



COURTESY PAUL HARTL

(Above) CRC 2WD champion Paul Hartl's Baja battle-scarred Volkswagen Beetle.



A FITTING FINALE

BY DEAN CAMPBELL

There's a concept called the "Three Types of Fun." The idea is that all fun things can be grouped into one of three categories. Type 1 fun is fun as it is happening. It could be go karting with friends or a BBQ on a sunny day. It's the sort of stuff that puts a smile on your face, but is fleeting. Type 2 fun tends to build character. It might not be fun at the time, but looking back, brings a smile.

Type 3 fun is a bit harder to define. Some say it is something that never evolves into a fun memory, while others simply believe it's the kind of experience that leaves a lasting imprint.

In short, it's life changing stuff. Mired in the silt of the 2013 Baja race after dark and only 20 miles into a 200 mile leg, Paul Hartl was assuredly not having Type 1 fun.

"We got stuck in the silt, maybe three or four feet of silt," said Hartl. "We tried sand ramps, but they didn't help, so we had to dig it out."

Eventually, Hartl and co-driver Carlos Bravo jacked up the car as high as possible, easing it onto the ramps, before continuing into the night.

"I drove 11 hours, non-stop. It was pretty awful," said Hartl. "The whoops are these waves maybe two to five feet high, and that's what it was all the way along in silt, and rocks, which is very hard on the car."

Trophy trucks have gobs of suspension and even helicopters flying ahead and warning of problem spots. In contrast, Hartl was driving an old VW Beetle in Class 11. Regulations state that Class 11 is open to pre-1972 VW Beetles and the only allowed

modification is aftermarket suspension. However, that suspension has to retain the stock geometry and travel. Every dip the Trophy trucks skip across is a crater that Class 11 cars have to negotiate. Hartl first became aware of the Baja decades ago and was fascinated. Hooked on the idea of competing, he was forced to wait until money and time would afford him a chance.

Finally, in 2011, he had his first try with a group called the Desert Dingos. Running on the strictest of budgets, the team was started by Jim Graham after watching *'Dust to Glory,'* a fascinating documentary that looks into the heart of the Baja. A few 'Dingos' have come and gone over time, but the team for this year's Baja numbered 14, including Hartl. Without Graham's own drive to see the Dingos happen, Hartl said his Baja dream would never have been realized.

Hartl spent some time doing other smaller desert races, and at the same time, was running a VW Golf rally car in Ontario and Quebec and filling his winter weekends with ice racing. As his skills grew, his savings shrunk and he became aware that he was going to have to call it quits. 2013 will be his final year of racing full time.

Victory at Rallye Perce Neige put Hartl into the class lead, and despite challenges at Baie and Defi, he decided that he should head west. It's a move he said blew the budget, but it was worth it. At PFR, he damaged the car on the first day and restarted the regional on Day 2, where he replicated the damage, but on the other side of the car, retiring again. At Rocky, he had to refocus

and concentrate on finishing. When he arrived at the final time control and scores were calculated, Hartl and Chuck Storry discovered they had clinched the two wheel drive title.

"My part of winning the 2WD championship is maybe 25 percent at most. It's Warren [Haywood] who fixed the car for us, it's Chuck, it's Peter Reilly and Phil Assad who built the car," said Hartl. "People say the driver is everything, but he's not. It's all the guys around that make it happen."

Just two weeks later, Hartl was deep into the Mexican night, this time stuck behind a Class 5 buggy at a water crossing. The driver of the buggy was dismissive of Hartl's desire to get past, using clear, but extremely impolite language suggesting Hartl go away. After having lost nearly an hour, Hartl and his co-driver pushed the buggy half off the trail and then hopped in the Beetle, climbed the other bank of the trail and snuck past.

For much of the night, the pair was driving with a broken rear suspension. Alone, that would have been a struggle. Stuck in the silt just 20 miles into their leg alone would have been a challenge. Getting stuck behind another car would have tested perseverance. To have to avoid booby traps set by locals on the only section of fast road – Hartl said there were three such traps – would make you question what you were doing. To face all of this, and be working with a co-driver whose English was as good as Hartl's Spanish – i.e. poor – moved the experience well into the Type 3 sort of fun.

"It was evil, just evil," said Hartl, of his feeling at the time. Looking back, the view is different. "It was amazing, I loved it. Just to make it through the 200 miles [of my leg], it is one of the biggest achievements I have made in my driving career."

Hartl and the rest of the Dingos ended their Baja at mile 570, the suspension too broken and having missed the time cutoff at the third checkpoint. Only two Class 11 cars went further.

"That's what Baja is all about. I ran the hardest off road or desert race in the world."

Hartl's rally car is for sale and, after this season, he has said he might pick one or two events a year to race in.

"So much racing is in your head. It's about saying 'I am never f—ing going to give up,'" said Hartl.

Hartl's 2013 season was filled with Type 2 and Type 3 fun. The lasting effects will stay with him for life. The hard part now will be stepping back from racing. •

"It was amazing, I loved it. Just to make it through the 200 miles [of my leg], it is one of the biggest achievements I have made in my driving career."