

2013 Taupo 1000

After 3 attempts at the 1000km at Taupo expectations were high in the Sleeman camp that after spending too much time and money success to some degree should theoretically be ours for the taking.

A few panic moments in the weeks prior getting the car as ready as we could, the mental preparation, hours at the gym sorting my bruised tail bone and then the weather goes and turns to shit on our parade. Never mind, offroad racers are tough critters/ridiculously stubborn and with the weather improving we all rushed off south into the torrential rain primed and ready for action. We arrived about Thursday lunchtime after what felt like 4 hours driving in a carwash and thankfully the weather had improved to intermittent drizzle for the afternoon. The Counties Manukau Club marquee was already humming with our four other club entries unloading gear and cars. So after unloading the truck of tools and equipment into our pop-up tent on the site right next door and the car into the main club tent we were all ready and excited to take off on the track drive around in our 4x4'a and see what the organisers had dealt up.

It took 90 odd vehicles well over 3 hours to get around the 50kms after bottlenecks, track hold ups and a grinding parade through ruts, holes, mud pits, mud slides and terrain that made Woodhill seem like a short dash to the dairy. Suitably unimpressed I know I wasn't the only one ashen faced and shocked at what was in store for us all, so instead of saving time doing our registration and scrutineering that night we just jumped into the truck and drove back to our De Bretts cabin to down a few bebies, suck it up and get ready for Friday.

Enjoying a short sleep in because I didn't see much point in enduring another 3 hours on the second drive round on Friday we arrived to a true off-road spectacle. This years pit area was expansive, the cars bigger and better, the weather so much sunnier then yesterday.

Emotionally buoyed, it was a quick trip to registration and an even quicker scrutineering, have the transponder fitted and it was back to the club tent for breakfast expertly prepared by Warren and co.

Although the car was ready to go I still harboured serious doubts about my own capacity to finish 1000kms on the coarse I had been over the day before and was reassured by the other guys who had just got back from that days rekkie that over night the track had really improved. So it was sit back, drink coffee and watch the other class's complete their time trials and wait for Class1 at 3.30pm.

Unfortunately, it wasn't going well for some of the other club entries in the tent. Phil Johnson in class 10 not only had been beavering away preparing the tent and tools etc he was having all sorts of problems on his car that was to ultimately end his campaign prematurely on both days. Despite that, Phil remained a positive and thoroughly helpful member of the club team throughout. Jimmy Johnston and his team in his immaculately prepared class 10 looked hot to trot and on our other side Greg Mullins was as happy as we all were that he had actually got the car into the the tent in one piece and he was ready to go. Unfortunately the same could not be said for the Elf sponsored Pro lite Truck driven by Nick Hall and Nick Leahy. In the open practice the truck suffered from a frustrating carburettor problem that just wouldn't go away despite a massive effort by all to solve it. To top it off when everything looked good at the start of their time sprint the power steering pump all of a sudden blew oil over the headers and nearly ended their campaign in a fiery pool of molten aluminium. That proved too serious a problem and their weekend was over. Credit due though, both Kevin and Nick after realising their weekend was screwed, rallied to support and motivate the rest. Nick Leahy who had flown across from Australia for the event was left without a drive then so we made the decision to offer him a drive in 197 which he accepted, solving the problem for both of us. My time trial, while I had planned for a grid position a third way back was a mess, not helped by my eyes in poor light I found I was monstered by the rest of class 1 and pulled off after 4

laps giving me a grid position 69.

Saturday morning feeling great after a fine sleep, 6.30 at the track, breakfast ready by our own fine catering staff, heaps of good coffee. Grid up 7.30, a massive turnout, talking to a couple without much experience of off-roading but had travelled up from the south island for, are completely blown away by the professionalism on display.

I started on the first 3 laps with Poss as my passenger (our total age 125) and immediately have a problem with googles going through 2 in the first 5 km. Pace is pretty hectic but start to settle in real easy. Though there seems to be major carnage with cars and trucks littering the sides of the track. Finish 3 laps in one piece and driver change with Nick who immediately goes out in blistering pace, keeps my pride and joy together for 4 laps and brings it in pristine all but an annoying electrical miss which stuck with us all weekend. I completed the last 3 laps with my mate Steve, a virgin to off-roading and never to be the same person again. Pretty overjoyed at completing the 10 laps and finishing 17th on first day.

Not much prep/repairs to do and after a couple of cold beers supplied by the club we were off home for an early night. Not much hope for that though, liver and bacon at Stag Park and a few more beers than I would have liked and it was not that early after all.

Sunday morning and I am pretty relaxed, Sleep in even later but still at track at 7.00 for bacon and egg buttie and coffee. On grid at 7.30 with Poss in passenger seat still fizzing at the bit after Saturday. Same deal as yesterday but faster, a lot faster. Weather was perfect, sunshine, dry hard track, couldn't believe our luck. 60 odd starters after the carnage the day before seemed quite good but the speed was quicker today and you had no option but give it shit and hope to hell. Really starting to experience a worsening electrical miss but tending to stay mid range and can still rev out to the rev limiter which, on the open bits is close to 180 kph which is fast enough for this old heart. Changed drivers in 9th place and Nick took off with his mate in the passenger seat and was on the pace so quickly it wasn't long before we were in 6th place. This was looking to be a dream come true, if we could hold it together, maybe, just maybe we could get a podium finish. 4th lap, disaster, Nick comes through with a loose left front wheel and an anxious time until he manages to bring it back only just with a broken front trailing arm and our weekend is finished. No regrets, no hissy fits, this is motor racing and its what happens.

All in all, we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves .After that first drive around the track I was amazed how much fun I had on that track in the end, I take my hat off to the team who put so much hard work and effort into it and thank them for the experience. Likewise, a huge effort by Tony Saelmen and his crew and congratulations on a fantastic weekend.

Thanks to my sweetheart, Dianne for all the love and support, you're a keeper for sure, Poss for the hard work and motivation and the shared love of speed.

Counties Manukau Off-road Club, your the best. Even though our tent had our share of disappointments for some, the atmosphere was one of continuous fun, enjoyment, encouragement, support and a true spirit of clubmanship. I would like to congratulate our club committee in a putting on a great effort to support its members and I for one can't wait for the next Taupo 1000. Bring it on, baby.