

# Rallycross: My first year

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I've wanted to race cars for as long as I can remember, but my infatuation with rally was spearheaded by the release of a popular racing video game's sequel in 1999. That was how I was introduced to rally and ever since, the thrill of racing a car in conditions that provide minimal traction and being the one behind the wheel has been my dream.

Since I knew little about rally, I thought it would be appropriate to attend a rally school. It was at rally school that rallycross was introduced to me as the first logical step into Stage Rally. It was a platform where I'd continue to develop driving skills, learn the limits of my car, what works and what doesn't, all without the fear of driving off a cliff. Undoubtedly, rally school ranks very high as the best two days of my life. Two days of sliding around in the dirt and mud, I couldn't have imagined it better. From that point forward, it was all I could think about.

I bought my car shortly after rally school, and it took a little less than a year to start racing. While not the most popular choice among rallycrossers, I decided to go with a '92 Honda Civic hatchback. I chose 2WD because it allows me to progress into Stage Rally. The parts are easily accessible, affordable and my husband is experienced in working on them. Finding one in our price range that hadn't been completely desecrated was a matter of some difficulty. Since the car I bought had an engine swap that put me in modified class, my husband and I went ahead and added stronger suspension parts, limited slip and a few other non-"go-fast" parts.

Over the months of building my car I had been anxiously awaiting my first rallycross, but when it came down to my first race I was terrified. I was so nervous I barely talked to anyone, including my husband. While waiting for my runs, I just sat in the car with my helmet on. I was afraid I would get lost on the course or do something incredibly stupid to



Photos courtesy Jennifer Johnson

**Jennifer Johnson stirs up a cloud of dust at the Brooklyn Bash rally sprints.**

embarrass myself. Despite my unapproachable demeanor, after each run the other drivers still came to see how I had fared and told me I did well, even though I hadn't.

Although my nerves affected my performance, I'm proud of myself for not allowing them to keep me from continuing. After several races, I inevitably became confused on a course to the extent I had to reverse the car in order to proceed. I was embarrassed, but to my surprise my embarrassment was extremely short-lived. To this day, with every race I become less nervous, have more fun and improve.

What fascinates me about rallycross is that it's not necessarily a sport for fast cars. In fact, when it comes to the cars, fast or expensive won't have much bearing on how you place. This is a sport where winning depends more on how well you drive as opposed to what you drive. The turns are technical, and speeds are kept minimal. The course conditions continually change and require the driver to be aware and adaptive.

There have been times I've gone too fast when it was too slippery, and ever so gracefully glided into a wall of cones. Conversely, there have been times where the dirt had dried, and by comparison to my fellow competitor's times, I learned I hadn't gone nearly fast enough. The course is designed to challenge the driver, and I take comfort knowing that even the

most skilled drivers find themselves eating orange rubber right along with me.

There's something to be said about the rally spirit. Even though these are competitive events, the atmosphere is relaxed, fun and inviting. It's an ideal environment for newcomers. When I recently broke my car, everyone around was willing to help, another driver even lent me a part off his own car so I could finish my runs.

I've never raced outside of rallycross but it's the only venue in which I've left expensive tools among other items unattended while I grabbed lunch and didn't worry about them not being there when I returned. In a world full of people out for themselves, it's comforting to be around people who seem to look out for each other.

My first year in rallycross is the prelude of several more to come. Doing something you love may be priceless, but it certainly helps when it's affordable. For me, racing makes all the hard work and tribulations of normal everyday life more bearable. It's my few minutes of serenity when the car becomes an extension of me, and my only thoughts are of the course ahead.

*Jennifer Johnson lives in Lacey with her husband Harley and two rescued American pit bull terriers. She works for the state. Most of their nonrally time is spent toying with their cars or remodeling their home.*