

Plan B for Dakar Rally was to wave a white flag

by Bill Center

I was reminded of one of my favorite America's Cup lines last week when the Dakar Rally was canceled just days before the start of the 30th edition of motor racing's greatest annual odyssey.

As the French boat labored in San Diego in 1992, I asked former French skipper Bruno Trouble what had gone wrong with the French challenge.

"Well," said Trouble, "it's because we are French."

10pt; FONT-FAMILY: Verdana">Which might explain why the French-based Amaury Sport Organization - which also stages the annual Tour de France cycling race - scrubbed the entire Dakar Rally after terrorist threats against the race over one section of the course.

The decision, which came a day before the event's scheduled start in Portugal, stranded almost 6,000 participants - support crews as well as drivers and riders - and immediately made obsolete the 550 trucks, buggies and motorcycles on line to start the 16-stage, 5,760-mile trek across the deserts of North Africa.

"I can't believe they didn't have a Plan B," said Robby Gordon, who was ranked among the favorites to win the rally. "Or a C Plan or a D Plan for as many years as they've done this race."

The lure of the Dakar Rally is that it sent racers through some of the world's roughest and most remote terrain, not to mention terrible conditions. Over the first three decades of the event, more than 50 competitors had died en route to the finish at Dakar, Senegal.

"It is difficult to define the Dakar Rally in two or three sentences," Gordon said recently. "It is half a NASCAR season jammed into less than half a month."

"The course is treacherous and unfriendly. In terms of communication, you might as well be on the back side of the moon. And you are racing through Third World villages, whose people are as surprised by you as you are by them.

"In many ways, it is the toughest competition I've ever been associated with, which is what makes it so

attractive."

Remember, Gordon is a three-time overall champion of the SCORE Baja 1000, and a versatile driver who has competed on the IndyCar and NASCAR Sprint Cup circuits. Gordon won stages in each of his first two attempts at the Dakar Rally.

But an added twist was suddenly thrown into this year's already treacherous mix: terrorism.

Al Qaeda-linked militants had issued threats against the race, as well as racers and spectators, during the eight stages to be run in Mauritania near the end of the event. The threat became public after a French family visiting Mauritania was slaughtered on Christmas Eve.

Gordon believed there were options other than canceling the event, including doubling back over the course upon reaching the Mauritania border or running the entire event in Portugal.

"All the teams, all the equipment were already there," said Gordon. "I don't understand scrubbing the entire thing."

There are doubts that the ASO will try to rekindle the Dakar event. Other countries - Russia, China, Argentina/Chile, Australia - have expressed interest in becoming home to a new Dakar-like rally.

But what of the 550 specially made vehicles for this year's Dakar Rally, plus the amounts already spent by the competing teams? Gordon estimates he - or his sponsors - is out \$4.5 million.

"We built two vehicles at about \$1 million apiece that can't be used in any other form of racing," said Gordon. We had 10 gearboxes at \$40,000 apiece, not to mention 20 sets of axles and CV joints.

"The cancellation puts a lot of people in a very awkward situation. We'll recover, we always do.

"But I'm just extremely disappointed on how a sanctioning body could not be better prepared. I can understand the decision not to race in Mauritania. But to not have a backup is mind-boggling."

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