

Desert racing is a very hard thing to understand without experiencing it first hand. There are video clips on the internet that show trucks screaming past, in-car shots of bushes whizzing by, and colorful pictures of high dollar racers in the air. What none of these demonstrate are the hours of violence that each truck experiences throughout a 425 mile race. The bruises and aches I have today are testament to the punishment handed out by such a race.

Parker, AZ is right on the Colorado River and surrounded by thousands of square miles of desert. The Parker 425 consists of 3 laps around a 140 mile course extending far into the desolate landscape. Our team would pilot the #7231 Torchmate Ford under driver of record, Bill Kunz. In most races, one driver of record reflects a small army and in our case represented 4 drivers / co-riders and 4 support crew. I would co-ride with Bill, and Greg Jones would pilot the second half of the race with co-rider Bradley Bolton.

After 275 vehicles are arranged in the correct order and paraded through town, Bill and I take the green flag and brace for our 235 mile leg. I must admit that I am a little nervous about facing the unknown but quickly become comfortable and start calling out turns and hazards from the GPS map. The importance of this job can not be understated as we pass multiple trucks and buggies upside down and crashed within the first ten miles. Visibility is a terrific challenge do to sun, dust, and the constant jarring of the course. Simple tasks like reaching the GPS or focusing on gauges become a constant effort.

We careen down a sand wash and weave around some bushes to make a pass. Suddenly, the truck slows to a stop. "I think we have a flat!" Bill says and I unbuckle to investigate. What I find is more than a flat, the entire wheel and tire are missing. Bill calls the chase crew and I start unbolting tools to make the repair. Unfortunately, the wheel lugs are damaged and only 2 of 5 are in working order. We hope to reach Pit #1 and meet the support crew for repair but as we buckle in truck, they happen upon us. After about an hour of work, we have 4 of 5 lugs operational and are back in the race.

More hammering and jarring. At this point I start noticing my helmet slamming into my head as the truck crashes into the whoops. What are whoops? They are overgrown washboard up to 5 feet deep. Just like washboard, the faster you go, the smoother it is. Control is lost at certain points and it is necessary to slow. The whole process is extremely violent. As we hit the larger bumps I could feel my organs hammering against each other and I recall desert racing being described as "A 24-hour plane crash." I now understand why this is called endurance racing.

Finally we break free of the sand wash and get to the high land. The truck rockets down a single track power line road slowing only to squeeze between the narrow poles. As the road widens Bill opens up all 496hp and we top out at nearly 100 mph. It is very difficult to determine when there is a faster car behind you. Anything can hide in the thick dust and even the loudest sirens are muted. The aggressive way to make a pass is to simply crash into the truck in front of you. I learn this first hand as an unlimited buggy lets us know he wants by. Our speed is about 65 and he hits us doing nearly 90. We both grunt as he slams us and Bill sees the wheel to gain control as the rear of the truck lifts and slides to the side. We both determine it best to just let him by.

We now pull into Pit #3 for fuel and a check of lug nuts. Again we sped off into unending bumps, rocks and turns. To compound this, the rain comes. I am not a meteorologist, but when a 60% chance of rain is forecast for the desert, I expect some sprinkles and enough to maybe keep the dust down. What we get is a downpour. Just keeping our helmet visors clear becomes a challenge and visibility is now our primary concern. What was silt and sand becomes miles of mud. The low areas started to fill with water and the whole race slows. Chances are that if we stop for any reason, we will never get going again. Bill's wet hands are now cold so I radio for gloves and clean towels at the next pit. The truck starts the second lap and the course is now more chewed up. My pain grows. Into the wash we go as the rain continues. We are now quickly becoming soaked and experiencing more problems from the moisture. Our intercom keeps cutting out and Bill's radio button is stuck. This means a total failure of communications. Our only protection from the unseen hazards is my hand signals to Bill. We slow a bit but push the truck harder than the first lap.

Time and again #7231 slams into whoops and holes, each time painfully jarring my head and organs. Eventually I realize I am shivering and becoming cold. With no strength left in my fingers, I am forced to use my complete fist to push the horn button. I am ready to turn the truck over to Greg and Brad and thankful when we leave the wash for the relative smoothness of 30 miles of highland before our exit at Pit #3. Bill and I limp from the truck as the exuberant new crew now takes control. Greg roars #7231 to life, rounds the corner, and exits into miles of desolation.

The now drenched course takes its toll as Greg and Brad decide to rip out the radio button in hopes of communication in the truck. After a while we hear them calling for our chase truck but we are unable to reply. We wait hours before finally getting word that a rear suspension link is broken and our race is over. We meet up with the rest of team after the truck was extracted and help push it in the trailer. What is usually intolerably hot desert was a dark and wet plain of mud.

We would learn the next day that only 76 of the 275 entrants finished the race. Only 2 of nearly 20 in the 7200 class finished. Many teams were forced to abandon their race cars in the desert with hopes of returning the following day to retrieve them. The Torchmate Racing Team was clearly disappointed to not finish but there was some redemption in seeing the challenges that the rest of the field faced. Our new team learned a great deal and will be more prepared for the next race.

I planned to take a couple pictures of the race but the belts were cinched so tight that I had no hope of reaching a camera in my pocket. Leaving anything unsecured is extremely dangerous and 95% of a desert race is unseen by anyone outside of the truck.