

History and Evolution of the Coursemarker Gimmick Rallye

Even though every one is different, coursemarker gimmick rallyes have changed very little in forty years. Prior to 1963, rallyes would not have their familiar format of general instructions (GIs), route instructions (RIs), Supp/SI page, scoresheet, and namesake cardboard course markers. These elements, now common, have evolved into today's coursemarker gimmick rallyes and this is their story.

Rallyes go back to the early days of the automobile and were more about the mechanical endurance of the machines than the course following ability of the driver and navigator. Often these were challenges between manufacturers and their engineering teams. The general public would have to wait several years for a "car rallye" in which they could compete.

The Car Culture

After World War II, Americans became a "car culture" with the automobile symbolizing more than basic transportation. Guys would get together and talk about their cars, what work they did on their cars, where they would go with their cars, and on and on. With the arrival of European sports cars in the late forties, especially the British MGs, car enthusiasm soared. Also arriving from England was the idea of a sports car club.

The sports car club served as more than a social nexus for car enthusiasts. Since each club generally focused on a particular make of sports car, the membership provided a knowledge base for maintaining and fixing the vehicles. This was vital if you were on a drive and your Spitfire broke down; a common occurrence for British sports cars. In the club, there was always at least one person who knew how to fix the problem because it had happened to them earlier. There were also many people who loved to get together just to drive places in their sports cars. It was these tours that would later evolve into rallyes.

Tours and the Sunday Drive

Where "follow-the-leader" for a drive in the country might not be considered much of an event, it is a rallye in its most basic form; a route from start to finish. Often, you had to copy the route instructions by hand from the organizers original at the start. Maps and detailed instructions were difficult to reproduce and personal computers were thirty years away. But by the early 50s, event organizers realized various things could be added to keep the participants busy.

A set of questions were sometimes included with the basic route instructions for the sports car club's driving tour. The answers to these questions could be found along the route and could be as simple as counting lamp posts on Main Street or traffic lights in rural farm town. To make things more interesting, you might hunt for signs and search everywhere to answer a simple question like, "What does Maryanne do?" only to find a poster exclaiming, "See Maryanne milk cows at the County Fair." Initially, these

questions were a minor part of the event but later these would evolve into question-answer rallies with much more complex and difficult questions.

Another early attraction, if not the earliest, was adding a poker hand to the tour. At the start, the finish, and various convenience stops along the way, each car would get a playing card. At the end, the car with the best poker hand would win.

Sometime in the mid to late fifties, the poker hands, questions, and similar attractions changed from being a minor part of the driving tour to being the focus of the event. Clubs recognized the popularity of these events with their members and capitalized upon the funds raising potential by opening the events to other clubs and the general public. The events started to be known as "Variety Rallies" as they could be of various formats and to distinguish from the "Timed Rallies" which undergoing similar development and transformation. All events now provided printed instructions describing the ground rules and route to the contestants.

The event organizers soon became known as rallymasters and were responsible for the planning and presentation of the events. By the late fifties, rallymasters discovered other ways, some devious, to make their variety rallies more interesting. By adding a "Bonus" such as turn left when you see an angry fellow, contestants would turn on "Crossman" to find a checkpoint for credit and to get them back on the route. Another trick or "gimmick" might be a misspelled route instruction and by driving past where you would have turned, you'd find a checkpoint. Since each checkpoint required one or more people to operate, rallymasters were limited to the number of checkpoints by the number of people in their club. A heavily "gimmicked" rallye might have five checkpoints- a vast difference from the thirty gimmicks common to today's events.

The First Coursemarkers

The first rallye to use coursemarkers, and I use that term loosely, was written by Eric Laudenslager of the Fremont Touring Club (FTC). It ran from Oakland to Livermore in 1957 give or take a year. Cards with a single letter were spotted at various locations along the route on numerous objects including poles, signs, and even the curb. An observant rallyeist would see all the letters and unscramble them to get the road they should turn on. Alas, the checkpoint crew on "Little Valley Road" was very lonely as they only saw three cars.

The idea of using cards with letters, however, had merit and was utilized by industrious rallymasters to add more gimmicks to a rallye without needing more checkpoint workers. By placing a letter, say "Q" on a paper plate and stapling it to a utility pole, a rallymaster could add a gimmick without adding a checkpoint. To get the cars that caught the gimmick back on course, additional paper plates were added with the return instructions written out. To save on writing, the instructions became cryptic using abbreviations and defined terms such as U, L 1st Opp. Later, when the cars entered a manned checkpoint, they were asked if they had seen "Q" and other lettered markers to get credit.

All the Pieces

The coursemarker gimmick rallye took a leap forward in 1963 when Dick Heinz invented the Supp/SI Page. By numbering the coursemarker return instructions and putting them on their own page, Heinz saved himself the work of lettering up several paper plates for each marker and opened the door for an entirely new layer of gimmicks. Coursemarkers, previously a reward for deciphering a gimmick, would become a popular source of new gimmicks as would their associated Supplemental Instructions commonly called "Supps."

With the addition of the Supp/SI Page, all the components of the coursemarker gimmick rallye were in place and would vary little in format in future years. These basic components, including the registration packet of general instructions (GIs), route instructions (RIs), Supp/SI page, and scoresheet would be as familiar to a contestant in the mid 60s as in the mid 90s. Also familiar would be the start registration, the on course checkpoints, and of course, the coursemarkers with the letter and number combination. The typical pizza parlor finish with its scoresheet collection, results tabulation, and critique describing how the rallye should have been run would change little over time.

The Golden Age

Whether it was the format of the instructions, the times, the relative ease of writing a CM rallye, or a combination of all, CM rallyes experienced incredible popularity and enjoyed a golden age from 1961 until the gas crisis of 1974. Turnout of 80 to 200 cars was common for Olympic Sports Car Association (OSCA) and other clubs. The "Gold Bug" rallye by club Ratcher Fratchers drew 500 cars and didn't complete scoring until after breakfast the next morning. Rallyemasters adapted to the high turnout by preparing multiple routes for the same event. Upon registration, contestants would traverse to a "Sub-Start" based upon their class to pick up their route instructions, etc. OSCA events would often have two rallyemasters and two, sometimes three, routes: beginner-novice, senior-expert, and master expert for their events drawing 225 cars. All the cars from each route would converge at the finish. That is, if they could find the finish.

Initially, the event organizers and rallyemasters were not concerned if many cars made it to the finish. They got their money up front at the start registration and were more concerned with a high number of starters. Finding the finish might be the night's last gimmick. This changed when a few pizza parlors started paying the rallyemaster for each car at the finish. At first it was \$.10, then \$.25 and finally \$.50 per car. Soon everyone knew where the rallye would finish and how to get there.

The Contestants

During these golden years, most contestants were of the high school to college age with the typical team or "car" being a guy as the driver with his girl "date" as the navigator. Inevitably, this combination lead to rather unusual situations when the GIs read "...at the checkpoint, the navigator shall..." One Halloween rallye had the checkpoints at cemeteries and the navigators were required to make their way through the headstones. Another event had a checkpoint at a secluded location complete with a guy in a gorilla suit surprising the unsuspecting navigators.

Perhaps the composition of the typical team is why there were more starters than finishers. It is quite possible that somewhere along the route, priorities would shift from competition to something else. This, of course, is pure conjecture but one does wonder about Team BARF. Team BARF used to compete out of San Jose and consisted of the same guy with a different female navigator, usually very attractive, for each rallye.

In addition to the "typical" car, there were whole carloads and a few one-person "solo" teams. The more competitive cars were usually a two-person, all male team who would run together for several rallyes and often several years. Regardless of the team makeup, word-of-mouth was how most people heard about their first rallye. Someone would run a rallye, tell their friends, and at the next rallye, they would all be there. This group of friends would likely become an informal rallye club. Since there were so many cars; there was a preponderance of rallye clubs.

The Rallyemaster's First Event & Broken Gimmicks

Regardless of whether a rallye club was a team of two guys who always ran together or a group of fifty who could add twenty plus cars to an event, the member's skills would eventually advance to "Expert" class and the club would want to "throw" their own rallye. Writing a rallye was a rite of passage and, even as an expert, you never quite arrived until the "Rallyemaster" title was achieved.

First time events for clubs and rallyemasters were usually disasters. The logistics involved with the numerous cars, delays with scoring and awards, but mostly poorly written instructions and gimmicks that did not work as intended would hang over a first event like a dark cloud. The "first event experience" would correct most of the logistical problems for the club's next event. The broken gimmicks would take on a life of their own even after the jeers, jibes, and general verbal abuse from the unforgiving experts faded away.

The "broken gimmicks" would result from slightly different wording of the instructions or definitions which would lead to radically different interpretations on how the gimmick would work. The novice rallyemaster was usually unaware of the implications caused by adding or omitting a few words. For example, if STOP is defined as "a red and white, octagonal shaped sign," a typical stop sign is described. But, if the word "octagonal" is left out, a "yield" sign, or even a "no parking" sign would fit the definition of a "STOP." The more experienced contestants would discover these nuances. The more experienced rallyemasters would incorporate these "broken gimmicks" into their next event. Although frightening for a novice rallyemaster, a first time event was often a creative and invigorating force to the sport.

The Lean Years

In the very late 70s, CM gimmick rallyes were scarce and finding an event to run required a bit of searching. Sporadically, a rallye might start from the Sun Valley Mall in Concord, the Stanford Mall in Palo Alto, or old GEM on First Street in San Jose. The Oakland starts at Lake Merritt and Bruce's Tires were long forgotten. If you were willing to try a non-coursemarker variety rallye, Empire Sports Car Club (ESCA) out of Santa

Rosa and FTC in Fremont each presented AB-multiple choice rallyes twice a year. If your contacts were good, you might hear of the occasional variety rallye presented by one of the still popular sports car clubs (Triumph, Porsche, Z Owners, Corvette, etc.).

A Resurgence

In 1981, an eager collection of rallye enthusiasts formed The Rallye Club of Silicon Valley (TRC), a 501c(3) not-for-profit California corporation. The Rallye Club was dedicated to preserving the road rallye sport and endeavored to present a mix of variety and timed events. So hungry were the CM rallyeists for an event to run that they tolerated the club's timed rallyeists and even participated in the non-CM rallyes. This cooperation turned to collaboration and, eventually, improved coursemarker gimmick rallyes.

By the time of TRC's incorporation, timed rallyes had developed distinct formats such as Pan Am, Monte Carlo, Time and Distance (T&D), and Trap T&D. Each format required a slightly different running style but all required the contestant to cross the timing line at the control (checkpoint) at exactly the right time. Error was measured in hundredths of a minute (or seconds) off of perfect time. The challenge was in driving "on-time" to get a time as close to zero as possible and, consequently, the route instructions were relatively straight forward. That is, unless you were running a Trap T&D rallye.

New Gimmicks from Timed Rallyes

Traps are T&D lingo for gimmicks and falling for a trap would likely get you a maximum error (max) for the leg of the rallye by arriving a couple of minutes early or late to the control. Many of the traps were the same as for a CM rallye such as the omnipresent misspelled RI or the strangely defined "signal." The notorious "6-sided stop sign" was used on OSCA CM rallyes and on Southern California T&Ds.

Unlike coursemarker rallyes where a CM could be posted to get you back on course, T&D Trap routes needed to loop. The course looped so that all cars, included those that fell for the trap, could be timed in at the checkpoint. Since the RIs would be the same for those falling for the trap and those that did not, the rallyemaster relied upon main road rules or determinates to loop back on course. Some of the more common determinates such as R (or L) at T and Straight as Possible (SAP) were familiar to both variety and timed rallyes. Others such as "Onto" had a slightly different meaning. The "Protection" determinate involved stop signs and was completely foreign to gimmick rallyes. Using the main road determinates was called "course following."

During the mid 80s, the collaboration within TRC lead to many of the Trap T&D rallye concepts being used in gimmick rallyes. This mix of ideas (cross contamination?) fostered the creation of "course-following AB rallyes." AB rallyes, like T&D rallyes had to loop to get cars back on course without the use of coursemarkers. These were viewed as an opportunity (experiment) to teach T&D traps to both gimmick rallye contestants and rallyemasters. Approximately five rallyes were written by various rallyemasters using the general instructions (GIs) developed by Steve Beuerman.

At about this time, gimmick rallyes saw the introduction of altered "onto" gimmicks and the Aristotle. A situation where two consecutive RIs cannot be executed at the same intersection is referred to as an Aristotle, since according to legend, it was the first logic trap he had written into his chariot rallyes. Various gimmicks based upon the location of the sign were introduced where the sign location would change as it was passed. Also introduced with course-following AB rallyes was the idea of a redundant RI. Seemingly innocuous, the concept of denying an RI because it would take you in the same direction that you would have gone anyway, caught many an expert at a T-intersection. Although never as popular as CM rallyes, even in the 80s, the course-following AB events revealed several gimmicks based upon T&D traps and main road determinates to the gimmick rallye community. Many of these would become commonplace in CM rallyes of the early 90s.

Other Gimmick Rallye Styles

In addition to course-following AB rallyes, the TRC rallyemasters explored other rallye styles. There were two reasons for this: 1) contestants would benefit and may actually enjoy gimmick rallyes in other formats, and 2) the rallyemasters had grown weary of posting and removing CMs. Other rallye styles included question/answer rallyes similar to the events presented in the Los Angeles area and those from San Diego a few photo rallyes. For the photo rallyes, you would record a mileage when you identified a location depicted in the photo. A few rallyemasters conspired to revive the "Gold Rush" rallyes of the late 70s by the El Dorado Touring Club (EDTC).

The "Gold Rush" events combined CM, AB, and photo rallye formats together. Not only were all the gimmicks available for each individual style but the combination created additional gimmicks where the styles overlapped. These were day time events that offered a longer route and a barbecue picnic finish. The route for TRC's first Gold Rush was written by the author in 1986 and finished at Cuesta Park in Mountain View.

Trends in the 80s

There were several trends in the late 80s and early 90s particular to TRC CM gimmick rallyes. Although not a new idea, posting signs in addition to coursemarkers was a trend. These signs included masked bandits, cartoon characters such as Garfield and various Far Side animals, a bat, and various weapons related to the author's "Mystery!" rallyes. Jeff Trimble is known for using oversize playing cards as coursemarkers on one of his events.

Another trend popularized by Mark Robichek of "Monster Mash" rallye fame used what became known as "monster" instructions. On these, different effects would occur for a limited time or number of RIs. For example, "while Frankenstein is in the car, all signs appear green and read from right to left (MONSTER appears as RETSNOM)." This proved very successful in keeping beginners engaged throughout the event and allowed rallyemasters to try different things without being burdened for the entire rallye.

A third trend involved the construction of the coursemarkers. A typical rallye scoresheet will have 26 single lettered spaces starting with "A" and another 26 double lettered spaces starting with "AA." Since a typical rallye needs about 45 CMs, this should be

adequate but often is not. Impossible combinations, fish, and the need to have blank spaces on the scoresheet to facilitate scoring necessitate another group of letters. In the past, a single column of triple letters starting with "AAA" would suffice. But triple letters take up too much space on the scoresheet and the paper plate, are hard to read, yada, yada, yada... Miss-matching the letters such as "AZ" solves these problems and allows for even more gimmicks such as the second "AA," "AV" (abr. for avenue), and the infamous "AB/BA" (signs read backwards) giz. Bill Jonesi was the first to try miss-matched letters on his "Maze" rallye in 1983.

The New Millennium

The late 90s saw another decline in turnout and the number of events offered. There was a rebound in 2001-02 and popularity seems to be increasing. Developing new rallyemasters to replace those who have moved out of the area or moved on to other things (marriage, kids, houses) is a slow process. To meet the demand for monthly events, TRC has persuaded a few rallyemasters out of retirement and recycled rallyes presented 10-15 years ago. Since many contestants have only been running for a few years, these old events are new again.

Throughout the years, coursemarker gimmick rallyes have been a San Francisco Bay Area phenomenon. Don Bess recalls CM rallyes run out of Sacramento as far back as 1970. Most of these started from the Arden Fair Mall or the American River College. Otherwise, the author is unaware CM rallyes being presented on a regular basis anywhere else in the USA or world. While attending college in San Luis Obispo in the early 80s, the author did run a CM rallye presented by the Calpoly Auto Club. Also, about this time, CMs were spotted outside of Santa Barbara. Harriet Gittings recalls seeing CMs in Boulder, Colorado while visiting family.

-Bob Schott

The author wishes to thank Harriet Gittings (FTC), Frank DeSmidt (OSCA), and Al Blazick (OSCA) who generously shared their memories and recollections of the early rallye days.