

# RISING TO THE CHALLENGE



**Neil Cooper just laughs when asked if he and mate Chris Hummer are masochists. They certainly don't think so.**

And yet, how else to describe two men who enjoy nothing more than being up to their armpits in water – in a car – or fighting their way across a hostile landscape with only satellite navigation to show them an end to the challenge? But that's what they love...the challenge. The Outback 4X4 Challenge.

"We're not totally nuts ... although a lot of people think so," says Neil.

"There are a lot of short course cross-country events which we like doing, but the

appeal of an enduro event like this is driving hard and smart. It's like the guys who do the Bathurst 1000. The car only has to cover 1000 kays, but if they want to win, they must be able to drive it hard enough, but smart enough so it is in with a chance at the end – and that's exactly what this is all about.

"You do have to be smart about it. You have to be able to conserve the car so it makes it to the end but obviously you can't be slow either, so we really enjoy tackling every task – but

also thinking about it to make sure we have the right approach."

Neil and Chris have just contested their eighth run in the Outback 4X4 Challenge, a 'survival and endurance test for man and machine' conducted over seven days and nights on locations around Broken Hill in outback NSW. Their vehicle? Neil's 1981 HiLux.

"It's not even close to being stock-standard! It has 60 Series LandCruiser running gear, coil over shocks at the front, airbag suspension at



the rear and a 6.5-litre V8 under the bonnet. It runs in what's known as the Challenge class for highly modified cars, but the event also has a production class for vehicles which are essentially showroom-spec."

Competing in the Outback 4X4 Challenge means being prepared to tackle sand, mud, rocks, gorges and both dry and extremely wet river crossings (think Darling River at full force). There are no tracks and therefore no road books. All navigation is done by GPS and winning can be almost an hourly affair.

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"And we enjoy the navigation side, too," says Neil. "You can do a section that's 150km long and there's no marked track – you have to work it all out with GPS, so it's as much about the crew's mental ability as the way we drive.

"You have to be totally self-sufficient with

food, fuel and spares. You carry everything with you and if you break the car, you fix the car – and there's no support crew. You can get outside help, but you are penalised for it."

A field of 28 vehicles entered this year, including two from Venezuela and one from South Africa. Previously the competitors would have been broken into groups, with each group competing at different venues. A new format this year meant all competitors were at the same venue at the same time, which consolidated the competition and the camaraderie.

"The Challenge is a really good, fun event to do and there are always good people involved. We're all competing against each other, but we also help each other too, if someone is in trouble, and that's part of the appeal; sharing the ups and downs."

Neil says a year isn't complete without doing the Challenge, but it's not the only such event that he and Chris tackle. They've been to Indonesia for similar challenges and next year they are heading to North Africa for the Moroccan Outback Challenge, which uses some of the route traversed in the famous Dakar Rally.

In the meantime, the pair continues to consolidate impressive results in the domestic

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event. "We've been third five times on the event, so we're doing something right!" he says.

In between these extreme adventures, the pair are simply businessmen, based in Victoria. Neil is general manager for truck body specialists, JTB Trailers, while Chris owns Dynamic 4X4 (wheels and tyres). Their industry connections mean they have backing from sponsors such as Hella, General Tires and Ride Pro Suspension, among others.

The Outback 4X4 Challenge started in 1999. Spectators are welcome to 'tag along'.

## THE DIRT:

For more information, visit [www.outback4x4challenge.com](http://www.outback4x4challenge.com)

[www.digitoutback.com](http://www.digitoutback.com)

