

# Croatia Trophy 2015

## Return to the forests

Genius and insanity walk hand in hand and sometimes I wonder if we step too far to the side of insanity as we plan our season. With only two hours sleep I head to Dover to make the crossing to France to attend the toughest event in Europe, The Croatia Trophy!

It's been two long years since I last attended and 4 years since Wayne Smith and I lifted the Trophy. Wayne is joining me again for this amazing event and we are determined to bring home the silverware.

It's a long drive and we collect Wayne from Frankfurt airport on Monday afternoon, stopping in Passau, (Southern Germany) before finally reaching base camp on Tuesday afternoon. But nothing is ever easy and Qantas lost Wayne's luggage. So its a detour to Zagreb airport to find the missing bags.



Ready for action



Drivers Briefing



Its great to be working with Wayne again



### Day 1, Stage 1

The weather is stunning and the cars head into Topusko for lunch, a show start and to meet the fans before heading to the forests for the prologue. It's a fast stage with four cars in each group; we don't want to win this and are over the moon to be placed 10<sup>th</sup>. It's the perfect position to launch our attack!



The prologue went to plan

### Day 2, Stage 2

Yesterday we came 10<sup>th</sup> in the prologue bang on plan. Today is the difficult bit, Punch through the top ten and take the lead.

The first few kilometres went really well and we soon passed three or four cars. Then at check point one it went to hell. The road book didn't fit the terrain and we lost over 30 minutes trying to find the way. Eventually we got back on track and set off hunting the cars that had passed us. We had some great racing with the Hungarian and Russian drivers with the water meadows being as deep, wet and nasty as ever. We smashed it, finishing first with a massive 1 hour lead. Only 6 days to go!



Into the forests



The water meadows are deep and seriously wet



Overtaking Croatian style



Fran and Frank from Euro 4x4 were racing in Adventure class

### Day 3, Stage 3

A 72km blast through the forests. Fast hard to find tracks that caused trouble. Wayne Smiths navigation is simply the best so when we took a wrong turn and found a large oak tree blocking the route; we did not question whether or not we had gone the wrong way. But even the best make mistakes and soon we were back on the correct trail!



Then trouble struck when dried leaves blocked the radiator causing us to over heat, with our temperature gauge misleading us as it faulted. Thankfully as friends passed they gave us water to continue. We received help from Russians, Hungarians, Germans and Austrians. How cool is that! It's great to race with such friendly teams. But the mistakes and over heating cost us a huge chunk of our lead!



Damage from branches is always a hazard

### Day 4, Stage 4

After the drama of yesterday it was great to see we still had a 18minute lead. Today is Trophy day. We race 12km individually through heavy forests to a quarry leaving the start in two minute intervals. Then we are split into teams of four vehicles based on yesterday's results. We struck gold being teamed with Szilard (Hungary), Fritz (German Legend) and the Ruel brothers (Belgium). We had to complete three simple stages as a team and then race as a four vehicle team 12km through the forests. The catch being we only had one road book and one control card! We blitzed the stages and then head back into the forests. Szilard leads out and nailed the navigation, while we took up tail end Charlie sweeping behind, although following three heavily modified diesel cars is no fun. We were fastest by three minutes despite Fritz breaking his gear-lever.



Short Trophy Day stages were great fun



Just love technical driving



Szilard from Hungary with his IFS proto buggy

### Day 4, Stage 5. The Night-Stage

This is my favourite stage and I was itching to get going. Due to troubles in Adventure class the start for the Trophy class was pushed back to 12.15am. We chat as we wait straining to hear the Adventure class engines screaming somewhere in the forest ahead.

Then we are off! Fast and slippery forest sections with huge water meadows and steep winch climbs. I love these night sections and thrive on the danger and the speed. This year we are using Lazer Lamps new Triple R Elites and simply wow!!! Game changers! But what i won't be doing again is wearing glasses with yellow lens. They went out of the window around 5km!



Ready for the night stage

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by

Wayne was also having fun after his wiper packed up at the halfway stage. At one junction Wayne asked "Have we turned left yet?", to which I replied "I thought you would have noticed the change in direction". His response: "We haven't gone in a straight line for the last hour Knucklehead!" Its banter like this that binds the team, simply brilliant!

We started fifth and finished first, winning the stage by 7 minutes. Time for some well earned sleep, finally we get to bed at 4am after servicing the car for the following day.



Clawing mud and steep slopes



The new Lazer lights are amazing!



All the way from Israel and loving it!

## Day 5, Stage 6

Race day and it was nuts!

It was a late start after the previous night stage. The Adventure class were split into two groups and went first. They had to tackle 4x 4km laps. It was a fast course with a balance of mud, meadows and technical driving. The Adventure guys struggled with muddy conditions and the first Trophy group didn't start till after 5pm. The first Trophy group nailed it and it wasn't long before we lined up for the start. The start is crazy with nearly 20 cars lining up side by side with the track converging on a gap in the trees only two cars wide after 100m. The leading cars had the longest run to the gap and we weren't going to give an inch! The flag dropped and thousands of angry horse's unleashed hell! We were second through the gap with someone hitting our rear wheel as we thundered through. Silzard was ahead of us but we dived through the undergrowth and soon had clean air ahead. We stayed on full attack for the first lap and then settled to a fast race pace for our next two laps. Thankfully we only got caught traffic briefly on the second lap. On our third lap we had the dreaded tyre swap. Thunder into a taped box, jack up the car, remove a wheel, run it 10 metres to a mark and then refit and thunder off again. We had practised earlier in the week and it worked. We came home first extending our lead by a further 10 minutes.

Lining up for Race day



there was heavy mud in several places on the course



Leading out on race day



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Day 6, Stage 7 and it's a return to the forests.

We started first and it was tough, seriously tough. Long dark gullies with hellish mud and steep unforgiving hills interspersed with the best forest trails in the world!

Wayne was on top form and our navigation was superb until only 3km from home the track just disappeared..... We spent 45/60 minutes searching and finally found our way. Many teams struggled with the tough conditions and we have been lucky to win the stage and extend our lead to over 2 hours! Two more days of rock hard forest driving still to over come. It's not a time to take chances and we undertake a major vehicle service that goes on well into the night with a few jobs left to complete in the morning before the start.



Laying down the power



Back to the forests



Wayne never stops working

## Day 7, Stage 8

52km kilometres of fast forest tracks with brutal water meadows and hard to find trails. We start first and have great pace until at 80mph, heading up a fast track towards a main road, the brake pedal hits the floor! Down changing I managed to get our pace down to 20mph and we cross without incident but that was a spooky moment. The problem was a main brake pipe had been bent, caught the frame and rubbed through. We managed to cut the pipe back, fashion a new flare using a hammer and punch and get back on the road. But by this time we had dropped several places. We soon passed the lead cars but small navigation errors plagued us the rest of the day and we finished 3rd losing a few minutes of our precious lead.



no such thing as an easy water crossing



crystal waters hide deep mud



Super fix! brake pipe repaired on the trail

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It's the night before the final day. The weather is amazing and the sunset stunning and from around camp comes the sound of welders, generators and grinders as teams work hard to be ready for the final push. We are expecting a 35/40km stage; the whole team is feeling the nerves. We have a strong lead but this the Croatia trophy and anything can happen, the car is prepped, the team is ready. Bring it on!



Even the top teams can be winching up to 20 times a day!



A PTO winch gear dies on another competitors car



The big guy doing his stuff



Blazing across the water meadows



Late night servicing



The last water crossing was seriously deep

## Day 8, Stage 9

It's the final 40km of forest stages and we are starting with a commanding 2.5hour lead. But this is the Croatia trophy...

We start in third position and all too soon we pass second placed Silzard as 3km in the track became confused. Our pace was steady, yet fast and we were comfortably passing Adventure class cars with regularity. But nerves got the better of me and I forgot to check my gauges and 30km into the stage we come to a halt with a broken alternator. We have no idea how long the alternator hadn't been charging, but I'd guess it failed on the start line. The amazing Odyssey Batteries allowing us to cover the huge distance before we had to stop.

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A quick alternator change and a jump start from a kindly competitor and we are back in the game! We have lost 15 minutes and instinct takes over as I increase the pace to compensate. I am staggered at the generosity of the drivers ahead as they pull to the side without hesitation as they hear us approach. All too soon the stage is coming to an end with the climax being a huge double river crossing. We dive into the crystal waters and power across the first run, then it's a dash along the bank, a near vertical drop into the river and 100m crossing to the finish. We dive in and the car sinks fast with water over the bonnet. The river is very wide so we winch back to shallower waters before Wayne charges across to set the front winch. It's text book stuff in front of large crowds. As I pass the winch point I change direction for the finish line and Wayne nails it securing the winch so I don't have to slow or falter. We power across the line and we are Croatia Trophy 2015 Champions! What a feeling! What a buzz! What a week! What a Team!



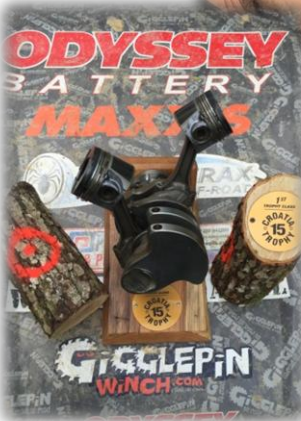
Bringing it home



The winning team



On the podium with the Russians and Hungarians



Fantastic trophies



Two times Croatia trophy champions - GigglepIn Racing!



Igor and Andejeklo hand over our Trophies

Thank you to everyone in the Team behind the scenes that made this possible and to our amazing Sponsors who help us and work with us to keep us at the top. Also a massive thank you to our growing army of fans for the fantastic support. All of you rock!!

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