

# 24 Hours of Exhaustion

September 2007 by JPFreek

**For twenty years the Camel Trophy was the ultimate display of what 4-wheel drive vehicles could accomplish. From 1980 to 2000, Land Rovers and Range Rovers, in every conceivable spec, traversed some of the most daunting and challenging areas on earth for weeks at a time. Another hallmark of the events was the emphasis on teamwork and mental challenges, in addition to the seemingly impossible terrain. It was an incredible test of man and machine, with teams from all over the world vying for the trophy.**

In 2000, Land Rover pulled their support from the event, and for all intents and purposes the Camel Trophy ceased to exist. Coincidentally, that same year there was a Land Rover enthusiast who had been following the Camel Trophy and thought it would be a great idea to put on a similar event himself, though on a smaller scale. It was with this goal that Oregonian Doug Shipman started the Team Trophy Challenge.

The TTC was similar to the Camel Trophy, though focused more on creative thinking, teamwork and both physical and mental endurance. Every year the TTC grew and grew, challenging every kind of vehicle imaginable from Land Rovers to Toyotas, with early model Broncos, Suzukis, and every kind of Jeep vehicle imaginable.

After six years of amazing events though, Doug had enough and threw in the towel. As he put it, "It's become too much work and more of a job." Luckily enough for me, there was another group ready to step in and put on the event for 2007; the Timber Tamers Off-road Club. The Tamers are a small but very active Washington-based 4x4 club who are as much dedicated to having fun on the trails as keeping them open for future generations to enjoy. The goal: Keeping public land public, as it was.

I became aware of the event last January, and my primary Jeep club, PNWJeep, was fielding two teams out of the total of twenty, but needed one more rig. Perfect. A good friend, Ian Foley, served as my navigator/co-driver/riding mechanic, and he proved invaluable. Jesse Connor and his white 4-dr XJ would be the other half, and Bryan Grey would fill the role as his navigator.

The Timber Tamers used Doug's template for the competition, though adapting it along the way to their own ends. Don't think there was any outright plagiarism, though: Doug signed up to experience the hell he'd been putting wheelers through for years but at the last second, the death of his brother-in-law a week earlier prevented his participation.

### **Friday , 28 September 07-**

After drinking several pots of coffee and running my head under cold water, we started packing the Jeep. And we kept packing...and packing. I've never had the Jeep so full, and it let me know. Around sharp corners my tires were rubbing against my fenders! After meeting up with another PNWJeep member, John Herrick who would be competing on the other PNWJeep team, we headed our way across the Cascade Mountains. On the way over Snoqualmie Pass (the geographical divider between Eastern Washington and the "Wet" side of the state), we stopped at an unmanned truck weigh station: My Jeep weighed in at 5100 lbs, about 1500 more than stock!

When we arrived a few hours later at the rendezvous/event campground, it was snowing. This was pretty unusual for Washington State even though we were at an elevation over 4000'. Once the rest of the teams arrived, we made our way to the tech inspections. One of the rules the Tamers enforced was a maximum width of 76" from the outside of each tire. As I barely squeaked through the cones they had set up, I was glad I spent the money narrowing my front high pinion Dana 44 front axle...it was close!



These rules were meant to ensure that no tube buggies would be competing...street legal rigs only. This also kept the Forest Service happy, who were instrumental in making the event happen. After tech, we all made our way back to our trailers (we had two enclosed toy haulers for sleeping) and retired early; the drivers meeting the next morning at 7am came way too quickly.

### **Saturday , 29 September 07-**

We awoke early, about 5:30am, in order to have a hot breakfast and (lots of) coffee before going to the drivers meeting. Ian stepped up to the plate and fixed two huge pans of bacon and eggs (two dozen), in sort of a country scramble with onions. It may have been the best breakfast I've ever had, but as soon as we'd finished it was time to head to the drivers meeting where we would discover our running order and rules of the event.

Up until this point, the Timber Tamers had been very tight lipped about the challenges we would face. We really had no idea what we were in for. And even after the meeting, we didn't know very much. Around 8:45am, we were handed an instruction packet and told, "Go!"

Uh....we quickly tore open our instructions and found a baffling combination of GPS coordinates and pictograms. I quickly dubbed them hieroglyphics as they bore no resemblance to any language I knew. The name stuck. We finally found our bearings and tore off down a trail we thought might be the right one. It wasn't, and we were forced to back track and start from scratch. This was the beginning of a long day for Team 31.

As the day wore on we gained familiarity with the directions and began to feel more confident with ourselves. We hit the first checkpoint/challenge early in the day; our task was to re-seat the bead on a tire and inflate it to between 20 and 25psi. If our tire was higher or lower than the prescribed pressure, we were disqualified. It was timed, points being awarded for the shortest time. We would run into similar exercises during the event.



Another of the major challenges that morning was a timed rock-crawling event. There were five different lines ranging in difficulty from "easy" to "barely doable" to "get the helicopter," with points being awarded for the more difficult. Both rigs didn't have to do the same line, but once you started one you were committed to it. If the rigs didn't finish, zero points were awarded. Both vehicles had to complete their line in 15 minutes.

After careful consideration, we decided to send Jesse up a very difficult line called "The Crack." As the name implies, it's a very deep crack that requires you to straddle them in order to conquer. Sounds easy until you factor in the steep angle of the ascent. As you climb, all you can see is sky; spotters play a huge role. After a couple attempts and near event-ending rolls, it was deemed too icy and slick to be possible. Jesse backed down and followed me up one of the easier lines. Though denied by "The Crack," we completed the challenge in the allotted time, gaining us some points.

We completed the first of four daytime “loops” around 1:00pm. This was due to some directions we couldn’t reconcile with the road we were on. We wasted valuable hours backtracking and second guessing ourselves. Finally we finished, but this error both in navigation and judgment (not simply giving up after the first few missteps and cutting our losses) would end up affecting us throughout the rest of the competition.

The next event was a timed rally where an average speed must be maintained while following vague directions and GPS coordinates. To make things tough (hell, anybody can average a certain speed over a certain distance), the Timber Tamers placed orange buckets with numbers on them along the side of the road between checkpoints. We were required to stop and put a poker chip with a number on it in the corresponding bucket, thereby screwing up whatever speed average you were trying to maintain.

After completing this event, it was well into the afternoon and we were barely halfway done. Also worrying was our fuel situation; both Jeeps were just over a quarter tank and we didn’t have spare gas with us. There was gas back at our camp, but not enough for all of us and there was a penalty for returning there. The idea was to be completely self-sufficient. We began our third loop and quickly found ourselves behind another team, two nice early model Broncos. All of a sudden they stopped and people piled out; the lead rig exploded his rear Ford 9” axle. The entire housing was shattered and the driveshaft was still attached to part of the mangled pumpkin. It was the end of the road for them, and they were blocking the narrow trail.



With low fuel lights staring us in the face, we decided to make the most of our delay and bend the rules. The organizers were very specific about not being allowed to return to camp, but they never said we weren’t allowed to drive the 30 or so miles into the nearest town, Ellensburg. We decided that with at least another 16 hours remaining before the end of the race, this was the only way to stay in it. We got some strange looks as we did a NASCAR-esque pit stop and tore out of the gas station.

It was nearly dark as we made it back to the trail and promptly got lost going down the wrong trail. Cracks were beginning to show in our foundation; our lack of sleep and the day's exertions were becoming evident in our decision-making and attitudes. Ian expressed it succinctly, "I'm not spending all fawking night looking for fawking buckets in the woods!"

Around 7:30pm the sun was starting to set and remind us of our time constraints. We had to be back at camp by 9:00pm in order to qualify for the night section; the Tamers were very clear that if both vehicles weren't there by then, you would not be competing in the rest of the event. After completing a couple more challenges, including a first aid event in which one of our team members was supposed to have a broken leg, we abandoned the third loop and raced down to camp.

We arrived with two minutes to spare.

Again, we were handed a packet of GPS coordinates and told "Good Luck!" Here's how it worked: We were given a total of eight latitudes/longitudes that we had to find. We were warned that the locations were not situated right on the roads and that we'd have to do some hiking. Once we found the initial GPS coordinate, we had to locate an orange bucket. Each bucket had a number on the outside and a hole punch (with a specific shape for each bucket) dangling from a string. After locating one, we would punch a shape in a score card with corresponding numbers. Each matching punch was worth points.



From the initial bucket, we were given a compass heading and a distance in feet where the next bucket was...or was supposed to be. Without fail, the buckets were obscured behind trees, down embankments and even covered in heavy snow at the highest point of 6300'. We quickly marked bucket after bucket off our master list, making great progress. It was rewarding to know we were doing so well, and the physical activity kept us alert and awake. Finally, we had found all the buckets we could and wearily made our way to the finish line; we officially finished the competition at 4:30am after 23 hours of hard driving and several hundred miles.

After a few hours sleep we made our way to the award ceremony and a hot breakfast of biscuits and gravy. As well as a lot of coffee. We knew after our rough start we wouldn't be on the podium. The other PNWJeep team had their own problems, including John Mathews exploding an alloy HP D44 shaft and a general lack of enthusiasm for the night exercises. Nonetheless, they came in a solid 4th. What surprised us more was our own finish of 6th, due mostly to a highest overall night section score. A total of seven teams failed to finish.

After all the buckets were found, the points tallied, receipts added up and sleep recovered, the event was a resounding success for all involved. Despite the exhausting and often confounding effort, everybody on the PNWJeep teams is excited for next year and already comparing notes on ways to improve our performance.