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CRAWL's Max Thomason interviews BFG's Gary Enterline

Photos: Max Thomason

EVERY SO OFTEN, a product comes along that fundamentally changes a motorsport. For rockcrawling, one of those advancements was the advent of the BFGoodrich Krawler T/A KX tire. With its aggressive lug pattern and available soft compound rubber for competition use, the Krawler revolutionized our sport almost overnight. Early on, BFG utilized professional drivers such as Tracy Jordan and Ken Shupe to test their products, which led to many victories. Since its launch, the BFG Krawler has seen tremendous popularity, both on the rocks and the trail. With rumors of several new sizes on the drawing board, who better for this issue's Rockstar than the man behind the BFG Krawler, Gary Enterline.

CRAWL: What are your thoughts on how the BFG Krawler has shaped the sport of rockcrawling?

GE: The Krawler has worked great in competition. BFG sponsored teams in several of the rockcrawling series', beginning in 2002. ARCA (American Rock Crawling Association) was probably the best known at the time. I got to attend all four of the ARCA events that year, and BFG teams won all four of them. Two on the Mud-Terrain T/A KM tire and two on the Krawler T/A KX. BFG became the dominate tire brand in rockcrawling very quickly. Rockcrawling was experiencing some growth and it was a matter of time before other tire companies also became involved in sponsoring competitors. There are now several other brands with sticky compound tires, and each has strengths and weaknesses compared to the Krawler. But, the BFG teams have proven that it's hard to beat [that tire].

CRAWL: BFG isn't sponsoring as many teams as they used to, for example in W.E.ROCK. Do you have any comment on further sponsorship in the rockcrawling market?

GE: BFG has sponsored competitors in a wide range of offroad motorsports for years. And each year, we evaluate the resources and opportunities, and make adjustments or changes as needed to our programs. We don't discuss the details of our plans.

CRAWL: I can tell you, from experience, that the W.E.ROCK Dayton, TN event was most excellent. The place was packed. The only downside was that on Sunday, the clouds decided to use the area around the course for lightning practice. The event really seemed to draw people in, and the town could support it.

GE: When W.E.ROCK had their finals up at Hannibal, MO, we had the BFG tractor-trailer up there. I went up to that one because I hadn't been to any rockcrawling events this season, and the timing of this one worked out well for me. It was a lot of fun. It was good having the BFG truck there, with the welders and the guys to help get competitors back on the course. It rained Saturday night and, as you know, Shannon Campbell came back and drove like Shannon Campbell to win the Unlimited.





learn something about the offroad world. I also just really like the wheelin' in Moab.

CRAWL: So we've heard rumors that you're stepping up your game with a few new tire sizes. What are the new BFG Krawler sizes that are being released?

GE: There's a 38x14.50R17, a 40x14.50R17, which you saw today, and a 42x14.50R20. All three tire sizes will be blue label [not sticky]. The 39.5x13.50R17 Krawler size, which is currently a red label, we plan to make that in blue label as well.

CRAWL: So you're involved with BFG. What's your personal wheelin' vehicle?

GE: It's a 1997 Jeep TJ with a 4-inch long arm Superlift kit, a beefed up rear Dana 44 axle and a [Superior] Super 30 kit in the front. The diffs have 4.56 gears and turn LT285/70R17 BFG Mud Terrain T/A KM2s.

CRAWL: How long have you been wheelin'?

GE: I started offroading as a kid, with motorcycles. College, marriage, and kids slowed all of it down. Then, I got into working with light truck tires in 1994, as a tire designer. That same year, I attended the Baja 1000. It was my very first one. That got me kicked back into it and I said, "Hmmm. I need to get back into offroading." It was kinda in my blood. I just hadn't done much of it. I had a motorcycle at the time, it was a Goldwing. When I moved into marketing, I decided it was time to sell the Goldwing. I was thinking about another bike, a Jeep, or, well something! I started talking to people, and the [Jeep] TJ seemed right for me, capable right out of the box. Lots of modifications available, and I could find one for a pretty reasonable price. I found a Dana 44 and put that underneath it. I wheel it at Tellico and I am going to Beasley Knob for the BFG Outstanding Trails presentation in the middle of October.

CRAWL: Have you ever been to Beasley Knob?

GE: I have never been.

CRAWL: Neither have I. It's on my list of places to go.

GE: Well, I am going to give it a try. I've been able to get my Jeep out to Moab one time. Ken Shupe was heading west and I put my Jeep on his trailer. He stopped by Moab at the Dynatrac booth, so I got my Jeep out there. I brought the family out and went wheeling for a few days. Then, I worked in the BFG booth for a few days, so my family took the Jeep out for a while. I had a great time. It climbed the backside of Hell's Revenge with no problems, other than my wife screaming in the back seat. It was at that time when I started to wonder, 'did I tighten those driveshaft bolts tight enough? Ok, did I do that right?' asking all of these things as I am going up the hill climbs.

CRAWL: Speaking of fixing stuff, what is your educational background?

GE: I got my undergrad in Engineering Technologies from Oklahoma State. I went with Engineering Technologies because it was more automotive oriented. I started out working for Proctor and Gamble for three and a half years, on paper products. After that, I said, 'I gotta do something more automotive oriented.' I went to work as a tire designer with



Michelin Tire in 1980. I worked as a green tire designer for six years, which means working with tires before it goes into the mold, and then as a cured tire designer for nine years. A cured tire designer works with tire after it comes out of the mold. Its performance, look, and how to achieve these things are all part of his responsibilities.

CRAWL: Going back to the BFG Krawler, you said you made a 37-inch general mold?

GE: Yeah. This was the first development mold for the Krawler. When it came out, it looked like one of the old military tires. It had a solid center rib with angled legs coming off of it. I played around with them and I hand-grooved all of the early tires. We started out testing the tire with Tracy Jordan, Ken Shupe, Don Robbins, John Gilliland and Curt Hildebrand. I'd send them drawings and ask for feedback. Most of the guys told me what they wanted the tire to do. We ended up doing some siping because Tracy and Don were running Land Cruisers at the time, and the siping was necessary for the heavy front end. It came down to two tread designs named G.I. Joe and The Hulk. The G.I. Joe design is what you see now on the production Krawler tire. The entire first year of ARCA, we did not have a production mold, all the tires were hand-grooved. The first fully molded Krawler came out in 2003. The first size produced was a 37x12.50x17, and the second size was a 35x13.50R15. The 35x13.50 was a bitchin' looking tire. I loved it.

CRAWL: Indeed. I always liked the wide 35-inch tire. A buddy of mine used to run them. Why did you go wider on the 35-inch tire?

GE: I called up my guys and asked if the equipment could handle a wider tire. Would it fit within our limits of manufacturing at the time—I wanted to try it. I would've taken the 37-inch tire wider, but the equipment couldn't do it. We now have the proper equipment to produce wider tires.

CRAWL: Overall, has the BFG Krawler been a successful project for BFG and Michelin?

GE: Yeah. It is an expensive tire to build, but it is pretty much a handmade custom tire. It is a complicated tire with the alternating carcass plies. From a standpoint of its capability and representing BFG in extreme traction and extreme offroad, it does an excellent job. It provides the image BFG wants.

CRAWL: Would you say that the Krawler is better for East Coast or West Coast wheeling?

GE: When I was designing the tire, I wanted it to be an extreme traction tire. At ARCA, it was dubbed as a rockcrawling tire. At first, I didn't want it limited to just that, but it was marketed as a rockcrawling tire.

CRAWL: How did you get into a job like that? I mean, designing tires.

GE: When I hired into Michelin, I wasn't hired to be an offroad tire designer. Michelin really didn't produce any offroad tires in the USA, at the time. They do make mining tires, but that is in another division. I am in the passenger and light truck division. I worked with all season performance tire designs and OE (original equipment) tire designs. I designed tires for several

CRAWL: Shannon Campbell's spotter is crazy-awesome.

GE: Yeah! They do well.

CRAWL: What are your favorite events to attend?

GE: The Easter Jeep Safari and the Off Road Expo are some of my favorite events. There is a high concentration of offroaders at these events and it is always an opportunity to learn something; something about what people think about your tires, and to get direct feedback. That is where, as a manufacturer, I call it a target rich environment of people. We use those venues to try and gather feedback, talk to people who ask questions about our product and [want to] learn something about it. It's not just an event to go to and promote your product, it's an event to go to and



Honda vehicles. I worked as a BFG light truck tire designer for one year, before moving into marketing. I have worked as both a Product Category Manager and a Brand Category Manager in marketing. I'm currently a Senior Product Category Manager for light truck tires.

CRAWL: You also designed the new KM2?

GE: I was the team leader on the KM2, and I designed a tread concept based off the Krawler, to be included in the survey. It seemed reasonable for the KM2 to have a family resemblance to the Krawler. It had compromises, like it had smaller lugs, more streetable design and more grooving. It worked out pretty good.

CRAWL: Was Michelin ready for a revision of the Mud Terrain, and did you work on the previous Mud Terrain KM tire?

GE: Oh yeah. I was one of the guys who was on the team that released the KM. I was a Product Manager at the time. When we released it, people said it looked like the old tire, "What is different?" they asked. Looking back, I think the offroad enthusiasts were expecting the new tire to have a different look. The All Terrain was strong, but I knew the KM needed to be updated. One of the main improvements we made for the KM2 was increasing sidewall strength. We even considered using a four-ply construction, but that was not feasible for the project.

CRAWL: Are there any changes planned for the Krawler?

GE: Not really. Just a reduced tread depth mold, because they

work better on the manmade courses. The full depth crawler is preferred for natural tracks.

CRAWL: When will the new tire sizes be introduced?

GE: Easter Jeep Safari 2009.

CRAWL: Is the Krawler going to be a permanent member of the BFG tire lineup?

GE: I think it will. I think the tire itself will be around for a long time. There could come a day when we decide to upgrade it. So far, it has worked very well and hasn't required major change. We are still experimenting with it, to make it better. I think it'll still be around, either in current form or modified form.

CRAWL: Good to hear.