



It was a rally that almost wasn't.

Two weeks before the scheduled date for ***Thunder Road 2023***, our flagship SCCA National Tour Rally, the road to be the route's centerpiece, got washed out. The raging force of the Kern River had undercut CA 178, and Caltrans closed the road entirely. It happened on the morning we were running precheck, so we didn't find out about it until we reached the gorge's beginning and found a dump truck across both lanes. "How long will it be closed," we asked the Caltrans worker. "I dunno," he said with a shrug, "Could be three days, could be three months." Not an answer one likes to hear.

I was ready to pull the plug, but I knew that some folks had bought plane tickets, and I checked with them and found that some were not refundable. So, we waited.

A week later, they reopened the road with a short stretch of alternating one-way traffic, 24/7 flaggers, and pilot cars. We ran a precheck on Saturday before the rally and found minimal delays - less than a minute. The rally was back on.

Such are the thrills of being a Rallymaster.

Rally weekend, June 17-18th, came, and we had a modest turnout of nine cars on each of the two rallies. (A bit of advice - don't schedule any rallies on the weekend before Porsche Parade and Great Race, but you probably already knew that.)

We were excited that we had succeeded in attracting first-time rallyists from other SCCA activities, especially since the rally was designed to be fun for all levels of experience. From the feedback, we achieved that goal. We were told it was never boring even at eight hours and 300 miles.

Running in Monte Carlo format, there were CZTs (Car Zero Time) for all Checkpoints, and creeping and stopping were allowed. The Checkpoints were positioned so there was room to get safely out of traffic to wait to cross or to stop and calculate any needed time allowance. Transit sections got us through the more heavily traveled roads, and the Checkpoints were usually grouped in gauntlets with some tightly spaced and others with a few minutes in between.

The rally ran out of Santa Clarita, just north of Los Angeles. We headed up through San Francisquito Canyon and the Angeles National Forest, then west to the Tejon Pass and down the famous Grapevine grade into the first break. We then forged north through the farmlands in the southeast corner of the San Joaquin Valley to the aforementioned Kern River Gorge. The river was surging with runoff from snowmelt and was truly a spectacular sight as it gushed into the air going over boulders. The water was right up to the road and made for a dramatic run up the Gorge. The course then veered off the 178 to head up Old Kern Canyon Road, a truly great rally road, for a series of Checkpoints that took us into the town of Lake Isabella for the lunch break. The lake itself was brim-full for the first time in as long as anyone can remember and provided another scenic backdrop as we ran east after lunch through the southern Sierra Nevada mountains, over Walker Pass and then down into the desert.

The course then took us through picturesque Red Rock Canyon State Park and into the town of Mojave for the final break, and finally southbound across the Antelope Valley and down through the San Gabriel Mountains and Angeles National Forest via the lush and twisty local favorite Bouquet Canyon Road to the finish, about 2 miles from the start.



Thunder Road's companion rally, **Two Lane Blacktop**, a 5-hour SCCA Divisional Tour, ran the next day (Sunday, 6/18/23). At 106 miles, it was a rally with a very different personality from Thunder Road. The intense sun of the desert was traded for a thick, cool, Pacific coastal overcast. Temps in the 90s were traded for the mid-60s to low 70s.

We headed west out of the start across the Santa Clara River valley, passing through the historic towns of Piru, Fillmore, and Santa Paula. Along the way, we ran a maze on the tiny roads that grid the citrus and avocado groves of the Bardsdale area. Then later, on the way back from Santa Paula, there was a similar maze through those same groves.

After that, we took off up and over one of our all-time favorite local driving roads, the steep and challenging Balcom Canyon Road decked out with hillsides absolutely carpeted with blooming purple sage. After some more Checkpoints in the rural area of central Ventura County, we headed into the town of Moorpark for the finish. When everyone is at the finish, and even those with higher scores are laughing and having a good time, you know the rally was a good one.

One footnote: as you may have noticed, **Into the Night** has a tradition of naming rallies after movies. *Thunder Road* (1958) is one you all probably know. Did you know that star **Robert Mitchum** wrote the story and produced the movie? *Two Lane Blacktop* (1971) may be a bit more obscure. Since it was directed by **MONTE Hellman**, it was obvious that had to be the name of this rally.

Our sincere and heartfelt thanks to all those who came out and participated in these events. Special thanks to **Paul McGaffey** and **Sean Stern** for their unending support and good ideas, to **Larry Scholnick** for being the best prechecker in the county, to **Jeff Stern** for his help on the *Two Lane Blacktop* precheck, and to my son, **Ethan Akerman**, for coming down for San Francisco and making this my *best ever* Father's Day weekend.

If you're in the L.A. area on August 4, October 6, and/or November 3 this year, we hope you'll join us for the **Santa Monica Sports Car Club**, a Chapter of the **CalClub Region**, **First Friday Niter** rallies. **Paul McGaffey** and I are trading off rallymaster duties for these. All three will be in the Monte Carlo tour rally style. There will be no navigational traps, just a focus on fun driving on beautiful roads.

Watch *RReNews*, the *Into the Night Rally Team* Facebook page, and <http://itnrally.org> for info on next year's **Thunder Road**.

Joe Akerman

Rallymaster, **Thunder Road** and **Two Lane Blacktop**, 2023