



Maximillion Cooper, founder of Gumball 3000

GETTING THE GUMBALL ROLLING

Now in its 17th year, the Gumball 3000 rally this month brings together cars, fashion and celebrity in spectacular style

BY PHILL TROMANS

Gumball 3000 has been nothing short of a phenomenon. Since the first rally in 1999, it has developed beyond a party-filled road trip for the wealthy and well-connected to become a global brand. Today, the Gumball group has a fashion line, video games and a big-budget feature film in the works and the rally is still going strong, with more than 100 cars heading from Dublin to Bucharest this month. Not bad for an event that was originally intended as a showcase of what its founder could do to organise a good time.

In the late 1990s, Maximillion Cooper was a 20-something fashion design graduate from the renowned Central St Martins College in London, where he had studied alongside Alexander

McQueen and Stella McCartney. He had also worked as a model for the likes of Ralph Lauren and Giorgio Armani, the proceeds from which funded his fondness for motor racing.

"I ended up racing for about eight years," recalls Cooper. "By the mid-90s I was racing for Porsche and McLaren so you can imagine by the end of the decade I had friends in the fashion scene and lots of friends in the car racing world, including team owners and sponsors and some wealthy individuals. Gumball came about as my way of creating a brand that could bring all of that together. While I loved racing cars, the social side of that world is very corporate and boring. I wanted to bring the music and fashion scene into the car world."

After plans to take over the Tyrrell Formula One team failed at the last minute when his financial backer was outbid by a major tobacco firm, Cooper decided to create something new.

“That deal gave me confidence that something was possible and I had the right contacts and friends behind me,” he says. “My gameplan changed and I decided to get these powerful friends of mine together. The plan developed to invite them on a road trip, give them an experience and show them that I can put something on, put on great parties each night and create something new.”

The first event in 1999 saw a guest list largely made up of Cooper’s friends and contacts, including Kate Moss, Chris Eubank, Jason Priestley and Billy Zane and 50 cars ranging from supercars and Rolls-Royces to trucks and an ambulance. Over five days, they drove from London to France, Monaco, Italy and Germany, partying in style each night.

“The rally was not a new concept. It was about who was on it and what that collective looked like,” says Cooper, who never intended the first Gumball to be anything other than a demonstration of his event-planning skills. “But by September that year we were in about 500 magazines

around the world. The famous faces on the rally had their own publicists and I reaped the benefits. That sheer demand really gave me the belief I should do it again.”

The Gumball had started rolling at an unstoppable pace and grew over the following years. As the new decade began, Cooper signed a series of lucrative licensing and sponsorship deals. “It was already creating a bit of a brand as opposed to just this rally,” he says. “We had a deal with Hasbro toys to do Gumball Top Trumps cards, which we still do now 16 years later. In 2006, we sold 15 million packs of Top Trumps in one year so it was totally game-changing.”

Cooper kept the guestlist fresh each year, ensuring current celebrities were invited to keep media interest high. A TV documentary won awards and MTV’s Jackass made a show on the rally that proved hugely popular around the world. In 2005, the rally launch in central London gathered a crowd of 400,000 people.

“That was the tipping point in terms of public awareness. Since that year, everywhere we go we get ridiculous crowds and the event changed from almost a private event for the entrants into [what is] very much a public event.”

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Cooper at the starting line of last year’s Gumball 3000 rally in Stockholm



The path to success has not been entirely smooth. A 2007 accident on the rally in Macedonia left two members of the public dead, which for a time tarnished Gumball's image, although Cooper points out the convoy was under supervision from a United Nations escort at the time. "There is always a risk with any event, especially on the roads," he says. "As long as we drum it into everyone that we are driving normally on public roads, the risk is limited. Now the whole event is marshalled by police, which is great for us.

"People who have done the rally multiple times know it is a road trip, not about how fast you get somewhere. Every year you have a few people who think, 'I'm going to win it' but there isn't any winning. We certainly have to tell them right after the first day."

This year's launch event in London will see more than a million members of the public attend, with 2,500 staff working in a closed-off Regent Street – one of London's busiest shopping areas – to prepare music concerts and a range of branded attractions.

"That audience allows us to get some quite significant sponsorship deals, as any major sports event would," says Cooper. "The drivers and cars have not changed. It is still an invitation-type event, although numbers have grown—but for them it is still an escape, an adventure, something they want to do in their social time."

A maximum of 120 cars are featured each year—half are alumni and half are new guests picked by Cooper to maximise

exposure and enjoyment for the participants.

"The premise is to make that 100-car grid as diverse as possible. There are always between 30 or 40 different nationalities, different industries and different cars," he says.

"Any car event will always be slightly swayed toward being male-orientated but there is as much of a mix as I can [organise] each year and the fashion and music side of things helps to counteract that."

GCC entrants have been a regular feature on the rally over the years so could we see Gumball on UAE soil in the future? Perhaps, says Cooper, although the country's small size makes things difficult without flying visitors and cars in as part of a wider tour. "We can't come to the UAE and drive around in circles for six days—but it is definitely in our plans. I'm surprised it is one of those places we have not been to yet."

With a lucrative Gumball clothing line now in about 3,000 stores worldwide, Cooper has plans to open flagship outlets in cities like London, Los Angeles, Shanghai and Dubai. But no matter the success of offshoot ventures, the rally will always remain the most important focus.

"If we are just a brand like Levi's then we have to take out traditional advertising and sponsor events and in a way the rally does all of that for us," says Cooper. "It is the week of the year when celebrities are wearing the clothes and all eyes are looking at us and it is bigger than any magazine ad or billboard. The rally is our unique sales point for the brand."



Some of the famous faces including David Hasselhoff that put Gumball 3000 on the party map