

2002 Extreme Winch Challenge Supported by Simex Tyres



Driven to extremes

Inspired by Malaysia's world-famous Rainforest Challenge, the Extreme Winch Challenge saw some of Britain's top off-road vehicles going against the clock over the less exotic but equally tortuous terrain of Baskerville Hall

Halfway up a steep, wooded hillside overlooking the river Wye, a Mercedes G-Wagen has its nose buried in a gully. Overlooking it, a Discovery is parked up with its back axle looking very squint. In the pits at the bottom of the hill, a Suzuki SJ has just finished getting its front springs bashed straight when a Land Rover 90 appears with its rear diff in pieces. Back on the course, a Range Rover and a Jeep Wrangler are racing wheel-to-wheel with a forward velocity of about six inches every thirty seconds.

The Extreme Winch Challenge is the brainchild of Martin Lewis and Peter Codd, two veterans of the Malaysian Rainforest Challenge. Famed for being one of the toughest off-road events in the world, the

RFC is a ten-day frenzy of mud, winching and vehicle repairs – the UK version is on nothing like the same scale, but it still manages to ask searching questions of the best-equipped vehicles and most experienced off-road drivers in the land.

With only a dozen vehicles taking part, the event had an entry list that smacked of quality rather than quantity. Certainly, the numbers you see in Malaysia weren't evident here – though that's probably just as well, given the fact that across there, they have a rainforest to play with, whereas in Clyro, they have to content themselves with a forest where it rains.

The base for the Challenge, Baskerville Hall, is famous in off-road circles as being the home of the Welsh Hillrally when it was

Words: Alan Kidd Pictures: Fiona Richardson

Off Road MOTORSPORT



Main picture: Simon Buck concludes an incredibly rapid, silky-smooth winch recovery on the way to yet another fastest time

Above: Howard Green struggled with his G-Wagen all weekend. A broken front diff lock and split oil cooler were compounded by a burnt-out winch

Top right: Darren McGuinness had a hit-and-miss event – his efforts in the gully climbs secured fifth place

Right: Clive Taverner kept smiling, even when a broken halfshaft stopped his 90 close to the end



reborn ten years ago. That event is now known simply as The Hillrally, and it'll be back in Clyro for its anniversary when it runs on the weekend of 6-8 October. But the character of the two events is altogether different – the Challenge is a lower-profile affair, but competitors found themselves tackling the sort of terrain that would leave any off-road racing vehicle, however competent, completely stuck.

As its name suggests, the Extreme Winch Challenge is all about self-recovery. Or at least, it takes the hardware and disciplines required and turns them into an against-the-clock race to get your vehicle through sections you couldn't hope to negotiate through the power of traction alone. Each section combines extreme driving with the

need for winches, bridging ladders or what have you – it's up to each individual team to decide what they're going to do, but safe enough to assume that attempting to cut corners, wing it or otherwise avoid the rigmarole of setting up a proper recovery will have come back to bite you by the time you get to the finishing gate.

So it was on special stage one, which combined some CCT-style driving with a gully for which winching was absolutely essential. It should be pointed out that each pair of vehicles started at a different point, and that the rules stopped the second team in the pair from watching the first in action – meaning that as they tackled the section, the drivers and navigators had no knowledge of what was waiting for

them. As a result, hazards such as the gully on SS1 invited one team after another to make the same mistake time after time – though as it turned out, a number of them managed to add some different mistakes of their own, too.

The first vehicle through this section, for example, was the bobtail Range Rover of Stuart Diack and Roger Bruce. Taking an admirable – if somewhat less than competitive – approach, which involved doing absolutely everything by the book, they used their rear winch to lower themselves into the gully, bridged the bottom of it with ladders and then started winching their way forwards and upwards. A laborious technique, and one which would certainly minimise the

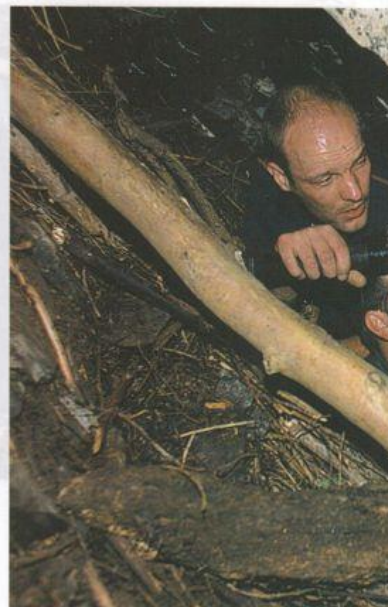
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Above: Russell Taverner, navigating for his dad Clive, felt another ARB would mean he'd have less work to do

Left: Simon Buck and Matt Cook accept the gongs from sponsor Simex

Right: real off-road spirit – Darren McGuinness and Richard Deekham repair their winch on a special stage



chances of disaster in the middle of nowhere, but with a 15-minute time limit on the section they were disqualified while the vehicle's nose was still pointing at the ground.

Next through, by contrast, were Howard Green and Ian Watson in a Mercedes G-Wagen. Having stopped to take a look at the hazard, they steamed in, got stuck and then paid out their winch cable with the idea of lifting the vehicle's nose into the air. The winch was having none of it, not enough wheels were on the ground for the big, heavy Merc to be able to shift itself – a non-functioning front diff lock didn't help here – and once again the time limit came

and went with the team still trying to fight their way out of the gully.

As it turned out, however, not bothering to use bridging ladders or waffles wasn't the biggest sin in the world – even though the organisers had planned the section with the specific intention of forcing competitors to bring them out. After a succession of teams had assiduously put their waffles carefully in place and then contrived to miss them altogether, Simon Buck appeared in his 90 truck-cab, eased into the gully and winched himself out again using about three yards of cable, en route to completing the stage in a time of around three minutes.

This is the kind of performance that's turned the man from North Devon 4x4 into the Manchester United of the off-road challenge scene. And he carried on setting blistering times all day, until a bit too much throttle while wedged against a tree gave his rear diff just a bit too much to think about. He winched his way to the end of the section, but ran out of time – putting what had until then looked like a guaranteed victory in severe doubt.

While Simon was cannibalising the front diff from his 110 tow-truck in order to get himself back on the road, however, other competitors were suffering traumas of their own. Russell Lowton and Ian Foster, for example, had removed and repaired their Suzuki SJ's front springs after catching them on one of the stages and bending them out of shape. Howard Green and Ian Watson, meanwhile, had retired from the event, having split their G-Wagen's gearbox oil cooler, and gone off to Hereford in search of parts in a bid to rebuild it in time for the second day's stages.

As for Nick Field and Steve Cooper, they were already underneath their Discovery for the second time, after the combination of 4.6-litre V8 power and Simex grip proved too much for the vehicle's standard-fit trailing links. On their very first stage, they had limped out after their nearside rear

2002 EXTREME WINCH CHALLENGE

OVERALL

1st Simon Buck and Matt Cook
1627pts
Land Rover 90 Tdi
Winch: Warn 8274
Tyres: Simex

2nd Tony Baskill and Dave Needham
1593pts
Mercedes G-Wagen 300
Winch: Warn 8274/8000
Tyres: Simex

3rd Barry Pluckrose and Robert Philipson
1535pts
Ibex 250S TD5
Winch: Warn 8274/Series 9
Tyres: Simex J2

SPIRIT OF THE EVENT

Stuart Diack and Roger Bruce
Range Rover 3.5
Winch: Superwinch Husky
Tyres: BFGoodrich Mud-Terrain



Above: Alan Wormald keeps it gentle on the clutch – touch the ground here, and you're disqualified

Right: slow and steady from Barry Pluckrose, shaking down his Ilex in time for some intense competition over the following weeks'



wheel had beaten its link to death, tried to drive out from underneath the vehicle and smashed the rear propshaft.

That would be enough to put most people on the trailer back home. But as luck would have it, Clyro has its very own Land Rover specialist in the shape of John Williams, a long-time competitor himself, major mover in the rebirth of the Hillrally and all-round friend of off-roading. A swift visit to his parts department (courtesy of the **ORM** photographer's Land Rover) saw Nick and Steve clambering back up the hill bearing new parts and glad tidings of a bloke in the trade who doesn't try to have your trousers down when you're in a bad way.

An hour or so later, the Discovery was back on its way as Nick and Steve tried to get some of the sections driven while the rest of the competitors were having their lunch break. No sooner had they set off from the first start gate, however, than Nick gunned the engine – and the woods shook with the sound of another propshaft letting go.

Thus condemned to finish in last place, the guys in the Discovery spent the rest of the day trying to work out why a vehicle that had worked without a problem for so long had suddenly started murdering its suspension. As is always the case when a truck gets into trouble, people gather to offer their theories... the most radical was

THE ORGANISERS

With the last competitor completing the last stage of the day, **Extreme Winch Challenge** organisers **Martin Lewis and Pete Codd** spoke to *Off Road Motorsport* about what goes into creating and running an event like this:

ML: I'm very happy now that Sunday evening's arrived! The stress is slowly ebbing away, but I'm very, very pleased that the comments I've had from the drivers has all been positive. They've loved the event. The format is very different to what they're used to, and they're all looking forward and pushing us to do more. So Pete and I are considering whether we're going to do more than one on a year.

ORM: How much work goes into setting up an event like this?

ML: I enjoy it. I enjoy doing the organisation, I've done it in Malaysia on the big event and it's good to do it in England for the boys back here.

ORM: I'm impressed by the number of marshals you've managed to get.

PC: That's really thanks to Cheltenham and Cotswold Land Rover Club – they

have been really good in helping us out. Also, we've got lots of friends who're interested in off-roading... and if you treat people well, they come back again.

ML: Obviously we'd also like to thank the landowner, Selwyn Kendrick, David in the Baskerville Hotel for putting up with us when he had such a busy weekend...

PC: ...Chris Mann at Simex Tyres for putting up the first prize, Cheltenham and Cotswold Land Rover Club for their great contribution of marshals...

ML: ...obviously the mother event, too, because the prize is free entry to the Rainforest Challenge. There's a lot of people interested, but it's such a big commitment to go all the way to Malaysia and compete.

PC: To put on an event like this is very labour-intensive. To have six sections running, you have to have at least twelve marshals, then running marshals and first aid cover. There's always this great fear that you try and organise something, you've got all these great ideas, and then not enough marshals turn up.

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WHAT THEY SAID...

'We've not been fighting today... It's an enjoyable event, because it's a mad rush for twenty minutes and then you've got time to talk. When you've got a nine-hour slog, they get a bit boring – you can do them, but you have to keep going all day to stand a chance.'

Dave Needham, navigator, 2nd overall

'I'm not so sure that these speed events are really my forte. But we'll see at the end of the day – we haven't had any DNFs or anything like that, we've completed everything and we've been in the middle – haven't been the fastest anywhere, haven't been the slowest anywhere. We're trying to drive half-sensibly, because we're trying to save the motor for next week. But we haven't been out for about three months, because there hasn't been anything on event-wise, so it's quite good that we've got a bit of a shake-down.'

Barry Pluckrose, driver, 3rd overall

'We've broken the propshaft and trailing arms three times. Fortunately Simon Buck broke his rear diff, so while we were down there helping him, Steve (navigator) noticed that his trailing arms are an awful lot bigger than the Discovery's, by at least 5mm. And with the Simex tyres, V8 engine, too much power and concrete ground, the trailing arms can't handle it. Simon's are 110 trailing arms, so we'll be going over to them next week... and then we'll take it and cane it!'

Nick Field, driver, 11th overall

'First time on the Rainforest Challenge type of speed event, and I've quite enjoyed it. Different to the normal type of winching, driving, navigation events. Good teamwork. I've not actually been trying that hard – I'm usually much more hyper, but I've had a heavy week!'

Darren McGuinness, driver, 5th overall

'It's being run really well, really professional, lots of marshals, and it's set-out well. It's tough, but manageable – about the right level. It covers from us, in a reasonably standard vehicle, up to Simon and the others, and it's a good balance.'

Russell Lowton, driver, 8th overall

'We broke a back diff, and had to spend an hour stealing one from the front of our 110 to replace it. Apart from a penalty on the cargo section, when I was being... over-exuberant, shall we say... I think we've had some good times... anyway, it'll all come out in the wash.'

Simon Buck, driver, 1st overall

'It's getting harder to keep up these days, to be honest, because everybody's spending so much money on their trucks.'

Stuart Diack, driver, 9th overall

'We're just not fast enough for these events. We'll try again another day.'

Alan Wormald, driver, 4th overall

that the chassis might be out of true, loading up one trailing link beyond the point of no return and, of course, taking the prop with it. Finally, however, everyone accepted that there was just too much power and too much grip around, and that the standard links weren't up to the job. By the time you read this, the vehicle will be sporting 110 trailing links – that's if Nick doesn't get round to fitting the radius arm conversion he's been thinking about for a while.

You'd think that would be enough mayhem for one event, but Sunday dawned and that's when the going got really tough. Clive Taverner broke a halfshaft in his 90, Howard Green burned his G-Wagen's winch out, Russell Lowton's SJ's clutch disintegrated and Simon Buck ripped a brake hose out from beneath his 90 and ended up having to do the rest of the event on his handbrake. Darren McGuinness, meanwhile, had trouble of another sort when a blazing run on a long hillclimb ended with him depositing his 90 on its side. With navigator Richard Deekham gently reminding him to switch off the engine, Darren could see his hopes of improving on an overnight fourth place going up in smoke.

Things didn't get any better when broken gearbox mountings led to the engine and gearbox shifting enough to pull

the downpipe off his exhaust, jam the PTO for his mechanical winch and break the drive keyway, which resisted his attempts to fix it until after he realised the shaft was bent. By the time he'd got his winch working again, he was over the time limit for the section – though in the end, he only lost one place for all his woes.

Leapfrogging him into fourth was Alan Wormald, whose Jeep Wrangler suffered nothing more than a de-rimmed tyre during the course of the event. Barry Pluckrose, too, managed to steer clear of major dramas, keeping his Ibx together for the following week's Bulldog Trophy (see next month's issue) and taking a slow and steady path towards third place overall.

That left a battle between Tony Baskill and Simon Buck for first place. Simon, the clear favourite before the event kicked off, had established a commanding lead on day one as Tony posted some inconsistent times, but the combination of some much-improved driving and an unbeatable winch – a Warn 8274 adapted to take hydraulic power – saw the G-Wagen catching Simon's 90 as day two went on.

Going into his final section, an orienteering course with twenty points to find in as many minutes, Simon knew he needed to reach as many markers as possible to have a hope of overhauling Tony's final score. But without any brakes,

he was struggling he got his 90 from A to B under any sort of control and, as navigator Matt Cook rushed around the course, a cacophony of crashing noises from the undergrowth indicated that in the cockpit, things were getting fraught.

Was it enough? As things worked out, yes – though only by a whisker. Simon Buck's dominance of the Challenge scene continues, but with less than forty points between him and Tony Baskill, it was a close-run thing. Had his handbrake been as effective as that of the average Land Rover with a heavy off-road history, the G-Wagen would have taken the crown – but if you ever wanted an example of the value of vehicle preparation, the 90's ability to shrug off the worst an enthusiastic driver and savage terrain could throw at it showed just how much a good 4x4 is capable of taking.

But it's about a lot more than just building an unbreakable truck and driving like hell until you get to the end. And what gave Simon and Matt the edge over all their rivals was the level of teamwork with which they attacked the stages. While several crews stopped to debate, argue or try and work out what each other were on about, the guys from North Devon 4x4 knew exactly what they were doing – and that's what overcoming the terrain, and the opposition, is all about.