

SLIPPING *and* SLIDING



The green flag drops and a couple of dozen old cars charge into a huge pileup in the first turn. Now that's ice racing!

By Vic Michener

minden, Ontario. You're standing in a big field of snow with the wind ghosting miniature flurries against the spruce and pines. It's so damn cold your nostrils crackle. This is block heater country.

Up here, you laugh when Mother Nature dumps snow on Atlanta or Vancouver or Toronto; you feel you've mastered some secret skill when you see all those unprepared drivers spinning their wheels, sliding helplessly.

Nearly every Saturday and Sunday during January and February, Tom Prentice gets up at 8 a.m. and drives through the cold morning air to that big white field where his nine-year-old Skoda awaits him. He jumps in the battered car, starts



Wild and wooly: the turns are where the action is in ice racing





Whoops: maintaining control when you've got glare ice underneath and die-hard competitors all around can be a problem

up the 1300 cc engine, and before long he's crunching across the snow to where the track lies, deep blue and slick. He actually enjoys driving on treacherous ice, slush and snow. But then, he's an ice racer, rubber tire class.

When the flag drops on a rubber car, you gotta remember that you're sitting on glare ice, and you try to take off gently and get traction... and away you go. You end up with a real schmozzle in the first corner because everybody piles in there at the same time.

Prentice is hooked. Ice racing does that to you.

In 1975, Prentice caught a race off Young's Point near Peterborough, Ontario. The next year, he built the track in Minden for the Kinsmen Winter Carnival. About one kilometre long, maybe 10 metres wide, the track is "shaped a bit like a peanut, still in the shell." It's mainly water – 912,000 litres of it to start with – and then another 90,000 litres a week to replace the nine centimetres of ice the studded tires gouge out of the corners each weekend.

Whenever the stud tires run they roughen up the ice, so there's traction... you watch for these chunks of traction or rough ice. There'll be a line of traction and

maybe other people don't notice it, and so you pick it up and you go to beat the band. First thing you know everybody notices what your doin' and they move in on that same spot, and it polishes off and you come into the corner next time and it's gone. And then you've got a battle on your hands just to keep off the snowbank...

The big difference with the Minden track, compared to most of its predecessors, was that Prentice laid it out on solid ground, rather than on a lake. While the chance of falling through the ice added a bit of spectator thrill, most drivers preferred to end up on terra firma instead of aqua colda.

Minden's racetrack has become one of the most popular and well-known in the country, and it's the site of the Canadian Automobile Sport Clubs (CASC) Ontario Region STP/Prestone Ice Race Championship.

But don't let the name fool you. This six-week series is a far cry from the sponsor-heavy, megabuck world of Formula One, IndyCar and Winston Cup racing, and that's its advantage. There's no prize money. No high-tech modifications. No glitz and glamour. Just points and trophies and a good time.

This is poor man's car racing. If there

was a big cash prize, then drivers who could, would start spending a lot more money on their cars. And that would effectively prevent the average driver – the guy who just gets out on the track as a hobby – from having any hope of winning.

All you need to get started is a racing licence from the CASC, a helmet and a car. An 11-year-old car – which is about the average age of a typical ice racing vehicle – often costs less than a \$200 helmet. Only a year after his first ride as an honorary co-driver at the first Minden race, Prentice was at the wheel of his own racer.

Prentice figures once you have a car and a helmet, you can spend as little as \$200 a year in the rubber-to-ice classes, where a maximum speed of about 70 km/h means stock safety equipment is enough.

You'll spend a little more in the metal-to-ice classes, where tire studs allow drivers to get up to speeds of 120 km/h and more protection is required, including roll bars or cages and a four-point safety harness.

The 11 ice racing classes vary by tire type (metal or rubber), engine size, and whether the engine is over the driving wheels. So there's a class for front engine, front-wheel drive cars up to 1500 ccs, one for front engine, front-wheel drive between 1500 and 3000 ccs, others for front engine, rear-wheel drive, and so on. Anything bigger than 3000 ccs and you're overpowered for the minimal traction you can get on the ice.

With 18 to 30 cars jostling for position on glare ice in a typical race, you can expect a lot of grinding metal, but CASC ice racing coordinator, Len Arminio, says the sport is remarkably safe. During his 20-year involvement, his most serious injury was a broken ankle, says Arminio, who remembers seeing big old American V-8s taking bigger risks on the ice in his native New England. In today's sport, you're more apt to skin a knuckle working on your car than you are to be injured driving.

It's just basically being cautious and paying a lot of attention to what you're doing. The big thing is, you see somebody sneaking by you and you wanna give your car some more gas – nine times out of 10 you're spinning already

— so the big thing is to let off and give your tires a chance...

With its curious combination of auto racing, demolition derby, and good ol' Canadian winter driving, you'd think ice racing could be a big-time televised sport, and spectators could ditch their Thermoses and parkas for couches and popcorn. But while the races are broadcast from time to time, organizers are careful to control sponsor involvement and keep ice racing amateur.

Arminio says more publicity would be a double-edged sword. "We'd appreciate getting more people out, but it would mean bigger fields, bigger grids, more races to get everyone in, eliminations, qualifying... It would kinda take the fun out of the sport."

And that's what it's all about. Chances are, if you go to watch this year, you might just be racing next year.

"It's not high speed, but the adrenalin flows just as much as if you were doing 150 miles an hour," says Tom Prentice. "You get just as excited." **A**



Hot wheels: racers in the studded tire classes have the benefit of greater control and hit higher speeds on Minden's ice track

A SPECTATOR'S GUIDE

Ice racers and ice racing fans get together at tracks across the country for day- and weekend-long events throughout the winter. Here's your guide to weatherwise spectator gear, and who to call to find out more about ice racing.

BUNDLE UP AND HUNKER DOWN

While Tom Prentice and his friends in Minden have built a miniature grandstand and snack bar for spectators, you're more likely to find yourself seated on a snowbank to watch an ice race, so be prepared.

Dress in warm winter clothes and boots.

Bring a Thermos with your favourite hot beverage.

Use a lawn chair, camp stool or milk crate to keep your fanny from freezing. Carry a film or video camera to capture all the action.

At some tracks, you may be able to

watch the races from your vehicle. And if that happens to be a motorhome, well, you won't need to worry about any of the above suggestions.

MORE INFORMATION

Call these numbers for more information on races in your part of the country.

Western Canadian Ice Racing Association of BC

Kevin Skinner (604) 254-2418

Michelin Cars on Ice Series (BC)

Bob Williams (604) 946-7173

Chevette Series (BC)

Klaus Neerop (604) 862-2728

Ken Stone (604) 764-7858

Northern Alberta Sports Car Club

(403) 489-8177

Saskatoon Sports Car Club

Jason Ahmed (306) 382-4680

Winnipeg Sports Car Club

(204) 233-2983

Canadian Automobile Sport Clubs

Ontario Region

STP/Prestone Ice Race Championship

(416) 667-9500

International Ice Racing Association

Thunder Bay Auto Sports Club

Brad Folino (807) 473-7513

Federation Auto Quebec

(514) 252-3052

Atlantic Sports Car Club

(902) 443-4333