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RACING FROM THE RIGHT SEAT

BY NATALIE LOVELL

When Brad is not piloting his 232 AMSOIL-Torchmate Ranger he is driving his F-350 to and from competitions. This is when I get to practice my co-piloting skills which I sometimes use to aid Roger in his #32 Ford Ranger. Sure it's not the same thing, we're not dodging orange cones, but we are navigation a 60-foot long hauler through some of our nation's largest cities, and that can be a feat to accomplish. Being a co-driver also means rehashing the event's highlights and lowlights over, and over, and sometimes over again.

This weekend was no different. While nearly all our events fit in a busy schedule, Father's Day weekend made for a conflict and caused the Colorado based team members to split forces. Roger raced back-to-back XRRA under #232 on Saturday and #32 on Sunday in Colorado Springs. This allowed both trucks to stay in the hunt for the season championship and freed Brad up to head to Reno, NV to defend the We-Rock championship and join team members Bill Kunz and Jesse Haines spotted by Mike Shaffer and Brian Howard, respectively in the We-Rock Round #3.

With the splitting of forces, the Colorado Springs based team needed a dynamic and hard working spotter to fill the shoes of Roger. There was no better fit than Nick Socha who works for Mike Shaffer at Shaffer's Off-road and is already an extension of the Torchmate team. While never having worked with Brad, Nick proved very valuable on the super-tight cone infested courses built in the middle of downtown Reno; sandwiched between hotels in a parking lot the size of a football field. It is without a doubt I believe that these courses were a true test of spotters to guide and communicate with their drivers. All the while we sideliners: wives, mothers, fathers, children, fans, etc. watch and wait patiently with our stomachs in our throats, teeth clinched, waiting for the cars to inch ever so far forward from one progression gate to the next.

I always thought it would get easier with time, but in nearly seven years of competition is hasn't gotten easier, in fact, if anything it has gotten harder to watch. The courses have become taller (with higher exposure) and tighter (Reno being the best example of this). But it's not the fear of injury that brings out the anxiety. "After several competitions you realize that rollovers are common and injuries are not, so you stop worrying about that and cringe every time he hits a cone," says Maureen, Bill's wife. As the mother of Brad and Roger, Rennie is always asked if she gets scared watching, "I am concerned about safety for sure, but I've been around long enough now to trust the safety measures and equipment, now it's just the time limits and cones. You want them to succeed."

This weekend I stood on the side lines in Reno and watched as Bill and Brad drove through nearly impossible courses, but what I was most amazed at was the wives and mothers that stood on the sidelines and cringed at every cone mowed and hung their heads low when transmissions blow-up just 20 feet from the finish (as is the case for Bill and Mike) and when trucks roll 20 feet inside the start gates (like Brad and Nick). It has been said that a bad day of racing is better than a good day in the office, but I

wonder how many of those people have stood on the sidelines and watched their loved one chase the sky or drop off a rock. At the end of the day Bill and Mike ended up in fifth after driving through the final shoot-out course (which was a culmination of all four obstacles they had driven earlier in the day) and found themselves high centered on a rock just 20 feet from the final climb when the transmission made a sound that made us sideliners cringe. I remember looking over my shoulder at Maureen and on my other side was Joan (Bill's mom, visiting in from out of town) and seeing them look as defeated as if they were Bill or Mike. I would know that same feeling just 30 minutes later when Brad and Nick rolled just inside the same course to end in 3rd place. This was Joan's first live rock crawl and I think it impressed her to watch her son drive through courses like he'd done it for years. Standing next to her just before the final course the announcer mentioned Bill's impressive climb from rookie to top contender and how he'd come from nowhere, when Joan says to me, "He didn't come from nowhere", and then told me how just a few short years ago he was taking flying lessons and that "he would excel at anything daring". Maureen points out that she can't necessarily differentiate between a wrench and screwdriver, but that she can be Bill's biggest supporter and cheerleader, "Bill just loves the sport, has found it challenging (and frustrating at the same time), but I don't see him giving it up for a long time". When she watched their final course and saw them slip from fourth to fifth she felt all the emotions of a driver or spotter. That's a supporter to the end, someone who's always pulling for the team and wanting them to do well.

But when racing is good, it is great! Jesse drove his rear-steer car around those tight cones and at the end of the first day had a smoking lead with -14 points (the only negative points posted all weekend). For those of you who regularly follow the sport of rock crawling its typical to see a few points on the board at the end of the weekend, but these courses were so tight that the pro-modified and unlimited groups ended the weekend with 100 plus points (that's ten cones for each team). I can't remember the last time anyone in our team took ten cones in one weekend! Jesse was able to finish in 1st place.

Roger who was holding down the fort with team member Mark Hayward filling in as spotter/crew chief in the two Colorado Springs races drove his car with authority. Placing 8th both days Roger has grown into and now appears to have grown out of his race car. Standing on the sideline in Colorado Springs was Hallie (Roger's wife) and Rennie. I wasn't standing next to Rennie this weekend, but I know from experience that she likely turned away only to turn back immediately to face the action. She recalls, "The anxiety, generated by an intense desire for them to perform as they require of themselves, became almost unbearable". Rennie is also the resident cook for the team as she provides food for the racers and child care for the children so that the parents can race and perform their necessary duties. This is truly a family effort.

Jud, the team statistician, just might top the list as the most enthusiastic fan of the team. Besides running around the rocks like a mountain goat with one and sometimes two cameras he is known for his up-to-the minute scores which proves invaluable when trying to figure out which bonus lines to take and when to take them. Without a doubt his vestment in our team has put Torchmate on top and well on our way to a championship-winning year. Our efforts now turn to our next rockcrawl in Oroville, California. Shortly after that, the group will undertake "Vegas to Reno, The Long Way" a 1000 mile race of epic proportions.

Video of Roger's runs can be seen here:

http://www.youtube.com/results?search_type=&search_query=lovellracing32&aq=f while Bill's efforts are cataloged here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QdCdkbVtY>

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