

JOHN BUFFUM'S WINTER CHALLENGE 2025

We decided the first event of the year to run would be John's Winter Challenge. So we loaded up the family car (Toyota Highlander with 118,000 miles) with the required emergency safety gear—flares, safety triangles, tow rope, jumper cables, shovel, work gloves, battery operated air compressor, etc. on a Friday afternoon and left for northern Vermont from New Jersey. The event was scheduled to start Saturday late afternoon and end early Sunday morning. We ran the event on our normal all season radial tires (Michelin Cross Climate)—although I will admit that snow tires were a mandated requirement. No issues driving—but glad there was no snow or freezing rain on the rally course. The weather was nice and sunny—they had about a foot of snow several days earlier but the transportation department did a great job on road clearing. Of course, the sunny day leads to snow melt and subsequent freezing on road surface when the temperature drops at night. There definitely were a significant amount of Subaru's at the event with driving lights and all wheel snow tires. John adjusted the time allowance provisions to be in 30 second, then one minute incrementally (30, 1:30, 2:30, etc.). You could not take a 10 second or 20 second time allowance. The maximum time allowance was 29.5 minutes-- which was actually pretty handy on the one leg we had to take a 20.5 minute time allowance to figure out where we went wrong. The few vehicles entered with only two wheel drive followed the same course but had lower speeds in several of the rally legs.

The route covered 221.8 miles of mostly unpaved country roads with 53 timed controls and three off course controls (15 second penalty for going off course—of which we managed to hit one—originally thought it was a L at T when the intersection turned out be closer to a Y-- my bad). There were two sections to the event with a nice one hour break in the middle. There was a 20 mile map rally leg just before the mid-rally break. Not sure how many rallyists are exposed to following a map!! The rally leg coming out of the mid-rally break was a straight line map leg of about 8 miles—also a little different type of route following. The rest of the rally was all tulip instructions. The ! warning at the instruction stating “hard squiggle left and right” lived up to its billing—it was pretty tricky (and exciting) getting through the curves. The course had a lot of timing helpers with John providing elapsed time from the restart to assist rallyists staying on time. Every restart had GPS co-ordinates to allow you to find your way back to being on course in the event you erred and wandered off course. The route instructions were large, easy to read in a moving car, and each leg had its own page(s).

There were 22 entries. The overall winners were the team of Paul Choniere/Ralph Beckman in class “A” with 23 points (which is really, really impressive under those road conditions since that averages out to ½ second a control). The winners in class L (which was a combined G and L under SCCA rules) was Satish Gopalkrishnan/Savera D'Souze with 259 points. I would note their score would have been 19 except they maxed a few controls after “over thinking” the route instruction that stated Left, not at “Stop” (no mileage provided and you went through a few stop intersections before you could make the left. I think they went left at the first intersection and got lost). They used the GPS coordinates of the next restart to get back on course. The class SOP winner was Alex Kuhner/Peter Monin with 303 points. The class S winner was James Blakemore/Phil Lamoreaux with 356 points. We finished sixth overall. Everyone that makes it through at least one control in the second section and comes to the finish location gets a dash plaque stating “Winter Rally Challenge Finisher”.

Since the navigator had a family commitment for a college day visit with his wife and kids for first thing Sunday morning (had to be home by 7AM), we left immediately after the rally ended and were unable to make it the awards presentation and therefore unable to share stories regarding the night's trials and tribulations. After driving 1,030 miles over the weekend, made it back home in Jersey at 6:30 AM. Took a nap and then put away the non-used emergency gear. (Note: For the 100 miles we drove on I-89 and I-91 in Vermont on early Sunday morning, we saw exactly two cars on the road heading south. Talk about a rural environment!

John is to be commended on the professionalism and quality of the rally presentation and on the rally course. I had a blast driving at or below the posted speed limit (mostly) on the unpaved back country roads of Vermont. I don't get a chance to drive on unpaved roads in New Jersey—if they even exist anymore. (Pine Barrens sand roads are different from a handling perspective). Unfortunately, there will be no Summer Challenge event this year so you'll have to wait for next year's Winter Challenge. Thanks John- looking forward to your next event.