How to Create a "Pan-Am/Starlite" Style Monte Carlo Road Rally.
By Joe Akerman

I ran my first Starlite in 1988 and wrote my first "Into the Night" Monte Carlo (ITN) in 1992, so I've been doing this long enough to see some changes.

The heart of these Montes are the maps. Paper maps. The old Auto Club county maps of California were and are the best. Other maps, like the DeLormes, are more detailed, but the AAA maps have some great features for us. They leave out a lot of small, extraneous roads, but they show all the roads that actually go someplace. And the type of line for the road indicates its surface. The ITN rallies are paved roads only.

Also, the AAA maps indicate mileage from intersection to intersection, so they're great for calculating transit times. The Entrants can guess the speed for the road and do the math to get the time.

When I started, we would go out with the Auto Club maps and drive around for a couple of weekends, trying to find the coolest roads we could, and looking for potential traps. If we missed a turn for some reason, like the map has a different road name from the sign, then we'd try to work that intersection into the course, as the name on the map is the official name of the road.

Mileages rule these rallies. Using the official maps, as you run the course as an Entrant, you follow the map from intersection to intersection.

Take a look at the Maricopa map. Let's say you're trying to find a Checkpoint on "Western Minerals Rd" and that you're traveling up 33/166 from the south toward the town of Maricopa and the point where those two roads split. You follow 166 eastbound from the intersection for 0.2 miles. However, when you get there, that road is signed "Hazelton St". You turn right anyway, because the mileage is correct. About a mile south, the road bends left (unsigned) and becomes "Western Minerals".

That is a classic, map-based Monte Carlo trap.

So, in writing a rally, after you picked the best driving roads, and found your map traps, you'd lay out a course of approximately the length advertised. Next, you have to set up the Standoffs and Checkpoints.

The spine of these rallies is the Standoff-Checkpoint relationship, i.e., you need to be able to see the Checkpoint from the Standoff. Say, for example, you know that on a road up a mountain peak there should be a spot where you can see the valley below. To find that spot, you work with 2 cars (one at Standoff and one at Checkpoint) and at night (so you can see the flashing light).

Years ago we used CB radios instead of cell phones. So, as one car drove up the mountain, the other sat out in the valley on the deserted road where you want to put the Checkpoint. You'd talk on the CB the whole way. Suddenly the CB volume would shoot up. Line of sight transmission had just cleared the obstacle (the mountain itself). The car on the mountain would stop at the next turnout and flash a light toward the expected Checkpoint location, and the car sitting in the valley would flash back toward the Standoff. Both crews then put an arrow on the pavement so the crews on the day will know where to point things.

So, after the Standoffs and Checkpoints are located, the next step would be to drive the course at least once, start to finish, to measure it and verify your estimated times. If the times you guessed were off enough to make the rally too long, or the distance between breaks too great, you'd have to rewrite the instructions, and then run it again.

By the time you did the actual checkout run, the Rallymaster would have run the course 5 or 6 times. This is similar to many other types of rallies.

Now, in 2015, we have a few more tools. I use Google Earth to scout roads. I can go to street view to check pavement condition. I can see where there are good Checkpoint locations - in passing zones with adequate creeping room and a spot to get the timing car far enough off the road so the Entrants picking up their time can get off the road as well.

Then I can use Google Maps to lay out the course for time and mileage. I can figure out where fuel will be available and work in breaks every 120 or so miles.

Also, I can use Google Earth to pre-verify my flashing lights. Just pin the Checkpoint and Standoff, draw a line between them, then trace your mouse along the line. Numbers at the bottom of the screen tell you the elevation. As long as there is nothing taller than the Standoff between there and the Checkpoint, you'll probably be able to see the flashing light. You still have to go out and physically check the lights, but you now have a much higher success rate.

So today, by the time we do the checkout, the Rallymaster has run the course 2 or 3 times at most.

That is the "how" and the "what". The other thing is the "why".

The "why" boils down to -- what kind of rally do you want to write. Different Rallymasters have different aesthetics. Some Rallymasters like traps that NOBODY will get, so the Rallymasters can laugh and feel smarter than everyone else — this kind of rally is usually written to impress other Rallymasters. ITN tries to discourage this type.

Our preferred style is to have rallies written for the entertainment and enjoyment of the Entrants. Everyone should be able to find everything, but we should keep the Entrants guessing until the very last possible moment, in order to maintain the "pucker" factor needed for excitement. We like to see a lot of smiling faces at the Finish. Of course, the rallies can't be too easy, because without a challenge people won't feel tested. But if you have traps that, even after you've explained them at the Finish, the Entrant still doesn't understand...well, you probably won't get that person to come back again.

Keep it simple and concentrate on the best driving roads you can find. People always find their own traps anyway.

See you at Standoff.

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