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Number cruncher mashes pedal

Auditor restores old Mercury, motors off to Newfoundland rally
By BEVERLEY WARE South Shore Bureau | 4:41 AM



Stephen LeBlanc has refurbished this 1985 Cougar and will race it next month in the 2,200-kilometre Targa Newfoundland. (Contributed)

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HEAD OF ST. MARGARETS BAY — Stephen LeBlanc will transform himself from a mild-mannered 52-year-old federal auditor to a race car driver next month when he takes part in a 2,200-kilometre, five-day race around Newfoundland and Labrador in his restored 1985 Mercury Cougar.

"It's a middle-aged crazy thing," he said recently during a coffee break from his job in a downtown Halifax office building where he works as an auditor with the Canada Revenue Agency.

His 65-year-old Aunt Mary from the Lake Ainslie area of Cape Breton will be part of his pit crew. His friend Scott Healey, a retired navy sea captain, will be his co-driver.

He said he'll have to paint the words port and starboard on his windshield pillars to figure out whether Mr. Healey's telling him to turn left or right. "He's a navigator by trade so I couldn't have a better person as a navigator."

Neither has ever raced before, they don't belong to any car clubs and don't have a penchant for speeding on the highway.

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It's been a pricey undertaking — the refit cost a good \$25,000 and registration for Targa Newfoundland was \$4,000, and then there are meals and accommodation. Mr. LeBlanc said he wouldn't mind having a few sponsors but joked with event organizers, "I doubt many would want to sponsor us."

Mr. LeBlanc found out about the rally when he was sitting back on the couch one day, watching Speed Channel. He was sucked in right away and went to Newfoundland last year with wife Crystal — the other half of his pit crew — for some training.

"I'm freaking out a little on two fronts right now," Mr. LeBlanc said. First off, he's got to make sure the car sitting in the backyard of his home in Head of St. Margarets Bay is back together properly, and secondly it's only 30 days before he and Mr. Healey embark on something they've never done before.

Mr. LeBlanc bought the old Cougar in the U.S. for his son about six years ago, but his son moved out and left the car behind. It deteriorated so badly that Mr. LeBlanc had to either fix it up or junk it. Since then, "everything's been either replaced or refurbished."

He even cut the car in half and took a slice out to make it shorter and more agile. "It can turn in a much smaller space than otherwise."

After watching an episode of Monster Garage on the Discovery Channel, "I thought if these guys can do it, how hard can it be? So I went out into my yard with my grinder and saw and cut it in half."

He had a professional weld it back together, and just last week a structural engineer who is an inspector for the province approved the modified car for the road.

It's been a mad dash to get all the parts back in. As of late May, it was sitting in the body shop pretty much empty. "It had no wires, it had no dash, it had no seats, it had no motor, it had no transmission. We have literally rebuilt this car from scratch."

Mr. LeBlanc and Mr. Healey are entering in the Grand Touring event, not the high-speed race event. They will be judged on precision driving over a set distance in a certain amount of time, although they're still allowed to go up to 160 kilometres per hour in the car, which has a six-cylinder, 3.8-litre engine, as they wind their way around the back roads, side streets and even driveways of picturesque little communities, from Placentia to Marystown.

"That's the challenge, to get around all these obstacles and maintain an average speed doing it," he said.

The other event allows competitors to hit speeds of 200 kilometres per hour.

No big prize money awaits them at the finish line.

"My goal is to stay on the road," said Mr. LeBlanc. He also hopes his team will bring home a finisher's medal and all the bragging rights that go with it.

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