

Dash for publicity backfires amid Cannonball chaos

By DAVID NASON

WHEN Akahiro Kabe would leave his plush home in Tokyo's western suburbs for his dental practice in nearby Tachikawa City, he had to drive his red \$750,000, turbo-charged F-40 Ferrari within the speed limit of 40km/h.

Moments before he lost control of the same car on the highway south of Alice Springs this week, killing himself, his Japanese co-driver and two Cannonball Run officials, Kabe had thundered past a Porsche at 220km/h.

The day before Kabe had been going even faster, clocking 285km/h in a "flying mile" time trial.

And the day before that, soon after the start of the Run, one of the dead officials, father of three Keith Pritchard, had made an ominous phone call to his mother.

"The Japanese guy is absolutely crazy," he told her. "He is going to kill someone."

Pritchard also said he was worried the Cannonball Run — a legalised 3800km high-speed dash from Darwin to Ayers Rock and back, had unleashed too many inexperienced drivers in high-performance cars on a public road.

Pritchard would have known. Before his death he was arguably the Northern Territory's highest qualified motorist, the only Territorian ever invited to compete in the Bathurst 1000.

Whether that grim prophecy flashed through Pritchard's mind in those final, fatal seconds as he sat at a card table by his four-wheel drive looking death in the face as Kabe's Ferrari slewed across the Stuart Highway towards him, no one will ever know.

From a twin-engined Cessna above the highway, Alice Springs mechanic Bill Yan, watched as the tragedy unfolded.

"The Ferrari got caught behind a Commodore and looked to overtake," Yan said.

"But then he must have seen the (Pritchard's) check point and pulled back. It looked like he caught some gravel which sent the car sliding. He over-corrected and then slewed left, back across the road and into the four-wheel drive."

In an instant the Cannonball Run, the event Chief Minister Marshall Perron bragged would "bring millions of dollars worth of publicity" to the Northern Territory, was transformed.

No longer was this a case of good PR. Here was blood-stained international infamy and, upon examination, compelling evidence the Cannonball Run concept was fundamentally flawed from the start and should never be raced again.

The questions are now many. Was safety, for both competitors and other road users, given proper consideration? Were the police opposed but over-ruled? Were the point score speed requirements set too high? Were the slow-down zones inadequately marked?

And was the decision to stage the event, and to continue it after the tragedy, based on the June 4 re-

election imperatives of Perron's Government?

"I'll probably be called a wise-arse after the event, but our initial call on the thing was that it was all a bit Mickey Mouse," said Phil Scott, editor of the market-leading Wheels Magazine, yesterday.

According to Scott, who made the decision his magazine would not report the event, a six-month bid to have safety guidelines explained and to obtain a list of entrants from the organisers, had failed.

"From what we've heard since, the event is no better planned than an amateur round of a State rally championship."

Scott said it was a "dynamite combination" to turn loose amateur drivers in high-performance cars on the open road.

"For Christ's sake, Kabe was a dentist from Tokyo. His sole experience was driving around Tokyo at average 12km/h speeds.

"He comes out here, they tell him to go like buggery. He's suddenly got TV cameras on him — he's a hero. He thinks he's Ayrton Senna. It was too much pressure on the guy."

Scott is far from the only critic. This week territory Senator Bob Collins, for many years a volunteer in the St John Ambulance, revealed his opposition to the event had been put to the Perron Government back in February.

And in April the general manager of the NT Automobile Association's, Malcolm Pash, went public, saying the race was too dangerous and should be banned.

But Mr Perron, who claimed there was "massive support" for the event, even after the deaths this week, dismissed both claims, telling Mr Pash he was "ill-informed" and Senator Collins he should concentrate on representing the Territory in Canberra, not the other way round.

A key area of inquiry for the coroner will no doubt be the role of the police in monitoring the event. Many police admit privately they were against the Cannonball Run but with the Government determined to see it happen, there was nothing to do but go along for the ride.

For organiser, three times Bathurst winner Allan Moffat, his dream event has turned from modest money spinner (there was no major sponsor) to nightmare.

Moffat's post-crash reluctance to be available to the media has also contrasted sharply with the bucket loads of pre-race hype.

"When we tell them (potential competitors) that we have the blessing of the Government, the police and the Transport Department and that it is going to be highly organised and legal ... people just can't believe it," Moffat told the Northern Territory News in January.

"There are all sorts of performance cars laying around unexercised that are just panting to get out there and give it a go." Now there is one less.



The twisted wreck of Kabe's Ferrari lies beside the road, fulfilling chillingly the prophecy of Keith Pritchard — Picture: CARMEL SEARS

Widows apologise as race winner declared

By DAVID NASON

TO the uptempo beat of a jazz band on the lawns of Darwin's Diamond Beach Casino, the 3800km Cannonball Run crawled to a close yesterday.

Officials seemingly confused at first about who had actually won the race, which claimed four lives in Tuesday's horror smash south of Alice Springs, later announced the overall points winner was Ron Conrad driving a Porsche 911.

As the 101 cars arrived in funeral-style procession, the widows of the

Japanese F-40 Ferrari team of Aka-hiro Kabe and Takeshi Okano released open letters to the people of the Northern Territory apologising for "the trouble caused" by their husbands' tragic accident.

"Yesterday I had a silent meeting with my husband," Mrs Sumiko Kabe said.

"He has spoken to me in a happy voice about his enjoyable experiences. He deeply loved me, our two sons, and he had a passion for Ferraris.

"One of his dreams was to participate in the Cannonball Run and he realised it."

Mrs Kabe and Mrs Miyuki Okano also expressed condolences to the families of the two officials killed.

But while grief was widespread among the finishing competitors, many also complained about poor organisation and expressed resentment at the reduced speed limit for the return leg from Ayers Rock.

"We had the ridiculous situation where the traffic was going faster

than us for most of the day on Thursday," said New South Welshman Mr Peter Pilkington, who raced his Lexus LS 400V-8.

Another, Mr Greg Dick of Alice Springs, driving a VR Holden, complained of being overtaken by a woman driving a caravan.

Mr Pilkington said he would be back "with colours on" for Cannonball Run II.

But whether support can be generated to run the event again remains doubtful.