

Rally Report

Our MG Midget became a Lemons Legend

By Suzi Milo

The concept of the Lemons Rally may not make sense at first glance: a multi-day, multi-state road trip scavenger hunt in the vehicle most ill-suited to the task. Judges assign points based on how bad your car is (the worse your car, the more points you get), how many checkpoints along the route you can find and post on Instagram, and any creative roadside repairs or silly things you might end up doing. Teams are also encouraged to dress themselves and their cars up in themed costumes. All you know in advance are the cities where each day ends, and at the kickoff meeting you get a booklet with all the challenges so you can plan your route. It's a competitive game, but NOT a race.

This kind of nonsense is right up mine and Pete's alley. In July, we competed in our 3rd Lemons Rally. This was the second time we entered our 1971 MG Midget. And in the words of the Rallymaster, we entered "Lemons History" with our story...

Last year, the Midget was mostly stock. Pete had replaced most of the suspension and we upgraded to Miata seats, but otherwise we had no real improvements or modifications. The route took us from Detroit through a good portion of lower Michigan to Kalamazoo, then through backwoods Indiana before crossing Ohio from Bellefontaine down to Columbus. The last day was a criss-cross set of checkpoints through Northeastern Ohio ending near Canton.

The checkpoints are generally "Roadside Americana" like "Visit the Mothman Statue" and "Find the center of Michigan's lower peninsula." You find the place, take a picture of your car there, and move on. The organizers are emphatic about this NOT BEING A RACE, but to hit checkpoints and gain points we needed to be highly efficient. This was very difficult in an MG that couldn't break 55mph without serious issues.

On this first rally, we had several breakdowns due to the exhaust falling off, but generally made decent time. We



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befriended a few guys from Michigan who had put a Triumph TR-3 motor in their C3 Corvette - yes, you read that right. We ran the back half of the rally with them until we caught on fire 40 miles from the finish due to a carb jet failing and leaking fuel onto the exhaust. Despite some heroic repair attempts, we were out of the running...

We later found out we had been on track to win 1st place, had we finished. The organizers had to scramble to redo the winners circle when we dropped out. So now we were determined.

We ran another Lemons Rally (there are several across the country, throughout the year) in our 2002 Porsche Boxster earlier this year. We finished this time, and won an award for “Random Acts of Stupidity” because we kept the top down the entire time. In February. We felt like we could do anything.

Now we were ready to engineer the Midget’s triumphant return.

Pete spent two months putting every spare hour into the project. He sourced a new drivetrain, built a custom CAN bus for the electronics, and replaced basically every original part aside from the chassis. Many of you have seen it by now - the “MG Fidget”, powered by a Fiat twin-cam.



I decided our theme should reference last year’s tragedy and represent its rebirth, so I painted Italian flag flames on the hood. Pete ran a test run up to Michigan for a British car show and worked out some kinks (one of the last original parts, the Lucas alternator, ended up failing, so he rebuilt it in place).



We were ready!

This year’s Rust Belt Ramble started outside Indianapolis on a Friday morning, so we took the “Fidget” out the night before, cruising comfortably at 75mph with its new five speed Italian transmission. Friday morning we astounded the judges when they asked to see under the hood. They gave us 425 starting points, a serious haul.



We paired up with our Triumph-Corvette friends from last year, who were running a Pontiac Fiero dressed up like a race car this time. We were off to a bad start: the frame had rubbed holes in the new radiator and we were overheating badly. Thankfully we were on home turf advantage this year - day one ended in Florence, so we opted to drive home to Dayton and do some repairs.



Armed with the new, badly fitting, less effective radiator available on short notice, we cruised down the Ohio river for day two. We crossed the ferry to Augusta, drove along some excellent back roads, and fought the specter of overheating the entire way to Charleston WV. We also had total electrical failure at one point, but Pete was able to reverse engineer a mistake he made and a little duct tape got us back on the road.

We needed more cooling, so Pete bolted a generic transmission cooler to the grill at the hotel in Charleston that night. It worked, but we were burping the coolant system pretty regularly, and the whole system could only do so

much with temperatures in the low 90s.

Day three started out promising with an amazing scenic drive up to Hawk's Nest State Park in WV, but we were still fighting to stay cool. A few checkpoints in, we had to wave our friends ahead to leave us behind while we found a rural mountain NAPA Auto Parts. Pete found that we had a consistent leak from a flange pipe introducing air into the system by the water pump, and had to perform some emergency surgeries to make everything fit.

We were down for a few hours and fell to the back of the pack despite starting the day at 5am. The nature of the Lemons Rally means there inevitably will be breakdowns. The community embraces and celebrates this, and roadside repairs are worth lots of points. In fact if you don't break down, maybe your car was too good to bring. Several fellow competitors stopped to check on us since we were stopped along the rally route. The spirit of Lemons is highly collaborative.

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The repairs were successful and we started off on the home stretch. The last few checkpoints were in the Pittsburgh area, where Pete and I are from. The car was performing well, but we were nervous. After all, we broke down at the very end last year. We took nothing for granted.

In the end, The MG Fidget finished with no issues except our nerves. The teams already at the end cheered like mad when we arrived - everyone knew we were in the running for first place and how much we had broken down along the way, since everything is documented on Instagram.

The awards were announced at 7pm. The Rallymaster gave speeches for all the winners: Organizer's Choice, Rallymaster's Choice, and Random Acts of Stupidity. Then 3rd place (our friends in the Fiero), 2nd place (some 1940s chassis on top of a modern car).

Then 1st place: "MG Fidget!!"

It was fun to hear the Rallymaster tell the whole story of how we came back with a vengeance this year after catching on fire the first time. And he mentioned how we broke down more than everyone else combined.

That's what makes a good Lemons Rally: you break down, and you get back up.

You can see our old rallies and follow us for new ones on Instagram: [@YourLemonStartsNow](#)

You can view all of our photos here:

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/RnhZ1g4Sy2j6DSYS6>

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/THXkK1uj8magx79C8>