

Coursemarker Gimmick Rallyes: A Blast from the Past

by Cris Wendt

For many of you new to the sport of gimmick rallying, they may seem like a new invention. But, actually coursemarker gimmick rallyes have been going on for about 25 years now. It evolved from the glory days of sports cars and T&D rallyes. My first experiences with rallyes occurred before I was able to drive, in a special time that Jeff Trimble calls "The Golden Age of Rallying." Way back when I was in high school, a few of my friends took me on a Club-501 rallye which had a theme related to fish and birds. I don't remember how we did, except that we didn't win a trophy. But I do know that I was immediately hooked. Once I learned to drive, I began rallying weekly. I spent countless Saturdays and some Fridays rallying, winning some rallyes and losing some rallyes, and moving from first timer to expert in about 8 months (not too difficult a task when you rallye 5 times per month). As the mid-70s, the gas crunch, "recreational drugs" (a bad couple of words nowadays), high-tech, and discos came around, rallyes seemed to die, and I along with many other rallye enthusiasts moved on to other (better?) things.

I began rallying again in the mid/late 80s after stumbling upon an ad in the San Francisco Chronicle for an upcoming gimmick coursemarker rallye. Ironically, it was another Club 501 rallye. However, this time it started from a place called FAR Performance. I was hooked again. However a few things had changed since that "Golden Age." It felt like a Twilight Zone episode where you return to a world where things are so similar, yet different. My how things have changed in the last 20 years and my how they have stayed the same:

* Rallying was very , very popular in the early 70s, characterized by lots of rallyeists and lots of clubs. While a good showing today is 40 cars, rallyes in the early 70s typically drew from 100-125 cars. The big, "event" rallyes, such as MIRT's "Monster Mash" drew well over 200 cars. There were enough rallyeists to organize about 30 rallying clubs, most of which sponsored several rallyes per year. Many put on one rallye per month! Some of the classic clubs that I remember were Le Vivo Machine (aka LVM), Zodiac, Sportin' Life, MIRT, Casey Jones Touring Club, Zero, Club 501, Gunn TC, Rebel TC, and Bone. In fact, there were so many clubs that many organized into the ARA (American Rallye Association) and had a yearly points competition. Many people in those days were really into it: they had rallye jackets with patches, special doublewide clipboards, and special rallye lights (yellow highlight pens weren't invented yet). I'm not quite sure why rallyes were popular then.

Not only did rallyes draw a lot of cars, but also there were lot's of rallyes. On any weekend, Stanford Shopping Center, where I mostly rallied from, Parkview GEM (now defunct and replaced by a parking lot on N. First St. in San Jose), Lake Merritt in Oakland, Sun Valley Mall in the East Bay and other places very often had 1 if not 2 or even 3 rallyes per weekend. Jeff Trimble brags about he was even able to run 2 rallyes in one night--across the bay from one another. As many as 5 rallyes could be occurring on any night. It was easy to get your fill of rallyes back then.

* Rallyes of the early 70s were (arguably) more difficult than today's rallyes for a couple of reasons:

Many terms and phrases were not as tightly defined and were more "loosey-goosey." Interpretation could vary week to week, depending upon who was the rallyemaster. This was especially true of the term, DG, or delete gimmick, which was defined as "delete the gimmick that got you here." This could, and often was interpreted differently.

Many gimmicks were also contradictory and it was the job of the rallyeist to figure out the true interpretation. If you didn't ask the right question at the start, you probably wouldn't get credit on a protest.

Signs could also be more difficult to find. Since signs were defined as "any single surface," hard-to-see signs was used as part of many gimmicks. One time Whisman was misspelled as Wishman to make a Note instruction apparently invalid. However, upon close inspection of a small business sign on Independence, one could find "Wishman Bros Printing."

There were no protest committees back then. If the rallyemaster didn't honor your protest, you were SOL. But to be perfectly honest, I'm not sure if the politics of a protest committee is really that much better anyway.

The scoring could also be more brutal. Many of what we term "on course" coursemarkers today would often not be scored. Many of the more difficult gimmicks were scored at 20 or 30 points, rather than the standard 10 points per gimmick today. Worst of all, there was no consistency from rallye to rallye. People just had to adjust to whatever scoring rationale the rallyemaster felt was appropriate.

The rallyes in the 70s tended to rely more on technical interpretation gimmicks, rather than on the creative theme gimmicks that tend to be used today. I think today's rallyes, overall, are more creative, a bit more fun, cleaner and easier than the rallyes of the 70s.

* Awards were more plentiful, but harder to win, because there were so many more rallyeists. Not only did all rallyeists get a nice multi-colored brass par plaque, but trophies and plaques were plentiful. In the beginner class, the first 3 people typically got trophies, while all cars down to 10th place received an engraved par plaque designating their position. A couple of the rallyes even gave out "Wolfhead Beakers" as awards instead of the usual trophy or wall plaque. Come to think of it, a few might have even given out cash. Most rallyes also gave out an award for the club with the most rallyeists (but to tell you the truth, I forgot the name of this type of award).

* The 70s did have its share of classic gimmicks. While I won't bother you with all of the gory details, 2 come to mind. One was a bonus instruction that had you turn when you came to the intersection of two streets whose names, when read together, pronounced the name of a famous holiday character. Well, low and behold you come to the

intersection of Easter and Abbott (Easter who?). Another was a Sportin' Life gimmick that had you pretending to walk your "barking" dog at a checkpoint. As you are walking, you should have noticed that the rallymaster changed a "NO PARKING" sign into a "NO BARKING" sign. U to find the CM.

* Even with so many clubs for a rallyeist or rallyemaster to choose from, a few clubs were pretty much one-man operations, intended to function primarily as ways to generate income that might escape IRS notice. Emil Rudolpho (who belonged to several "one man" clubs) and Dick Heinz of Sportin' Life were two of the names that come to mind as one man operators. They were both prolific rallyemasters who could probably write a rallye in one day. The financial arguments of writing rallyes for profit were pretty compelling back then; writing one rallye a month could n enough money to make the house payment (just ask Dick) or put one through college (just ask Emil). And the rallyes were only \$3. However, writing too many rallyes could often lead to some really marginal gimmicks (like looking into your rear view mirror to see a coursemarker).

* Due to the large number of cars participating in each event, the rallyes had to be organized and run differently than they are today. Rallyes had to start from the parking lots of large shopping malls (can you imagine 200 cars in the FAR Performance parking lot), the registration had to last longer, the route had to be longer, and the rallye finished much later. It wasn't unusual for a rallye to finish (i.e. turn in your scoresheet) past midnight! For the most part, the rallyes in the 70s ran primarily in industrial parks (like today) where there were no local residents and the streets were long and wide. To prevent the boredom of travelling on the same South Bay industrial park roads over and over, the rallyes from Stanford (close to today's FAR Performance location) used many of the industrial parks north of Palo Alto. I remember one time, while rallying in area, a spotlight-bearing security/policy helicopter flying around to see what was going on. Why would all of these cards be driving around in a desolate Belmont industrial park on a Saturday night shining spotlights at buildings?

* The 70s rallyes finished at pizza parlors then, as they do now (surprise!), but otherwise were run very differently, and much more efficiently. The popular finishes seemed to be Straw Hat Pizza Parlors (most of which are now Round Table). The ones I remember were on San Antonio in Palo Alto, in Cupertino across the street from Target (which was then Gemco), and the one in Milpitas on Landess. In fact, the Landess Straw Hat was owned by a rallyeist, Frank DeSmidt. I imagine that the Pizza Parlors did a fantastic business on those nights. Most rallyemasters did the scoring in a back room (away from distractions) and used an overhead projector to post results, which prevented the cramming around the scoring table that you see today. Scoring also seemed to go a lot faster then. I guess that rallyemasters paid more attention to creating an efficient scoring with understandable scoring patterns (are all of you rallyemasters out there listening?). This philosophy, along with the lack of a protest committee, lead to awards being presented very shortly after the last scoresheet was turned in. Maybe we can learn a few lessons from the past.

* Surprisingly enough, the format and organization of today's rallye instructions is pretty much identical to what it was then: a DEFINITIONS section, followed by sections entitled ROUTE, SIGNS, COURSEMARKERS, CHECKPOINTS, ORDER OF PRECEDENCE, and MISC. This makes me think that today's rallye instructions, if they haven't changed that much in 20 years, could probably use an overhaul. They still read like a reference book and not a "how to do."

* With the advancement of computer technology, rallyes today are easier to write and easier to change. Today's rallyes have a nice professional look. Computer-generated fonts and laser printers are available to most everyone today. Back then, no one had ever heard of a word processor, let alone an inexpensive copier. In fact the technology has changed so much that in the olden days, a "word processor" was an eraser, a "font" was a misspelled version of "front", a personal computer was an abacus, and an Apple was something that you ate. It was all typewriter and mimeograph, baby. If you didn't spill the mimeograph liquid, you probably got a headache smelling it. You could sometimes tell who wrote a rallye by the quality of the print produced by the typewriter. Dick Heinz of Sportin' Life had his instructions written in uniquely crooked way. It was also more difficult to change a rallye for a pre-check back then. You pretty much had to get it right the first time.

Some of "us" old-timers were recently speculating on why the essentially same, gimmick coursemarker rallye was so much more popular in the 70s than today? Was it because of their interest with the high school and college "baby boomers," many of whom were on the math/science/computer track in school and just learned to drive? For me, the rallyes of the 70s also had a cult "feel" to them, which might also have appealed to other people of the same "baby boomer" age group. Rallying was not something that someone's parents did. Perhaps there is a time and place for everything, and the early 70s may have been the time for rallying. Who knows?

If you really want to find out more of what "A Golden Age" rallye was like, give Jeff Trimble a few beers and let him talk. Better yet, you should attend the August 3 rallye, "Moose Haven". This is a Cris Wendt/Jeff Trimble rerun of a famous 1970 Le Vivo Machine rallye, updated to 1991 rallye standards, but with most of the original gimmicks intact! I'll bring out some of my old rallye memorabilia (that I recovered from my parents' house) for display at the finish. This promises to be a special TRC event, and a real "Blast from the Past."

Written in 1991 to promote Jeff Trimble's "Moose Haven" rallye. Rallyes presented the late 1980s by The Rallye Club are compared to rallyes of the early 1970s.