

Thinking about getting into rally racing

It astounds me how popular Bancroft's Rally of the Tall Pines is. It's *the* championship rally - a favourite for drivers from all over. That's what racer Zoltan Kovacs told me on our way to test the first stage of the rally. He names another race in Finland that compares, but can't think of any others.

The reason: it's all about skill at the Tall Pines. He says racing on pavement is nothing compared to the wet and muddy track in the backwoods of Bancroft. The conditions can change at any moment.

At this moment, they're icy - so the rally co-ordinator told me before I strapped in to the copilot chair of Kovacs's 2003 Mitsubishi Lancer ES - and we're about to take them on in the dark. I hear echoes of my father triple checking that I wanted to participate in the rally's VIP rides. I have to admit, it doesn't sound safe.

We pull up to the starting point of the stage. Kovacs takes this time to tell me he used to drive a Subaru but crashed on this track years ago.

That's OK though, the Lancer is slower with none of the fancy stuff the Subarus have, he explains. He says anyone looking to start rallying should start in something such as the Lancer - which has been scraped to its bones and installed with a cage but that's about it. He says anyone learning to drive in a fast car is bound to crash.

"And the roads are bad tonight, so we won't be going that fast," he tells me. A kilometre later I learned 140 kilometres an hour across ice-slicked gravel and in the dark didn't qualify as fast. But wow, what a rush!

"Seven seconds and then you're good to go," said the race co-ordinator at the front of stage one.

Seven seconds later, we were flying down the road. All I could see were walls of trees. We plummeted toward them as Kovacs fought with his steering wheel - shaking and tilting one way and then the other. But then we'd drift around a corner at the last minute and be headed to another wall. You might then ask "[what is drifting?](#)" Well, for different drivers it might have different meanings, but ultimately it's the act of going sideways in a car while in motion and having to correct adjustments to the steering wheel, if you click on the link you can get a better understanding of what was happening as we were drifting around bends.

I note them and Kovacs laughs, he says he knows where the turns are.

Kovacs said he loved the race because it had the most jumps. We were airborne twice in the three kilometre stage.

It was over in a blink, but I wanted to go again and again. I'm usually a little nervous as a night driver, I peeled out of the Dungannon Recreation Centre parking lot that night.

If you didn't get a chance to make it to the rally this year, next year's event has been scheduled for Nov. 23 and 24.

If spectating isn't enough for you, and you're looking to get into the sport itself, you should check out the Maple Leaf Rally Club. It hosts rally races throughout the year. The race is open to anyone with a valid driver's license.

The event's website says the races offer "future rally stars" a chance to "get their feet wet." It says it's an "affordable introduction" to rally sport with "minimal" car prep.

I don't think I'll be taking my XTrail rallying anytime soon but if I still had the beater I was driving in high school these rallies would be tempting. That being said, I'm not sure my loved ones could handle me zipping around in a rally car. My lead foot might get me in trouble.