

Winchcraft

The Warn Challenge final is the event for drivers spellbound by extreme off roading. David Phillips reports

If you go down to the woods today you're in for a big surprise – especially if you wander into the woods chosen as venues for the final of the gruelling Warn Challenge. Today, private copses and disused quarries across the East Midlands are echoing to the sound of revving Land Rovers, chainsaws, machetes and highly-stressed electric winch motors.

The 14 finalists won their way through regional heats and converged from as far afield as the Isle of Man, Carlisle and Devon. Now they have only one thing on their minds: to get through against seemingly impossible odds.

It takes something special to even want to risk your Land Rover in a situation where body damage is virtually guaranteed. But then, the Warn Challenge is something special. It was devised by Vince Cobley in 1992 as he won Europe's most gruelling off-road event, the Transylvanian Trophy. Lost in the dense forests and blood-curdling mountain ravines of eastern Europe, he decided to deliver something



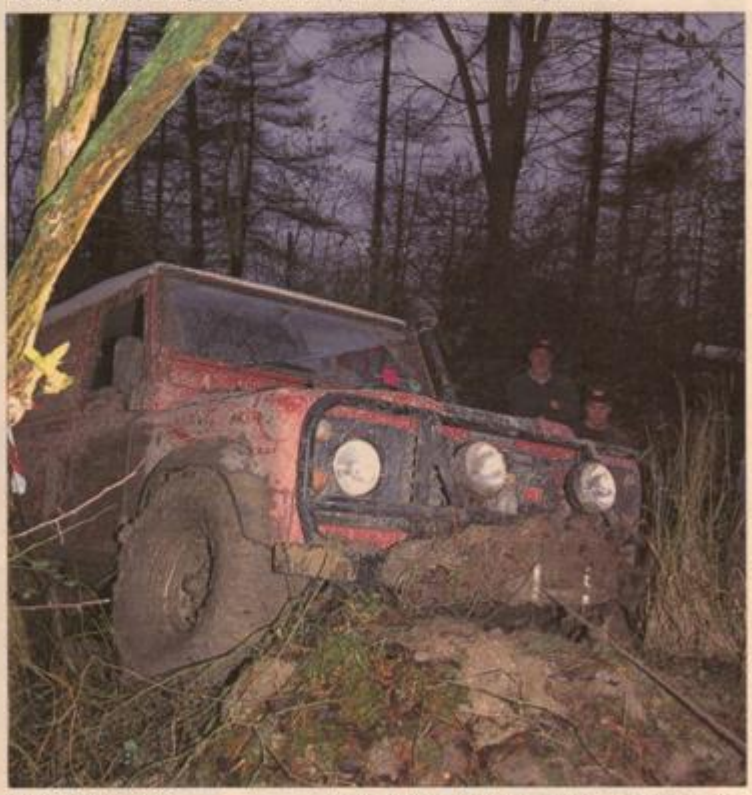


Almost all competitors were beaten by the infamous 'hill' at Stibbington



It cost just £250 but Andy Davey's Series IIA put in a fine performance against 90s

PHOTOGRAPHS: CARL RODGERSON, PETER COMELY & DAVE PHILLIPS



Conditions were incredibly tough on this year's challenge

similar back in Blighty.

Since the first challenge in 1993, it's gone from strength to strength. Today, the competitors know exactly what to expect... or do they?

The first day is straightforward enough – except that the 16 locations are scattered across a 30-mile radius and it's impossible to reach them all in the allotted time. Those who believed they could achieve it end up crestfallen... but not as disappointed as owner of the Toyota Landcruiser, whose engine couldn't take the strain. There are some smirks on the faces of the 90 drivers. ►



Army's John Norfolk competed in Wolf 90 hard top with Mark Pennington





Teams had to use ground anchors for winching out the Stalwart



Sunday's wooden section was tough and tested teams to the limit



Andy Cook's awesome 90 with chassis and cage by RJ Harvey (01268 784923)

Day two dawns like day one – only tougher. How would you fancy hauling a stalled five-tonne Stalwart amphibious vehicle up a muddy 30-degree slope? Vince reckons it's the equivalent of a 12-tonne direct pull... and the effort of trying sees ground anchors bending and popping out of the soft Northamptonshire mud. Most give up in disgust – but just a couple of teams manage to achieve the impossible.

Meanwhile, in a nearby overgrown quarry, competitors are fighting against all odds. Precipitous slippery slopes, deep pools of oozing mud and dense thickets of mature ash trees provide obstacles galore – particularly since there are no paths through them. This is real trailblazing stuff, and it's great to see the team spirit of the competitors as they risk penalty points to hold back and help their rivals.



Amazingly, the organisers realise that the teams are making better progress through the jungle sections than expected... so they change the route at the last moment to send the drivers through the most impenetrable terrain so far. But nothing can deter them, and they drive, winch and hack their way through with time to spare.

For details of the Warn Challenge 1999, contact Vince Cobley on 01536 770096.

It's a tight call, but the judges eventually award this year's honours to Mike Turner and Mark Harrow, making their long trip from the Isle of Man worthwhile. For their pains they receive a new Warn 8274 winch – which will come in useful if they ever manage to wear out the hard-working identical model currently fitted to the front of their 90.

The culmination of a year's struggle is over, but instead of earning a hard-earned rest the competitors are already hatching plans to win next year's event. The success of the Warn Challenge just goes on and on.

Warn Challenge winners Mike Turner and Mark Harrow from the Isle of Man