





VIKING RAIDERS

when they are out on track
they take no prisoners





If you're tired of chewing on dried fish or resting your weary limbs in the hot thermal springs spattered around the volcanic island, then Icelandic Formula Off Road will certainly show you that the ancient Viking spirit is still very much alive and kicking. Here is where you see the most powerful specially modified 4x4 vehicles on the planet taken to the extremes under full throttle and heavy doses of nitro. The result: hundreds upon hundreds of horses under the hood propelling their potentially certifiable pilots up near vertical 'slopes'.

Rollovers are common and spectacular. And as you watch the action from the sidelines you might imagine that the drivers are crazy – and you'd be right to. Sort of like the Vikings of old – a tribe with a law unto themselves. But it's not completely true – they may be rough on the outside but they are friendly, for the most part – once you get to know them. Most are family guys with wife and kids and a few grey hairs. Guys who just want to let off a bit of steam and pound a whole lot of dirt as they rocket skyward in an awesome rage of sound.

There are currently three competing classes in Formula Off Road. The newest is the street legal class. The 4x4s must be legal to drive on the roads and they must have certain security measures like a roll cage, 4-point harness and a helmet for the driver.

The two major classes are the 'Modified Street' and the 'Unlimited' - which in itself sounds a bit scary! The difference between them is mainly in the tyres. Unlimited class 4x4s are allowed to use paddle tyres that give an enormous advantage in grip – literally digging into the earth during what little contact they make with it during the hops and short flights. Apart from that the Modified Street class vehicles must have original looking bodies and also have a passenger seat – although you would have to be out of your mind to want to sit in it.

The two major classes compete on the same tracks and for overall position, as well as in each individual class.



The location

So where do you hold an event like this? Formula Off Road takes place in closed areas with no road traffic and where your average sedan would struggle to drive anyway. Rock mines, for example, which are usually just outside towns, are often used because they offer the right kind of terrain. Mostly the surface is driven just as it is but occasionally it's modified slightly to give spectators a better, more exciting experience – as if watching several hundred horsepower of rampaging metal heading skyward isn't exciting enough. The tracks themselves are pretty makeshift, marked by old tyres, flags or sticks. On the day of the event the course marshal takes the drivers through the tracks on foot and explains how they are laid out and how they are 'supposed' to be driven.

The pilots


Possibly the most important quality of a successful driver in Formula Off Road is not to

be afraid of heights! Building a good Formula Off Road 4x4 takes creativity, but driving one takes courage and perhaps a dash of insanity!

The sport attracts all sorts of people: the loudmouth and rustic, greasy mechanic type who's a genius at fixing and modifying cars; the quiet loner who drives his vehicle just like it is an extension of his personality – not spectacular, but refined and capable.

Each driver has a small team of assistants. They help out by preparing the 4x4 and of course fixing whatever breaks during competition, even though there is little time for repairs between tracks. They have to be fast thinkers and quick to act during pit stops or rescuing the vehicles if they stop on course.

It is a small community and the drivers know each other well – having competed in numerous events. But they keep a certain distance from each other. It is important that, like their ancestors, when they are out on



track they take no prisoners.

Preparing for a competition is a major undertaking. You need a truck large enough to carry your chariot. And it has to be a mobile garage, welding shop and spare parts department to fix up the twists and leaks which are the typical scars of each event. With the sand drag tyres on the 4x4s are wider than 2.5m, so the 'big boots' have to be transported separately.

The risks

As spectacular as Formula Off Road appears, there have been very few serious accidents – if you discount anything that you would normally claim on your motoring insurance. The drivers are protected by a roll cage, a full-face helmet with neck support, four-point harnesses, a homologated bucket seat, flame resistant overalls, shoes and gloves, special arm

restrainers and other safety measures that are required by the rules.

Spectators can sometimes be pelted with sand, earth or small stones kicked up by the huge shovels attached to the rear tyres, but if you're daft enough to stand behind one of these beasts then expect to get dumped on.

All the lurching and bouncing around also puts a lot of strain on the trucks. Mechanical breakdowns include failing transmissions, overheating engines, broken axles and body damage happen as a matter of course. Hence the need for a good back-up team preferably with a toolkit and sledgehammer to hand.

The spoils

Points are given in the same way as Formula F1: 10 for the winner, 8 for second place, 6 for third and one less for every subsequent place. There's also a special

award given for the most spectacular driving in each class. There is not a lot of money in the sport and the winner only gets a medal and a cup, as well as the honor of being the champion.

Keeping a Formula Off Road truck competition ready for a whole season is an expensive project. It's not something you can fund with your kids pocket money, although that too will probably end up being spent on spark plugs or gaskets. So, many contestants get companies to sponsor them and in return run ads on their trucks. Assistants are, in most cases, just real enthusiasts who know a lot about fixing stuff and who just generally love the sport. They rarely get paid. Their pleasure comes from smelling the gasoline and nitro, getting their hands dirty and watching their pilots riding their mechanical steeds up impossible inclines. That's what Sundays are all about.

Formula Off Road Rules

Formula Off Road is a real test in off-road driving on closed tracks. Each competition is held in accordance with the FIA International Sporting Code (ISC) and has about 6 to 8 tracks. On each track a driver can earn up to 350 points depending on how far he goes or if he gets any minus points for faults.

Each driver has to go as far as he can and gets no help from the team during the attempt. Stopping incurs a penalty of 10 points. Backing up is allowed but incurs a 40-point penalty. Touching a marker is 20 penalty points. Driving over a marker is 50 points or 100 if only one wheel is still on the course. Faults at the final gate incur only half as many points.

Timed courses give points according to position. First place = 300 points, second place = 270 points, third place = 250 points and then 10 points less for each succeeding place. The highest total number of points wins.

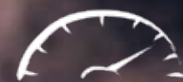
The vehicles

Excluding the new Street Legal class, the Formula Off Road style 4x4 is highly modified. A typical example usually has the following modifications:

- *Locked front and rear diff. as well as the centre transfer case. When one tyre is turning they all are.*
- *Gear ratios are lowered and usually have slightly higher ratios up front. This makes the front wheels turn a little faster and makes the vehicle easier to steer in the extreme situations.*
- *Engines are powerful big block 8-cylinder petrol engines tuned to convey a huge amount of power to the wheels. A nitro system gives an extra couple of hundred bhp when the pedal is floored.*
- *Strong automatic transmission with a converter that kicks in the driveline when the revs are around 5,000rpm (your family car converter is often around 1,000-1,500rpm).*
- *Sand drag tyres for maximum traction. The Unlimited class allows the use of paddle tyres that are built on racing slicks with the paddles welded on. The Modified Street class uses diecast sand drag tyres with slightly smaller shovels.*
- *Suspension is made so as to give high articulation and quick response to the fast changing surfaces. The older trucks have coil springs while newer trucks have air springs that are easier to adjust according to each track. A new type of suspension is also being tested by at least one contestant. It's similar to your typical motorcycle, where the shock absorber and the suspension arm is built into a single unit.*
- *A specially built roll cage is required for all vehicles.*
- *Steering is hydraulic and definitely not allowed on the street.*

About the author

Thrandur Arnthorsson is the owner and webmaster of 4x4offRoads.com where you can read more about the Formula Off Road events and see even more pictures as well as other 4 wheeling activities around the world. Thrandur lives in Iceland and takes his 4x4 for extreme winter trips over snow and glaciers.



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