losing circulation to my brain, but this is racing and I'm a

helpless passenger. Lack of blood to the brain is probably all for the best.

SO-SO. Adj: A face-ripping tear through a rally car stage at top speed at night in the dark with a world-class rally driver.

The crew sandwiches me into the bucket seat and HANS device in the car with Travis. He signs a few autographs while we wait and then climbs back in, and it's impromptu interview time.

- He's been in Australia on tour with *Nitro Circus*. He doesn't know about making a third season, and might opt for a movie instead. "We shot the first two seasons of *Nitro Circus* back-to-back and I had to do the second with my knee blown out."
- He's coming off his 29th operation. "I was really hoping to keep it to 25 operations at the age of 25, but...but that didn't happen." He's smiling when he says this, but you already knew that.
- His workout regimen? "Physical therapy, for the most part." He rides a bike due to multiple knee injuries now, and does the odd bit of weightlifting. "Rally car's more about mental endurance, since you're running all these stages back to back."

The sun is completely down now on a rainy night at 8:30 p.m., and Travis misses the turn for the race stage.

"...and I don't know where we're going. Hold on. We have to turn around here."

The car stops, and he slams the gas down while slamming the brake and turning the wheel violently to one side, the entire thing spinning on a dime without moving forward or backwards, smoking rubber stench filling the cabin before he hits the accelerator and goes back towards the course.

The course is a short one: just a mile or so through an old dirt track. Pines creep in on either side of the road. A man with a flag, a clipboard, and a stopwatch stands by the side of the road. We wait for his cue.

"Yeah, I'm really sorry. I'm just getting used to some stuff in the car, and--" he clicks the headlights-- "I think our headlights aren't working, and I'm still not straight on how to run this yet, so you're going to get kind of a so-so ride."

He fiddles with the massive gear shift sitting between us.

"You come all this way, and it's going to be so-so. But this should give you some idea. We're a go?"

The man signals go.

"Again, I apologize."

Then, Travis Pastrana slams the gas, punches the gears, and proceeds to rip my face off at 70 miles per hour on dirt roads.

There's a tree. And there's another. Dirt flowing freely under the car sounds less like soil and more

like water. A flash goes off--lightning? No, cameraman, perched so close to the roadway I think he just got a riveting portrait of my terrified, bloodshot right eye. Stones and pebbles pelt the bottom of the car; with no insulation or muffling it's like riding inside a rock polisher. Travis is talking the entire time to himself, or to me, or to the universe in general: "Yeah yeah no whoops yeah not sure where we're going here hey look at that no yes noo right little too fast sure whoa yeah this no." It's like being in a jetski running on land, with no fixed point on the horizon to look at and an endless sliding from point to point, curves so nasty I understand why co-drivers often wear transdermal motion-sickness patches behind their ears because this is puke city, and would be so much worse were I not hammered into place by a bucket seat and restraints cutting off the circulation in my genitals. Dirt dirt tree people--oh my God, there are people out here, sliding into my vision on the left and then back into the darkness, yellow ponchos receding into the darkness.



(The camera work is *Blair Witch* quality, but that is a pretty accurate portrayal of perspective in the car. The film stops abruptly because a hard corner knocked the battery out of the camera.)

The stage end zips by us without my noticing it passing. Travis hits the brakes and powers down. The interior of the car smells like fear, dirt, and hot engine. We're back to darkass New England woods, the blue glow of the interior lights, and Travis smiling a manic smile at me from the driver's seat.

"Yeah, so I know that wasn't all that, but it should give you some idea of what it's like. Again, I apologize."

I'm not really sure how to answer. On one hand, I haven't traveled this far for sixty seconds or so of exhilarating pleasure since a long-distance relationship in college. On the other, it was completely worth it, since being in a rally car at night is the primeval chase illustrated, something that requires heavy metal animation and a Mastodon soundtrack and spectators banging their heads while flashing the devil's horns with their hands. Blind terror reduces the situation to wolves chasing you through an ancestral forest, a fight or flight reflex induced while you are strapped in and forced to do neither in your seat while someone else pops the gears and slides you sideways though what is essentially a controlled horizontal fall. The earth is one huge **labrynthspel**, and you're the marble rolling through it.

"Not necessary," is all I can say or need say. One minute is enough to know what I need to know: that driving rally car is an advanced degree in insanity studies, and that Travis Pastrana may as well be its Dean.



Spencer Hall

Contributor

Spencer Hall is the editor of EDSBS.com and a contributor to SBNation.com. He focuses on college football and participatory pieces involving trying new sports. He does not excel in the latter and is... [Read full bio](#)

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