

Targa Newfoundland 2007 – a study in “If it can go wrong, it will”

With the exception of people sustaining personal injuries or having health problems, it's hard to imagine that any stretch of 10 days could possibly go any worse for two people than what Nadine and I experienced this year at the 2007 edition of Targa Newfoundland. And to make matters worse, we had such high expectations for ourselves. We had planned for months, we had watched videos from our 2006 campaign, we had checked the car over a dozen times, we made promises and commitments to our sponsors like [Continental Tire](#), LSB Bank, and [Autobahn Collision](#). We did everything we could to make this the most enjoyable, and hopefully most rewarding, event that Nadine and I had ever competed in....and it all began to fall apart right from the start.

A little background

First, let's start at the beginning. What is Targa Newfoundland anyway? Targa Newfoundland bills itself as the Ultimate Motorsports Adventure, which is an extreme understatement. Modeled after the old Targa Florio in Italy, and more recently Targa Tasmania in Australia and Targa New Zealand, Targa Newfoundland is a week long adventure that tests you and your car's stamina, mental and physical strength, and skill. It takes you through little fishing villages, local suburban neighborhoods, back country roads, and some of the most beautiful countryside in the world. Didn't you ever want to run flat out through your subdivision? Buzz through that really cool road you like to drive, or run through the middle of town *without* fear of being stopped by the police? It's 5 competitive days of driving to a stage, driving as fast as you can from start to finish, driving to the next stage, and doing it all over again in a new place. Multiply that by 40 stages and you have Targa. In the evenings, you make sure your car is all in one piece, do repairs as necessary, and park in the town ice rink for a car show (we *are* in Canada, after all, and all towns have hockey rinks) so all the locals can come and see up close who and what just ran through their neighborhood.

Unlike normal races, each class has a handicap factor based on the year and modifications of the car. You're given a time to beat for each stage: beat the time, and you've aced it. Take longer than the time, and you get penalty seconds. The team with the lowest penalty time after all 5 days wins.

One of the big goals is to win the coveted Targa Plate. For each stage, there is also a "Trophy" time. If you beat the Trophy time for EVERY SINGLE stage all week, you win the plate. Have one really bad stage or mechanical difficulty, and you're out. It's a measure of consistency and endurance, and a surprising few win the Targa Plate each year.

Oh, and along the way, EVERYONE considers you a celebrity and wants your autograph. Children, teens, adults....everyone. For that moment, you are the most amazing person in those people's lives. It's very, very cool. Check out the details at www.targanewfoundland.com.

NaroEscape Motorsports is a team made up of me and my wife, Nadine. In 2004, a friend of ours Casey Holzman asked me if I would like to navigate for this Targa thing. For some reason, I said yes, and we had a great time and finished very well. We ran again in 2005 and didn't have a good week, crashing Casey's car on the first day. After that, Nadine said she wanted to compete. She had been a part of our crew in '04 then a Competitor Relations Officer for Targa in 2005, so she knew everything about what she was getting into. We went about planning and building our car – a 1971 Porsche 914-6 that we named "Huey". Details on Huey can be found at www.naroescapemotorsports.com. I drove, Nadine navigated. Since I navigated before, I could help her with all the things the navigator needed to do, so her learning curve was pretty short.

In 2006, we did great, finishing 11th overall out of 80+ cars. We had issues all week with shifting (remember, it's a 914), and the engine was not really set up for low rpm torque. But we pushed through,

and had a blast. For '07, we figured we'd do great: we fixed the shifting issues, we had a new engine that had much better low end pull, and we had a year under our belts for driver/navigator communication. What could go wrong?

The problems begin

First of all, don't EVER say "what could go wrong". You know when you watch a movie and bad things happen to the lead character? Then they just keep getting worse, and worse, and worse, and you think to yourself "yeah, right, nothing ever goes this bad for anyone". Well, I'm here to tell you that things CAN get that bad.

The whole trip was a nightmare from the start. A friend of ours, Delmar Kiser, offered to drive the truck and trailer holding 2 cars up to Halifax for us, where Nadine and I would meet him to bring it across the 15 hour ferry to Newfoundland. (the other car was owned by Harold Seagle – a 1980 911 SC Targa). Only hours into his trip, the trailer blew a tire, then the truck wouldn't start because the batteries were dead. Not only dead, but they looked all burnt up and shorted out. He called me and I jumped in my car and ran up the highway to get him new batteries. We replaced both of them, and he was on his way. OK, no big deal, just a flat and some batteries. Unfortunately, the next day, in Harrisburg, PA, he had starting problems and found that the bad batteries had shorted out the starter. So he got that replaced and kept going.

He had no issue all the way to Halifax, so we thought all was behind us. We met him and drove it to Sydney, NS and stayed the night, meeting up with some old and new Targa competitors for dinner. Everything was getting better, and the Targa feeling was starting to come back.

Friday morning we got in the truck to drive to the ferry. About 1 mile into the trip, the "service engine soon" light went on, and the truck started to lose power. I stepped on the gas, and we slowed, then it picked up speed. All I wanted to do was get on the ferry. 5 miles from the ferry, the truck died on the side of the highway.

Competitors Doug Mephram, Tony Kloosterman, and Sebastian Borugon stopped and we determined that the truck was not going to start. We called for a tow, and these guys took all of our stuff to the ferry in their trucks and trailers (thanks everyone).

We got towed to the local Ford dealership, with the hopes that it was a minor problem and we could get on our way. We had an hour or so until we had to be at the ferry, so we had a small amount of breathing room, but not much.....

About 45 minutes later, it was determined that the fix was not easy or quick. It was the injector control module that had to be replaced. So, we decided to unload the cars and drive them onto the ferry, leaving the truck and trailer in Nova Scotia. So, we first unloaded our 914, then Harold's 911....which wouldn't start. We tried and tried, but it wouldn't turn over. All the Ford mechanics came out, and nothing.... I called Harold, who was flying into Newfoundland with his navigator Stan Pendergraft and our crew member Bill Dunster. Back and forth I went between each of them as to how to fix it. None of the suggestions worked. We called everyone we knew, nobody could figure it out. It wasn't getting a spark and we had no idea why. Finally, after 30 minutes, one of the mechanics jumped a circuit to the coil and got it started. I jumped in the car, Nadine hopped in ours, and we race to the ferry.... only to see it leaving in the distance.....

So, here we are in Nova Scotia, all our stuff (luggage included) was on the ferry to Newfoundland, and we weren't.

2 hours later there was another ferry to Newfoundland, but it was headed to the opposite side of the

island (Port aux Basques), making it a 10 hour drive from the ferry drop off, to St John's - our destination. The next ferry to Argentia (our original ferry drop off point) was not until Monday, so we couldn't wait.

Keep in mind the time here: the Port aux Basques ferry leaves at 5pm, getting in at midnight (it's shorter than the Argentia ferry). Then we have a 10 hour drive ahead of us in 2 track cars that are in no way comfortable to drive for long periods of time. Well, we had no choice but to do it, and off we went.....

Standing on the deck of the ferry, Nadine said to me "well, at least we're heading in the right direction". Now THAT'S positive thinking.

....so, here we are, driving across Newfoundland at 1am. Keep in mind, NOTHING is open at that time of night, not to say there is even anything on this side of the island to be open anyway. 3 hours into the drive, we realize we're going to need gas soon, again, NOTHING is open. We stop and start wondering what's going to happen if we run out. Then, like an oasis in the desert, we find a station and fill both cars up completely - they were almost empty!!!

The rest of the trip to St. Johns was uneventful except for the moose I kept seeing at around 3-5amVERY BIG moose. In the dark, and in a small sports car, they look 10 feet tall. Moose accident deaths are more common than you would like to think in Newfoundland, and based on our trip so far, I was almost expecting to hit something. Oh, and the rain and fog...and the bumps in the road...and the fact that there was no heat and it was 40ish degrees...and I couldn't turn off Harold's car or we'd never get it started again...but that's it. Uneventful.

So we make to St. John's, tired, worn out, but we're there. We've been awake since 7am Friday morning, and it's 11am Saturday. All goes well with tech, Harold's car still has starting issues, but our 914 "Huey" is running great. Bill and Richard Burpee of Mantis Sport adjust the ride height on Huey, but that's it. Everything else is great.

Targa Competition

Sunday is Prologue day, a day to do a couple runs to get acquainted with the car and the crew with each other. We do well, running fast and smooth. Good day all around.

Monday is the first day of real competition. Rain is threatening, but nothing really in the morning. We head out to our first 2 stages and ace them easily. Huey is running great, Nadine is on the mark, and I am feeling very comfortable again.

We stop in Placentia for breakfast, then make 2 runs to the lunch spot. It's starting to rain a bit, but not bad. We ace both stages, even after I skid into someone's driveway and stall the car. It wouldn't start for a few seconds, but it turns out we made the stage anyway...

So at this point, we're thinking "all the bad stuff is behind us....right?"

Unfortunately, it only got worse.....

We head out from lunch back the way we came. It's raining, and the road is very slick. I back down a notch or 2, and we're doing great.

Right near the end of the run, there's a wood bridge. Nothing very amazing, about 20 feet long or so over a stream. We come down the hill, point the car straight on the bridge....and spin instantly. Unfortunately, I was going fast enough to not be about to save it and we head off the road. I have no

idea what made us lose grip, but we found out afterward that this bridge was fairly new, and the chemical treatment in the wood was still seeping through. So it was like an oil slick.

For those of you that have spent years driving on the track you know: you don't try to jerk the car back on the road, you drive straight, settle the car down, and get back on the road under control.

However, this is not a race track. The road had a big dip down then up into a field, which launches us airborne, we land on the nose, flip over onto the tail, then land on the wheels again. Yes, you read that correct, we flipped nose to tail. It happened so fast, we didn't even realize what happened until we stopped, and saw the hood buckled in front of us.

We both climbed out of the car stunned, shocked, and quite upset, but not injured at all. As we sat there thinking of what just happened, another car came across the bridge and spun off too, rolling over sideways. Then 2 more spun off into the woods.

Had a marshal before the bridge not started waving people to slow down, there would have been much more carnage. As it was, 5 cars went off there, 4 others were close, and most of the rest tip-toed across due to the marshal's warning. Unfortunately, we had no such warning.

As we looked over our car, we realized our beloved little 914 Huey was totaled. Nadine and I are devastated. We both feel we've lost a member of the family since we've put so much time and effort (not to mention money) into getting this car exactly as we want it. Who's fault was it? Who knows. It was a racing accident. Unfortunately, it happens. But this car was special, and it will be missed....

We then realize that we have a bit of a dilemma: Our truck and trailer are still in Nova Scotia. Since we left it, our plan was to run the week, then drive both cars on the following Sunday back to Port aux Basques, over the ferry, and load them up back on the truck. Unfortunately, that's now not possible.

10 Hours on the Newfoundland Countryside....again

So, Tuesday morning, we borrow a local's car (thanks Andy) and head out to Port aux Basque (10 hours). The dealer is kind enough to bring the now fixed truck and trailer and load it on the ferry on their side, so we can get it on our side....but not until Wednesday morning. We stay in Port aux Basque with the hope of having a good meal. At this point, we had only been eating truck stop food and snacks, so a nice bottle of wine and good food was much needed.

We order a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon. When the waitress asks "is that red or white?", we know we're in trouble. She comes back in a few minutes saying "we don't have that kind, but we have another red one, do you want it". "Sure", I said...I mean, how bad can it be? Well....remember how our week has been going....we should have ordered water instead.

Wednesday morning we rush over to the ferry early since it was supposed to be in at 7am. And we wait. And wait. And keep waiting until 9:30 when it finally arrives. We load up the loaner car, and head back to St. John's (10 hours and truck stop food), looking forward to the return trip again on Sunday (10 hours and truck stop food again).

While we were traversing the desolate Newfoundland countryside, Bill took it upon himself to see what he could do about getting Huey running. Bill owns Autobahn Collision Center, so he knows a thing or two about body work. When we get back, Huey is running!! Not pretty, and not completely straight, but he runs. Amazing... He runs well enough for us to bring him across the ceremonial finish line to all the fanfare on Friday. People are shocked and amazed to see it, though most had no idea how bad it was.

So, you'd think it was over right? Well, to top it all off, the event has a "Spirit of Targa" award. There is no defined criteria for this award, just the team or person that showed true "spirit" or persevered through adversity. You'd think with all we went through, we'd win that, right? Nope. Just to put the icing on the cake for the week, we didn't even get that.

So ends our Targa adventure. Truck problems, 40 hours of driving back and forth across Newfoundland in the rain, fog, cold, dark, etc., eating at gas stations 4 days as we drove back and forth, staying in little b-f nowhere places, standing out in the cold to help marshal a stage so the other competitors could run....Oh, and totaling our wonderful little car. This is supposed to be fun right????

As the weeks have passed since returning from Targa, we are still very saddened by the loss of a great car and unfortunate circumstances that surrounded the entire week. While we not only lost a car, we lost the time spent with the competitors and friends we've met through the years. That's a big part of Targa: the camaraderie that develops throughout the entire competition. From the organizers to the volunteers to the competitors to the fans; everyone is there pulling for each other to do well and have fun. When you experience Targa, it gets in your blood. It truly is a family that's hard to let go. Part of our high expectations was not only finishing well, but hanging out with all our friends for evening socials and "stage stories". Targa is truly something you need to experience at least once. Accidents like ours are rare, so don't use our experience as a gauge for the event. Put together a solid car, with good suspension, good torque, that can take a beating on rough roads, and a driver and navigator that get along and communicate well, and you will do just fine. I still think a 914 is an excellent car to run with...it just doesn't like wet wooden bridges!

Will we go back? Maybe not in 2008 (we don't have a car right now), but we definitely will in the near future. Heck, where else can you buzz through a city and have everyone cheer you on! It is definitely one of the most amazing events we have ever been a part of, bar none. I do PCA Club Racing and both of us are PCA Certified Driving instructors so we do a lot of track time. This is nothing like that....it's much, much more.

We learned a lot about ourselves too. Some would think that through an adventure like this, our relationship would be a bit strained. On the contrary, we've realized that we can work through the worst of adversity and find solutions to make the best of a situation. We joked a lot, talked a lot, and cried a lot together during that week. We realized that we might be trying to do too much right now, and need to "simplify" our lives a bit (by the way, I am also the President of the Carolinas Region PCA and owner of Exclusive Motors, both of which are full time jobs). We'll be focusing on our other 914 "Papa Smurf" for racing and Drivers Eds for a while, then figure what we're doing from there. Bob Giannou, President of Targa Newfoundland, says that Targa is a life changing experience. He is absolutely correct in that. You will always take something positive away from Targa. We did, even after having such a miserable week.

Say a prayer for Huey...he was a good car that served us well. We poured our hearts and soul into building and perfecting him. Bill says maybe Huey will ride again someday. We can only hope...