

Cannonball Re-Run: A screwball crew of gearheads retool the outlaw cross-country car race

By Nicholas Phillips
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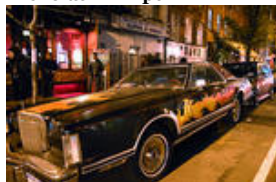
Chris LaCon hustles Project Interceptor toward the mountains of Wyoming.

Nicholas Phillips



Alex Macfarlane shows off his laser jammer, a radar-gun-scrambling device.

Nicholas Phillips



The Cookin' With Gas team's 1979 Lincoln Continental Mark V, which gets about five miles to the gallon.

Dean Engledow



An employee of the famous Red Ball

Team Project Interceptor is tearing into Sacramento, California, at 110 mph. The long spidery fingers gripping the wheel belong to the team captain, 26-year-old Alex Macfarlane of St. Louis, who's guessing — more like hoping — that our 1999 Ford Crown Victoria has enough gas to reach the finish in San Francisco. But who knows? It's 1:30 a.m. and the dashboard lights died a few counties back, so he can't read the fuel gauge.

We might still win the "2904," an underground coast-to-coast car race that began in New York City on November 7, more than 35 grueling hours ago. Though we might not.

At six-foot-nine with size nineteen shoes, Macfarlane is crunched up like an accordion in the driver's seat complaining of sore knees. He sells dildos for a living. He's failed to mention that he suffers from a congenital heart condition, which at this velocity would seem to be pertinent information.

Riding shotgun and spotting for Macfarlane is Chris LaCon, 23, a red-bearded undergraduate from the University of New Hampshire. He's rotating his shoulders fore and aft, scanning Interstate 80's entrance ramps and overpasses with a pair of binoculars. He's watching for "Smokeys," the old nickname for state troopers who sport Smokey Bear-style wide-brimmed hats.

Macfarlane and LaCon have both swallowed a 5-Hour Energy shot and have now attained a dreamlike state in which slicing through late-night traffic no longer feels reckless.

The Crown Vic hits a bump and bounces like a speedboat. St. Louis' other team member is 43-year-old Dean Engledow, who has resurfaced from an iPod-induced nap (the Crown Vic has no working radio). A squat and chatty former St. Louis City cop, Engledow peers bleary-eyed through the

Garage time stamps a team's envelope.

John Ficarra



Gadgetry and auxiliary fuel cells inside the A-Team van.

John Ficarra



Team Creative Film Cars, a.k.a. the A-Team, in San Francisco: Alex Richter, John Ficarra and Pierce Plam.

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Corinna Mantlo of the Cookin' With Gas team relaxes in the trunk of their Lincoln.

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2904 founder John Ficarra with veteran Cannonballer, John Harrison.

Christopher LaCon



2904 fail: The Interceptor gets towed in Nebraska.

John Ficarra



To the victors go the "spoils" — the Crap Cup.

Scott Paz

windshield, silent for now.

Somewhere behind us in the darkness, a black GMC van with a red stripe on either side is barreling forward, manned by three guys dressed as characters from *The A-Team*. Also giving chase is a 1979 Lincoln Continental Mark V with flames spray-painted on its flanks.

What we have here is a ragtag romp across America. But this is no road trip; it's a road *race*, from Manhattan to the Golden Gate — a total of 2,904 miles — on a budget that cannot exceed \$2,904.

Just like the madcap Cannonball Run races of three decades ago, the idea is to go as fast as you fucking can. And if that means doing 115 mph in a junky old police cruiser, rigging up auxiliary gasoline tanks, subsisting on beef jerky and peeing into plastic bags to save time, well, so be it.

Welcome to the "twenny-nine-oh-four."

The world record for driving from New York City to Los Angeles is a blistering 31 hours and 4 minutes. It was set in 2006 by Alex Roy, a wealthy 35-year-old bachelor with a BMW M5 and something to prove.

The flamboyant Roy poured \$75,000 into accomplishing his feat, which required an average speed of 90.1 mph. Expenses included gadgetry of high precision and a complex spreadsheet system, plus a small reconnaissance aircraft thrown in for good measure. He then parlayed his exploits into a book deal, an appearance on the *Late Show With David Letterman* and international notoriety.

John Ficarra, founder of the 2904, considers Alex Roy a "trust fund baby douchebag."

"Almost any twerp can hop in a megabuck cruiser and blow across the U.S. in record time," complains Ficarra, who is 40 and lives in Brooklyn, New York. "But what if you had to do it in a cheap old used car or truck? What if you had to use old-fashioned American ingenuity instead of just opening your checkbook? "

A trained actor and co-owner of Creative Film Cars, a New York-based company that furnishes automobiles for film shoots, Ficarra felt Roy betrayed something essential to outlaw car-racing culture. He began reading up on the history of the infamous Cannonball Run, whose route was the same one Roy took three years ago.

The Cannonball was run five times in the 1970s and has become the stuff of legend, inspiring offshoot competitions and a half-dozen feature films; the most famous is 1981's *Cannonball Run*, starring Burt Reynolds, Farrah Fawcett and Dom DeLuise.



Engledow, Macfarlane and LaCon.

Scott Paz



Richter, Ficarra and Pierce Plam.

Scott Paz



Donald Almquist, Corinna Mantlo and Robyn Almquist.

Details:

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Riding in everything from Ferraris to beat-up vans, drivers donned Catholic priest garb, police badges, construction-work helmets — you name it — in the hope of outfoxing lawmen on the byways of rural America.

"I just liked the insanity of it," says Ficarra, who wanted to merge the original Cannonball concept with another quirky motor-sports event, 24 Hours of LeMons, where disposable jalopies costing less than \$500 endure a bruising day of track racing.

For this new hybrid contest, Ficarra would move the Cannonball's traditional finish line from Los Angeles to San Francisco because, he says, "I hate LA."

In the spring of 2007 Ficarra fired off an e-mail to friends sketching out his idea, hoping to recruit racers starved for clunker glory. Only three teams answered the call and competed that first year. In 2008 five teams showed up, including one sponsored by the British magazine *Top Gear*.

In the weeks leading up to this year's 2904, Ficarra was expecting seven different teams from across the country, including one led by a polite young Missourian named Alex Macfarlane. When it came to cars, Ficarra says, Macfarlane seemed to know his stuff.

"Not only do I think we can win," Macfarlane wrote in an e-mail to fellow team members a few days before the start, "I believe we will grind their bones into the dust."

There are five days left before the race, and the Crown Vic needs serious attention. It's parked on the gravel front lot of Frank's Service garage in south St. Louis, and the towering team captain of Project Interceptor has come to give it a once-over.

Wearing his customary leather jacket, Macfarlane lifts the hood. A kitten is sleeping on the engine. Mechanic Frank Pretz, who's missing a few front teeth and uses words like "whatchamashit," shuffles over and promises he'll get around to futzing with the car later in the day.

As Macfarlane describes his plans for the 2904, Pretz rolls his eyes and says, "Guess we all gotta have our little whims that we do."

The Crown Vic has 168,789 miles on it and cost the team \$1,000. Macfarlane lists aloud the modifications he wants: an oil change and a transmission flush. This counts toward the race budget, so he'll have to keep the receipts as proof. Safety features, though, such as new tires, a windshield and repairs to the brakes and suspension, don't count.

Macfarlane believes the GPS, radar detectors and laser jammer, which can wreak havoc with a traffic cop's radar gun, will give Project Interceptor an edge. Ficarra disagrees. "They don't make you go faster," the race organizer

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[John Ficarra, Alex Roy,](#)
[dildos, Burt Reynolds,](#)
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later says, adding that the whole point of the \$2,904 budget ceiling is to "prevent people from building racecars."

Officially, every dollar over budget results in a minute added to your time. Ficarra says the race is still new and that the application of rules is somewhat negotiable — so long as you're racing in good faith.

However, any "act of douchebaggery," he says, such as buying a Lamborghini from Grandma at \$500, means you'll lose the car, and your rivals can take a sledgehammer to it. It hasn't happened yet, notes Ficarra, but it could.

Macfarlane is aware of the health hazards inherent in a race involving high speeds and precarious automobiles but says, "It's good for the soul to take dangerous risks every once in a while." And besides, his wife is supportive — nervous, but supportive.

He pops the trunk, revealing his supply of RealTouch dildos and tongue-vibrator kits that he plans to hand out during the prerace festivities. His wife, a schoolteacher, is "totally cool" with his job at Red Square LLC, the adult-toy company where he's a partner.

While taking the Crown Vic for a quick spin, Macfarlane offers a suggestion for cutting down on pit stops: Texas catheters, or condoms with a tube running into pee-collection sacks. But he concedes, "There seems to be some resistance to that idea."

At the 2004 sendoff party inside a Lower East Side bar in New York, go-go dancers high up on a table twist their bodies to guitar music. Some last-minute bailouts have narrowed the racing field to only three teams.

The flamed-out Lincoln Continental boasts a plush interior that features a Cartier clock and an eight-track player rigged to a cassette player, which is then rigged to an iPod. The team was forced to replace the small motor that adjusts the driver's seat because one teammate is barely over five feet tall and couldn't reach the pedals.

"Had I known how much it would cost," Corinna Mantlo says, "I would've gotten her platform shoes."

Mantlo's team, which expects to achieve five miles to the gallon, plans on preparing a meal of chicken breast and Brussels sprouts under the hood — *during the race* — hence their name: Cookin' With Gas.

Roaring up to the curb fashionably late is the Creative Film Cars trio, a.k.a. the A-Team. Ficarra, with a Mohawk haircut, denim vest and fake gold necklaces, is a dead ringer for Mr. T's B.A. Baracus, his obvious whiteness notwithstanding.

Ficarra swings open the back doors of the van to reveal their secret weapon: two stand-alone fuel cells that hold a combined 44 gallons of gas. With those babies piped into the main gas tank, Ficarra gloats, they'll only have to stop every 750 miles.

Finally, Team Interceptor rolls in, fresh from St. Louis. Chris LaCon, who is ditching classes, has just hopped off the train from New Hampshire and trades handshakes with the team for the first time in

person. Macfarlane met and recruited him online.

In the dimly lit bar the music blares, and Dean Engledow, the short, stocky cop-turned-motorcycle instructor, is chatting up every lady within a 50-foot radius.

At night's end Macfarlane's adult toys are being doled out by the bar's staff to anyone who orders a drink. Engledow rips open a box of tongue vibrators and, when he can't figure out their function, begins chucking them at the bartenders.

The forecast for the next morning, race day, calls for clouds and hangovers of moderate severity.

"This is not a race," John Ficarra announces to the contestants, gathered in Brooklyn beneath the Manhattan Bridge. "This does not exist. I'm not an organizer. I make no liability claims whatsoever, and if any of you try to come after me, I pity the fool!"

Then the gray-haired John Harrison turns to face the crowd, and Ficarra wraps an arm around him. Harrison raced in the 1979 Cannonball and these days sells real estate. He discovered the 2904 online last year and has been swapping e-mails with Ficarra ever since.

Today he's officiating as the grand marshal. "Please," Ficarra says with a flourish, "declare this *toornament* of endurance and efficiency open."

Harrison grins. "You guys are trouble."

At 3:48 p.m. November 7, Team Interceptor is off and running. We get our time stamp from the Red Ball Garage on East 31st Street, the Cannonball's famous starting place. After lurching through Manhattan's knot of stop-and-go traffic, we ascend from the Holland Tunnel into New Jersey — then promptly make a wrong turn.

There's a hush in the car as the GPS system decides how to reroute us. "Recalculating," the robotic voice says. "Turn right on Indian Place." The voice is set to "Australian female" mode, whose name, the team decides, will be Sheila.

Within minutes, we've merged onto Interstate 280 and discovered that our right rear blinker doesn't blink. But the taillights work, so we're still street-legal.

At 4:31 p.m., someone farts and all windows slide down except the rear driver's side, which is broken and duct-taped shut from the outside. Chris LaCon is skeptical that this feature will lend credibility to our aura of a police vehicle. But something must be working, because cars ahead of us keep peeling off into the right lane to allow us passage.

Macfarlane is now weaving through traffic at more than 95 mph. In one downhill maneuver, he switches lanes too hard, and the car swoons. "The suspension can't handle that, Alex," Engledow says. "We will flip like a coin, and that's instant death."

"OK," Macfarlane responds.

"I'm just saying that because I've investigated those kinds of accidents, and they're terrible."

It is early evening in eastern Pennsylvania when Engledow blurts out, "Whoa, deer!"

A large antlered buck, in the glow of sunset, has sauntered into our path to gape at us, motionless. Macfarlane brakes and whips to the right without checking his mirrors.

Our leader suggests that the noise created by the deer whistles he bought for \$4.50 and mounted to the front fender might have caught the buck's attention. Unfazed, he eases the Crown Vic back up to 115 mph.

"Dude," Engledow exclaims, "I don't think my heart rate's dropped below 85 since I sat in this car."

Late that night in Indiana, at the end of the first toll road, we pretend we've lost our ticket. A paranoid Macfarlane reasons that it's best the attendant not figure out that we traversed this section of the Indiana East-West Toll Road at warp speed. We might get ratted out to the highway patrol.

Fortunately, Team Interceptor managed to sneak through Ohio, notorious Smokey country, without incident. We've been far luckier than one racer in the 1979 Cannonball Run, who, while hurtling through the Buckeye State, earned himself three speeding tickets — all within the same five-mile stretch.

But for us, as Engledow puts it, Ohio has been "like driving down a bowling lane."

We cross the Mississippi River into Iowa just before 1 a.m. Major system failure comes a few hours later at sunrise. The battery has petered out, and the team huddles beside the car in the wet grass. We're figuring the alternator must have quit at some point, causing the car to drain every last drop of juice.

Macfarlane dials AAA only to discover his coverage expired a week earlier. As LaCon dispatches a towing company from his cell phone, the team captain sends out a text message to his rivals: "Fried alternator leads to total power loss in NE. 30 minutes of waiting for a tow and our overall average speed is still 81 mph. Consider yourselves lucky."

Engledow looks at Macfarlane and asks, "Are you crushed?"

Macfarlane: "I'm good."

Engledow: "I know this was important to you."

Macfarlane: "I just feel shitty that it's something I could've prevented. I could've had the alternator tested."

The tow truck arrives, but it only has room for two passengers. "If we leave two people, will you come back and get them?" Macfarlane asks.

"Absolutely not," replies the tower.

Engledow and I hike down the shoulder of eastbound Interstate 80 toward Lincoln, Nebraska. Eighteen-wheelers are buzzing by us. Engledow has brought his hand-held CB radio from the car and is begging truckers for a lift.

"Break 19," he yells into the receiver over the highway roar. "We had too many for a tow. Can you take us to the Lincoln exit?" One trucker responds that he only picks up girls.

Suddenly, Engledow makes an unhappy discovery: The Crown Vic has been towed, but we have the keys.

Within minutes a trooper pulls up and tells us to get in the car. On the ride into Lincoln he asks who we are and where we're going. I explain that our car broke down. He wants to know the car owner's name and what he does for a living. I respond that the car's owner sells adult toys.

"Adult toys," the trooper repeats back. I decide to stop talking.

Finally, the team reunites outside an O'Reilly Auto Parts and installs the new parts. But we've lost crucial hours, and we have half a country to go.

Our radar detectors light up like Christmas trees as we rip through Nebraska. So far the only Smokeys we've spotted have been cruising in the opposite direction. Surging past a rest stop, the laser jammer spurts out a wild string of beeps. Somebody's nailed us with a radar gun.

We slow down to 70. LaCon watches our tail closely with the binoculars. No one seems to be following. Macfarlane expresses concern about "wolf-packing," when state troopers flood a small stretch of road to make sure no speeders escape their trap.

When we resume speed, the duct tape holding the rear driver's side window pane flaps so violently that LaCon has to wrap his windbreaker around his head in order to sleep.

As we push westward through the Great Plains, the names of service stations become increasingly quirky: Pump n Pantry, Loaf 'n Jug, Kum & Go. We glide past a convoy transporting the blade of a windmill. It's at least three school bus-lengths long and looks like a giant whale.

When the sun drops behind the sugar-glazed mountains of western Wyoming, the A-Team sends us a text message: "You might still be in it. Can you get back up to 78 mph?"

A debate ensues over how to respond. If we say we've given up, they might relax, and we can gain some time on them. But they also might feel encouraged and push even harder. We agree on a vague response and press forward.

Flooring it through the dark Nevada desert, Engledow is loopy with fatigue and convinced all is lost. "What's the word for when you come all this way and you lose and you're crushed?" he says.

"I'm just demoralized. I'm too competitive, that's what it boils down to. I don't know if I need to change my character or what." He glances up at the inky sky. "God, it looks like an astronomy class up there. Just clusters and clusters of stars."

This will be his final shift. LaCon takes over and brings us far into California before handing off the wheel to the team captain for the final leg.

"It's our last chance to bank time," says Macfarlane as we scream toward the Bay Area.

At 2:33 a.m. on November 9, we cross the Bay Bridge into San Francisco. It just so happens that an hour later, a truck loaded with pears will topple over the bridge's squat guard rail and crash 200 feet below onto Yerba Buena Island.

It's the finish line at last when we roll up to the Classic Cars West garage in the Mission District. We park and totter up to the entrance with rubber limbs. It's been 38 hours and 29 minutes on the road.

Our final task is to find the secret word taped on the garage door and text it back to Ficarra's wife in New York. The send time of our text reads 2:46 a.m. Pacific Standard Time. It is our official end time. We don't know yet if we've won.

Last year the secret word was "Dirty Sanchez." This time the word is "merkin." We have burned through four time zones, two mountain ranges and several sacks of jerky, not for money, but to brag that we found out, in the shortest time, that the word taped on the door is "vagina wig."

Now it's time for noodles in Chinatown. We consult the GPS system and let our Australian female guide us. "I kind of want to date a girl named Sheila now," Engledow muses.

After one speeding ticket in Ohio, a sumptuous under-the-hood chicken dinner and thirteen pits stops, Cookin' With Gas takes third place. The A-Team, though hit with a speeding violation in Wyoming, came in at 37 hours and 8 minutes — besting St. Louis' Project Interceptor by 1 hour and 21 minutes.

"Project Interceptor would have kicked our ass this year if it were not for the breakdown," Ficarra admits.

Macfarlane knows it, and while it tears at his guts, he plans to sign up for the 2010 race. "I've gone through every conceivable emotion with this race," he says. "It was almost as stressful as my wedding. But I'll be doing it again next year."

So will Ficarra, who is already scheming to race either an ambulance on biodiesel or something that resembles *Star Wars'* Millennium Falcon.

He hopes the race might someday swell to twelve teams but refuses to advertise it. "You gotta find your way to us by word of mouth," he says. "I've had people come to me directly, and I've turned them down."

One person he'd never turn down, however, is Alex Roy. Ficarra says he sent Roy a direct challenge via e-mail, but Roy never responded. "He's probably too afraid he'd lose," Ficarra laughs. "And he probably thinks I'm some nutball."