

HRA Duo Achieves B-Spec Racing Title With Honda Fit

by Arvin Donner



James Robinson and Brian Penza teamed up to take the top prize in the Rally America B-Spec class.



Many Honda associates and engineers spend long hours contributing in the design and engineering of new Honda vehicles. There are a few associates though that contribute in making Honda's cars who also take playing with them seriously too. They like to race on race tracks, off road and everywhere else in between. Of those that do, there are fewer still that have chosen to compete in the new B-Spec class of the burgeoning U.S. rally racing circuit.

"In rally car racing they have gotten rid of the traditional showroom-car class," said ER2 Principal Engineer James Robinson. "Now, the only class that closely represents the showroom car segment is B Spec. The B-Spec class is where you take a production car, put a B-Spec suspension kit on it, a roll cage and then race it."



Robinson and his co-driver, DB1 Design Engineer Brian Penza, competed this year in the eight-event **Rally America National Championship**. They finished first place in the B-Spec class and second place nationally in the two-wheel drive car division. Their best race, technically speaking, was the 100 Acre Wood Rally in Salem, Mo.



The team finished in first place in the B-Spec class with a 28-minute lead over the team's nearest competitor and third in the 2WD drive division for the race. But it was the championship series' Sno*Drift Rally in Atlanta, Mich. that was their favorite.

"The Sno*Drift was pretty special because it was our first event of the year with our new 2015 Fit. I didn't have a lot of expectations for that race either. I was just hoping we would finish the race," said Robinson.

The Rally America Championship started in 2005. The rally allows race teams to compete at venues spanning the country, from Portland, Ore. to Newry, Maine. Competitors drive in different classes of modified street cars on natural-terrain courses consisting of gravel, dirt or snow. The cars can reach speeds of well over 100 mph through the timed courses while sliding through corners diagonally at high speeds and going over terrain most people would think twice about taking a 4-wheel-drive truck

through. This may lead for some people to beg the question of whether or not racing a showroom stock 2015 Honda Fit would be a good idea.



"Lee Niffenegger from Honda Performance Development asked us if we wanted to build a B-Spec Honda Fit and race it in a rally sport B-Spec class. Brian and I said, 'Sure, we'd love to,'" noted Robinson. "The Rally America National Championship started in 2013 after HPD and Ford proposed the new class to Rally America in 2012. They have supported Brian and I getting it kicked off in the rally circuit."

After Robinson and Penza did the first couple of events together in the Championship in 2015, Robinson became thrilled getting to drive the Fit because as a driver he learned so much about driving a car that was not originally suited for racing. The Fit highlighted all of his bad habits he had established from driving more competitive vehicles. It really forced him to focus on Penza's directions.

The reason for this is because when racing higher performance vehicles a driver may have their co-driver giving them lots of directions. If the driver is not paying attention to what the co-driver is saying, the driver may have a tendency to enter the corners too slowly and then end up powering through them, but still have an overall fast time. But, with a B-Spec car and in particular the Honda Fit — a driver does not have that luxury. Robinson has to maintain as much speed as he can while going through corners since the Fit has a power to weight ratio of 1 horsepower for every 30lbs versus most of the team's competitors who have 1 horsepower for every 6 to 7lbs.

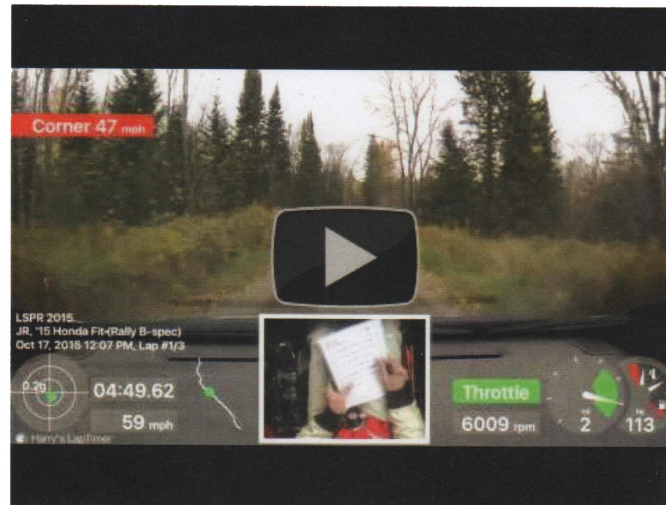
"Everything your co-driver is saying is super important when driving a car like a Honda Fit. We're trying to hit corners as fast as we possibly can without braking," added Robinson.



In spite of the performance challenges of competing with a Honda Fit, the team has been dedicated to each other since their beginning. Penza and Robinson started last year when Robinson asked Penza to co-drive for him on a couple events. Robinson asked Penza to come back again and team up with him this year to race the Rally America National Championship.

"The 100 Acre Woods Rally was really my first big rally event I did with James," said Penza.

Penza's role as the co-driver is without a doubt the most important job on the team. Not everyone is suited to do it. Most people can drive a car but it's a special skill to be able to simultaneously read a book, know where you are going when driving through a forest and realize the only thing keeping the car from hitting something is your voice. Not to mention, you also have to know the language.



"A lot of people who first listen to rally racing videos hear the co-driver and have no idea what they are saying, it sounds like some kind of coded language," said Penza. "If you cut down to the bare essentials, I am telling the driver up ahead there is a right corner or left corner, and the severity. I express the severity of a turn to the driver using a gradient between 1 and 6. So, a 'right 1' is a hairpin right turn and a 'right 6' is going to be a slight right curve. There are also gradients between those as well. You can have a one plus or a two minus for instance."

There is a lot to learn in order to be a good co-driver. The real teacher in learning how to co-drive is experience.

"It's all about feel," added Penza. "To get good at co-driving you have to drive through some courses to get a feel for what a right 1, right 2, right 3 feels like. They all have very distinct feels."

And, even though Robinson and Penza have the opportunity to do what is called a "recce" — that's when a team can preview a course before a competition and take notes — they choose not to. "The recce ruins the surprise," joked Robinson. This is a testament to the trust Robinson has for Penza's co-driver skills.

"I am just hoping the course notes Rally America provides us are accurate because that's what's keeping us on the road," explained Penza.

The duo met five years ago when Penza joined Team Honda Research (THR) — the after-hours racing team created for HRA associates by Honda. Penza wanted to have an after-hours community experience and meet more people at Honda while also getting a chance to learn more about how to work on cars.

"After joining the team, I not only learned to lube and change the brakes, I also learned how to swap engines and swap clutches which I didn't think I could do," said Penza. "I have gained a lot of important friendships like James here too."

When Brian first joined THR, the team took him under their wing. Now he is starting to take on more of a leadership role. "I have never really thought of myself as a leader of the team but I have started to take on more responsibility for things like the budget," said Penza.



If Robinson and THR have their way Penza and others like him will have more opportunities to participate on the team and win more races like they have this year. "People like Brian are the next generation of leaders who are going to make THR something great," added Robinson.

If this year is any testament to that aspiration, there is much more to come.