

Torchmate Racing #7231 gains invaluable experience, but falls short at Parker 425

The Torchmate Racing team headed to Parker, AZ this past weekend for the Parker 425 desert race. The #7231 desert truck had a new dress on and was ready for a dance. We arrived in Parker on Friday and the sun was shining. It was a beautiful day, but the forecast was calling for a 60% chance of rain on Saturday. We assembled our team and the group's consensus was, "This is the desert, how bad can it be". By the end of Saturday, we would find out.

We woke Saturday morning around 4:45am to darkness and just a light sprinkle. The team all came together in the Main pit around 5:45am. As the crew warmed up the truck my co-driver, Brad Lovell, and I suited up and readied ourselves for battle. While I have run a couple of races in the Jeepspeed class, this would be only my second race in the Torchmate Class 7 Unlimited truck. This was Brad's second desert race and his first in this truck. The rain began to fall more steadily.

At about 6:30am Brad and I left the Main pit and headed to the staging area. The race was scheduled to begin at 7:15am. We found the rest of the Class 7200 trucks in an empty patch of desert next to the entrance to the Bluewater Resort and Casino. Soon the police escort would take us to line up for the start. This line goes on for about a mile or so as the fastest trucks and cars start first. The slower the class, the further back in the line you are. The 7200 class is staged towards the front of the masses just behind the Trophy Trucks, Class 1 Cars and Class 8's. The clouds cleared and the sun began to peak through.

In the staging line our pit crew found us waiting and checked everything over one last time to make sure we were good to go. The line slowly crept forward as the officials turned a car loose onto the course about every 30 seconds. Soon the entire field of 276 cars and trucks would be screaming straight into the sun. That anticipation builds as we get within three to four trucks of the starting gate. An in car camera was installed by Sopwith Motorsports which would capture about the first hour of our race. They came by to see if everything was working as it should. Victor from BF Goodrich was there looking for contingency stickers. He gave us a thumbs up and snapped a couple of pictures. Next thing you know, we are on the line. Casey Folks, the BITD Director, holds up a couple of signs telling us to have fun, be safe and don't hit any cones. He gives us the thumbs up then the light turns from red to green and we are off.

At this point the sun is shining and we are flying right down the middle of Parker's Main Street. It has all been cordoned off and there is a coned chicane at the end of main street designed to slow you down into a 90 degree corner which leads you off into the desert. The sun is low in the sky in front of us as we head out of town. There are a couple of 90 degree turns and then a long straight stretch of whoops that throw the truck in all directions. Thousands of people have lined the right side of the course and all are looking to see some action. We were told the sun could be brutal in the beginning of the race. About now we both thought a few clouds would be nice.

It usually takes me a few miles to get into a rhythm with the truck and the course and my codriver. After a couple of good whoop sections and letting a few trucks by, I began to get comfortable. I remember moving over in a wash to let someone have a shot at passing. Another 7200 truck pulled up next to me

and for whatever reason the switch flipped in my head. I mashed the pedal to the floor and the Ford 4.5 SVO 6 Cylinder engine put all 490+ horsepower to the ground. He did not stand a chance. I felt good and it was time to get moving. We passed vehicle after vehicle flipped over and wrecked on the side of the course.

Brad was doing a fantastic job of calling out the turns and hazards that he saw on the gps. We took a right hand line into a split in the trail while passing a slower truck that went left. As I went for the pass and jumped back onto the main course I felt the left rear drop. We had a problem. I told Brad that I thought we had a flat and I pulled off as far as I could. He jumped out to take a look and the next thing I heard was, "the whole wheel is gone". We were at mile marker 28. We both jumped out and spent about 20-30 minutes trying to mount a spare. As the wheel came off it sheared one of the studs and ruined two more. We called our chase crew and they pulled up on the road right next to us. After about another hour we were ready to get back in the race.

Brad and I climbed back into the Ford Ranger and I asked Greg Jones, who would be driving the second half of the race, whether it was "fixed or not fixed". He knew exactly what I meant. What I was asking was whether I needed to baby it or not. He said, "It is fixed. You are still missing one stud so you may feel some vibration. Don't worry about it. Go, go, go!!!". Like that we were back in the race. It took a few miles again to get comfortable, but soon we were making up ground.

The rain began to fall steadily and the course began to deteriorate. While we were broken down, the lead trophy truck had passed us along with a handful of other leading cars and trucks. We also fell behind all of the slower classes which we would have to blow by now on our way to the front. The race course was one of the roughest that I have seen. I could hear Brad grunting in the passenger seat as we put the Torchmate truck to the test. Not much can really prepare you for the torture that is desert racing.

Mile after mile went by and we were pushing as hard as we could. We got word back in the Main pit that we were making up ground and that we could catch up if we kept on it. There is no question that our truck is one of the fastest in our class. Brad and I are getting more and more comfortable with one another and with the truck. We make a good team. The conditions continued to get worse and the course became a quagmire. The high horsepower motor was making a huge difference for us. We began to pass many vehicles that were getting stuck on course.

Brad and I's leg was going to be 235 miles. At about mile 190 I think both of us would have liked nothing more than to get out of that truck. We were soaked to the bone and coming into the fastest part of the course. As we reached speeds of almost 100mph the only real positive was that at high speed the driving rain would blow off my helmet so that I could see. The truck drifted across the muddy road and pretty much had a mind of its own. I just kept her going in the right direction and never lifted. The rain had shorted out our intercom so Brad and I were reduced to using hand signals to communicate. Brad was pushing the horn to tell people we were passing with his elbow because his hands were so cold that he couldn't press the button. I tried calling our pit crew and the radio button kept sticking open. They

could hear me, but I could not hear them. I pounded on the dash over and over trying to get the button to pop back up. No luck, but I did manage to put a nice dent in the dash and bruise on my hand.

I counted every mile marker that went by as we closed in on Pit 3. Finally we got there. Brad and I had done our job and brought the truck to Greg Jones and Brad Bolton who would bring it home. I pulled into the pit and Greg said, "Get out!". I told him that I needed help because I could not move. Slowly I worked my way out. I helped get them set in the truck and before long they were gone. I have never been so happy to get out of a race vehicle in my life.

We would wait with Brad Bolton's father Ron at Pit 3 until they came through again. I fell asleep in the chase truck. A couple of hours went by before we found out that the truck had succumbed to the drenching conditions and would not keep running. Greg and Brad finally were able to get it started, but ended up breaking the rear link. They were in the middle of nowhere. We had a spare, but there was no way to replace it and cross the finish line before it closed. Our race was over.

The next day at the awards ceremony we found out that out of 276 vehicles that started the race, only 74 would finish. Of those that finished 12 of them only had to complete two laps where our class had to run three laps. Only 2 trucks out of 22 in our class finished. It does not excuse our DNF (Did Not Finish), but at least it makes you realize just how difficult it was out there.

Thank you to our pit crew first and foremost. You guys are troopers. I want to thank everyone at Torchmate CNC Cutting Systems that helps support our team, especially Carol Woods and Jack Douglass. Thank you to Thermadyne, Shaffer's Offroad, BF Goodrich, Sway-A-Way, Pirate4x4, Ford, Sopwith Motorsports, and BITD for putting on such a great race.

Next stop for Torchmate Racing is the King of the Hammers in Southern California February 26th & 27th and then on to the World Extreme Rock Crawling series (W.E. Rock) in Tucson, AZ March 20th thru 22nd. The Torchmate 7200 truck will be put to its next desert test next in Primm, NV at the BITD Terrible Town 250 April 16th thru 19th. Please stop by our booth at one of these great events and say hello.