

Originally built two years ago to win the Mexican 1000, the thunderous Baja Sportster got a lot of ink and broke a lot of hearts before ending up in a shallow desert grave. Resurrected by excited So-Cal Harley dealers and fitted for the street, it took dead aim on a new pavement record. A lifetime of failures later, it got it.

By Dave Holeman

# SAGA OF THE GILLETTE HIGHWAY



● No other motorcycle in modern racing history has lead a life as bizarre as the infamous Baja Sportster. It was originally built by a handful of aggressive Southern California Harley dealers and mechanics, on a whim, as a publicity gimmick. In dirt trim the Sportster just couldn't beat Baja's murderous roads and its own bad luck. So it was fitted for the Baja Highway.

The whole incredible idea of racing an 883cc iron head Sportster came from 20-year desert and Baja champion Larry Bergquist. Larry was, and will certainly remain, the only motorcycle rider to score an overall win in any of the big Baja money races. Teamed with Gary Preston, Larry scorched an unbelievable pace from Ensenada to El Arco, the halfway point, in 1968. From there to the finish, all through darkness, Gary led the way to a win that was five and one-half hours quicker than the previous year's winning time. Larry said then, as he does today, that a big four-stroke is the only bike that will ever win a Baja race overall and beat the Broncos and single-seat buggies. He conveyed the idea to Bruce Chubbuck (H-D of Pasadena); Bruce passed it on to the So-Cal Harley-Davidson Dealer Association; and they were ecstatic about the idea. Jim Wismer, then president, accepted responsibility of building a Sportster from his Fullerton shop.

Nobody involved with the project had any idea of what the machine had to do; where it was to go; how fast it must run; or how far it had to go. Nobody had ever been to Baja. Nobody had ever even seen a Baja bike before.

The engine was, and remained throughout both dirt and highway attempts, a hodgepodge of heterogeneous parts. The iron-barrel engine was of 1971 vintage—883cc stock. It was overbored .020" to accommodate the only pair of 1957 round-dome, low-compression pistons that could be located. This dropped compression to 6.5:1, enabling the engine to consume stale Mexican gas acceptably. The pressure drop also reduced maximum power, operating heat and, to the rider's pleasure, vibration.

The heads were sent to Harley porting wizard Jerry Branch. They were flowed, ported, polished, and bigger XR valves were installed in sintered bronze guides. Cams were street-standard "P" models. Larger gears were installed in the standard oil pump to hasten scavenging of the crankcase so the engine wouldn't wet-sump during continuous high-speed running. The breather valve and passages, particularly ones to the heads, were drilled out. Over \$100 worth of high-pressure hydraulic aircraft oil lines and fittings were used, along with a cooler.

Dean Wixom was brought in to build a gas tank as large as was feasible and as durable as possible. He popped an oversized mold off a 1967 H model touring tank. This fiberglass tank was about a quarter-inch thick, and held 4½ gallons.

Ignition was provided by a 1958 Fairbanks-Morse magneto. It was completely separate from the generating system or battery, and thus became an insurance

factor in case the electrical system failed.

Carburetion was a nightmare from the start of the Baja Sportster project until its conclusion—in the dirt and on the highway. The dirt-bike version started out with a Bendix, then changed over to a Tillotsen, and finally was fitted with an archaic 1957 Linkert. No one could figure out how to tune-in any of the carburetors with the exception of the Linkert, which gave the same performance regardless of jetting settings or climatic conditions. Efficient it wasn't; workable it was.

Over 800 man-hours were stuffed into the Sportster in preparing it for its first Baja races. After that, no one could keep track of the phenomenal amount of time and money invested in the world's biggest dirt bike—the 900cc Sportster.

In the NORRA-sponsored Baja races the Sportster was a frustrating, if not heart-breaking, disappointment. In the 1972 500 Larry Bergquist stretched out a prodigious lead over the rest of the motorcycle field in the all-asphalt first 92 mile section. In fact, Larry would probably have posted overall (ahead of Parnelli and Thompson and Ferro) fast time into Camalu. But the jinx struck: the front exhaust guide seized onto the valve stem, locking the valve open. Over a blind, twisty road Larry limped into Camalu on one cylinder in 58 minutes, then retired.

High hopes were held for the 1973 Baja 1000. There were almost 300 miles of flat-out asphalt awaiting the Sportster. It was clocked, while cruising on the Mexicali to San Felipe straightaway, at 114 mph the day before the race. On raceday the bike hardly went 15 miles before the entire tread cap on the huge 5.00 x 16" Goodyear Grasshopper peeled off at well over 100 mph, slapped Larry in the back so hard that it knocked the wind out of him, and put the Sportster into the world's most terrifying speed-wobble. Larry saved the bike and rode to the half-way village of El Arco on a stock Sportster wheel and tire—in the dirt. Jack Froelich took over and rode to within 125 miles of La Paz when the under-gusseted frame broke into two separate pieces held together only by wires and control cables.

In its final Baja race appearance, the 1973 500 miler, the Sportster ended its dirt career with a fitting adieu—in flames and smoke. After crossing the talcum-powder dry lake at Rancho Laguna Chapala and forging through the dreaded rock canyon beyond, Larry dropped the bike on the carburetor, tearing it loose from its fitting. When being kick-started the engine coughed and back-fired, setting the carburetor aflame. Larry threw the dragon on its left side and attempted to arrest the fire by throwing sand on it—in vain. The gas tank caught fire and that was that. Along with some Mexicans camped close by, Larry disgustingly buried the bike in a shallow Baja grave.

The remains of the Sportster were disinterred a week after the race's conclusion and placed in Jim Wismer's new Westminster (California) shop. In time, the salvageable pieces were cleaned and placed in one of the dormant storage



*An astronomer by trade, Bornhurst lives to set records. By wrestling the bizarre Baja Sportster to La Paz in less than 12 hours he established the first Gillette Highway record.*



rooms across the shop's alley. But the project had, in its own peculiar way, been a success. Other than the winning bike in each race, the Sportster was given more magazine and news-weekly space than any of the other competitors.

Six months later, in November of 1973, another seasoned Baja motorcyclist, Larry Bornhurst, got Bob Laidlaw (Laidlaw's Harley-Davidson) on the phone and proposed taking Bergquist's old Sportster out of retirement, dressing it up and running it down Baja's Highway One when the new road was opened in December. The idea was taken to the So-Cal H-D Dealer's Association. They had a flush kitty at the time and gave Larry an enthusiastic okay on the project.

The face-lift of the Baja Sportster involved getting an old Fontana road racing

Bornhurst's fervor to be first and fastest to La Paz didn't overshadow thorough personal preparation. Larry recalled to memory all of the trick turns, blind corners, populous (livestock and people) areas and construction zones. He had ridden every inch of the highway while it was being built and most of it after the road was paved. A big-rig truck driver who had traversed the new highway a multitude of times gave Larry a very accurate mileage chart (broken down in miles to two decimals) running from Tijuana's first toll gate on the Ensenada freeway to the airport at La Paz—913.92 miles. There were 19 reference points (towns or road intersections) on the chart. Larry computed elapsed time to each reference point at 80 and 90 mph averages. To each of these averages a reasonable pit stop

fuel pump was bolted to the left side of the fairing to pull fuel up to the main tank upon operation of the switch. With a total of nine gallons of gasoline the bike's cruising range was guaranteed to be 160 to 180 miles.

Testing was a tremendous problem. Ontario Motor Speedway was available—for \$500 per day. And the Ensenada toll freeway was a three hour, one-way drive. When Larry first laid his hands on the Baja Sportster, it was for the bike's first shakedown run. I told Larry of a secret road used occasionally for top-speed runs on test bikes. Anything but legal, this 26-mile stretch of asphalt in the high desert lay smack in the middle of Edwards Air Force Base—where much of the supersonic testing of planes like the X-15 takes place.

PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVE HOLEMAN, DALE BOLLER, SUSIE MANN

**“... the Sportster ended its dirt career with a fitting adieu—in flames and smoke.”**



drum brake front wheel once used on DeWayne Keeter's race bike. This and the 6.5 gallon KR gas tank were donated by Monte Miller, who tuned for Joe Leonard (three time national AMA Champion) from 1958 to 1962. The tank was modified by Dean Wixon to fit the Baja Sportster and its capacity was raised to 7.0 gallons.

New Ceriani road racing forks replaced the charcoal-smoked legs from the dirt bike. Tires were acquired directly from Goodyear's Gary Bryson. The new skins were the street-standard ATs—rather than some high-speed specials Gary offered that were used on the Kawasaki Z-1 24-hour record bikes at Daytona. Clip-ons were fastened to the fork legs and rear passenger pegs replaced the standard foot rests. The Kinby trio of lights were replaced with a solo Cibie Super Oscar quartz iodyne lamp that fit into the fairing like a quarter in a dime slot. The battery was removed from the system and the Cibie was loaded with a super-bright 100 watt quartz element.

Bates Leathers was excited enough about the wild project to set aside 96 rush orders for Daytona and whip up a set of dazzling threads for Larry. Included on the leathers were fluorescent orange reflective stripes and a huge bull's-eye on the back of the jacket.

time was included at six points—five minutes each, 30 minutes total.

There were so many known obstacles facing the project that anyone with less than bug-eyed enthusiasm would have thrown in the towel after careful preliminary research. The biggest hazard is the road. It's unlighted, sparsely marked, extremely coarse in texture, loaded with chuckholes, very narrow (19 feet for hundreds of miles) and virtually free of any shoulders, turn-offs or escape medians. A flat tire at the century mark and odds are you'll buy the farm. During the first month it was open, 31 people were killed in accidents. Highway 1 has been averaging almost one death per day since.

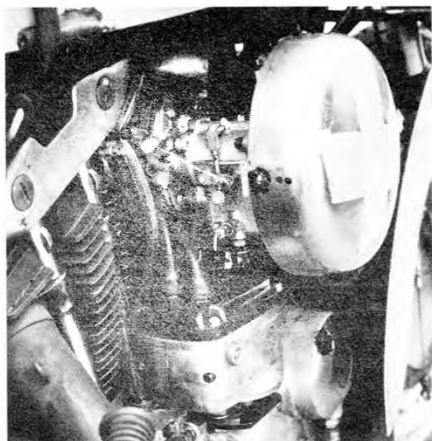
Pitting and gas supplies were of prime importance. Another Baja veteran and friend of Larry's, Boothe Hartley, was contacted for help. Boothe isn't a motorcyclist. His years of Baja experience are mostly in the air. Hartley has landed on over 80 different strips in Baja; only about four of them are paved. Boothe and his plane would leapfrog from one pre-planned stop to the next and gas Larry from supplies on the plane.

Fitted on the Sportster were two of Jacwall's 1.5 gallon number plate gas containers. They were located on the bike like saddle bags. An Autopulse electric

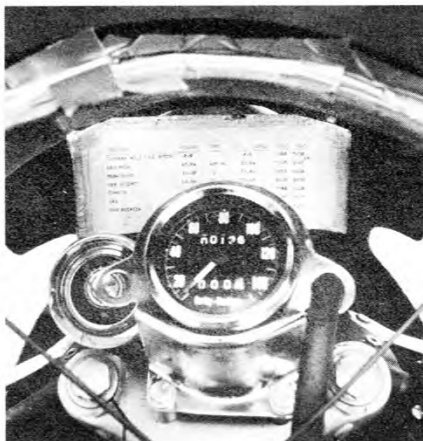
The road, not noted on any maps, is almost as narrow as the Baja highway and just about as coarse. It is little-traveled by civilian traffic and free of any stop signs. It is also posted for 50 mph and patrolled by Air Force MPs. In the middle of the base are Rosamond and Rogers dry lakes, once used for land speed record attempts before being taken over by Uncle Sam and forcing these efforts up to Bonneville. Since then, over twenty years ago, not one land speed or record attempt has been permitted inside Edwards gates.

When I directed Larry to the base road site in mid-February we both took the opportunity to ride the Sportster. Having also ridden the dirt-prepared Sportster, I can personally vouch that the road version was even less pleasant as a asphalt speedster than it was as a Baja 1000 racer. The front brake wouldn't work until boiling hot and the rear couldn't slow down a Hodaka. Stooping over the ungodly gas tank and trying to lever the too-narrow handlebars made accurate mountain road-handling virtually an impossibility. With the innertubes filled with liquid tire balancing fluid the tires bounced up and down ferociously as speeds fluctuated. Vision through the low, tinted windscreen was blurred from the thundering engine

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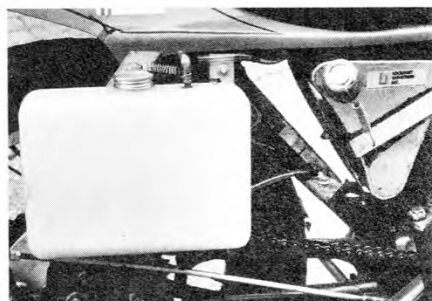
Culprit of numerous engine failures was an archaic Linkert. A 45mm Tillotson finally worked.



Larry made up a schedule to follow just like he was riding an enduro. Speed average—80 mph.



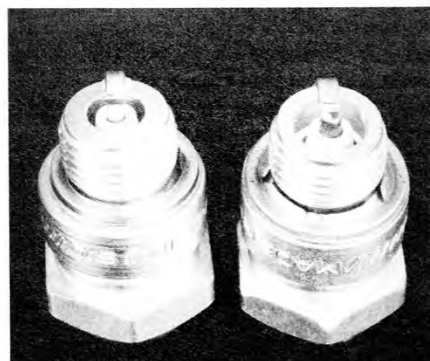
Hand built, the glass tank held seven precious gallons with three more pumped up from the rear.



Two 1.5 gallon Jacwal tanks were emptied into the main tank via an Autopulse electric fuel pump.



The twin double-leading shoe hub came from an old racer. Goodyear A/Ts chunked at 130 mph.



Magic spark plugs from Champion saved the engine. Left is frigid J-79, right is standard J-4J.

explosions, road undulations and tire-shake. It was impossible to judge braking points because I couldn't tell how fast the bike was going above 80 or 90 mph.

The machine was so terrifying, from a safety, riding control and predictability standpoint, that I could only tell Larry he was totally insane if he made the attempt on it. If Larry were an experienced road machine rider and technician he would have had enough sense to be scared out of his wits too. But he wasn't. The big Sportster felt, on the asphalt, so much like a wiggly, squirmy Kawasaki Bighorn in loose dirt that Larry was comfortably at home on the beast.

A total of ten runs were made up and back on the 26-mile road. Larry's only yardstick for speed while making the runs was whether he could read the license

**“... all the Mexicans were in frenzied panic, jumping around, waving their arms in the air and screaming. Some of the officers were south of the toll gate looking through the bushes with flashlights to see if they could find the remains of the airplane that had blasted through the (toll) booth.”**

plate numbers on cars when he blew past them. If he could read the license plate numbers he was going too slow and when he couldn't read them at all he was going fast enough.

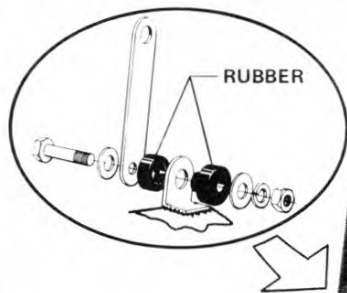
During the morning speed runs Larry passed 30 or so military vehicles without giving it thought. None had red lights on top. After lunch, with the gearing set, it was back again for jetting calibration. On the second run Larry smoked passed an innocent-looking military Corvan (speed was estimated to be 110 mph). Unbeknownst to Larry, in the Corvan were two Air Force MPs who were looking for the reported land missile that had been blasting by the 50-mph traffic at sonic speeds. As soon as the two airmen put their hats back on their heads they radioed ahead, where a road block was set up to stop Larry. But he had turned around and was streaking back towards the Corvan. With unlimited visibility that day the airmen saw Larry approaching, swung their Corvan across the road and stood out in front waving their arms for Larry to stop. Not knowing what he was approaching and seeing only the waving arms, he screeched to a halt, facing the Edwards Air Police.

The airmen were uncontrollably livid. They wanted to impound Larry in the base stockade. But upon removing his Bell Star, the display of Bornhurst's 45-year-old shining dome (rather than a 19-year-old mop of long hair) stunned the policemen. Rage turned to bewilderment and finally curiosity.

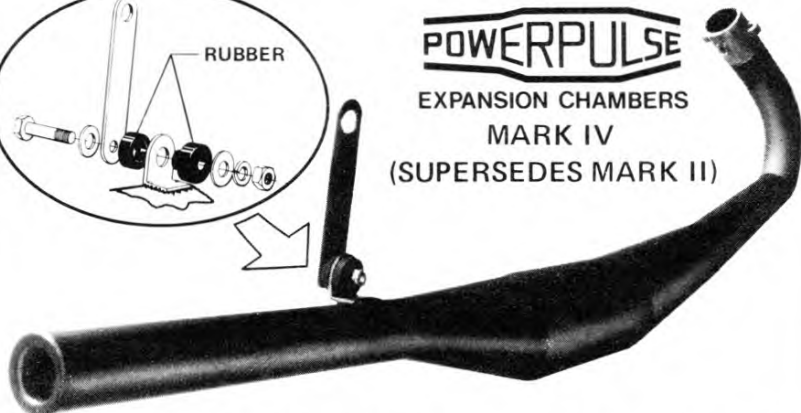
Before he knew it Bornhurst was on the  
(Continued on page 104)



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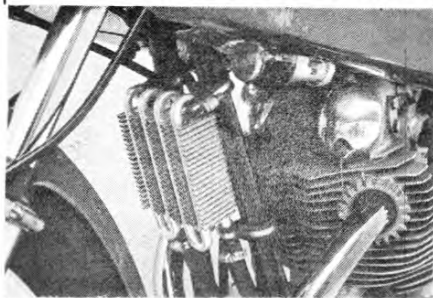
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GILLETTE Continued from page 49

way to the Base Commander's office. Upon walking into his office, Colonel McKee said, "Hello, Mr. Bornhurst. I understand you now hold the new base land speed record—130 mph. It used to be 110." Here again, intrigue with the project, and Bornhurst, led to the offer of use of the dry lake—where a civilian vehicle hasn't been able to run in twenty years.

It had been a good day for Bornhurst and the mechanics. Not only had Larry talked his way out of the Crossbar Hotel, but potential problem areas were corrected. The two rear saddlebag tanks had been mysteriously losing gas rapidly whenever the bike was run. Originally thought to be siphoning from the aft-mounted breather tubes (the fuel pump was never turned on), Larry discovered that the Autopulse diaphragm was being actuated by engine vibration, automatically transferring gas to the main tank.

The second run (the first attempt had been an unmitigated disaster) was scheduled for March 12th. The week before, March 5th, Larry went down to the Ensenada freeway along with a contingent of mechanics to zero-in the jetting. Pre-run distance totaled less than 50 miles. Constant plug checks were made and no color could be seen on any of them except pure white. Since the Linkert had the biggest jets possible already installed, a drill motor and bits came out. Larger holes (.069" oversize) were punched in the jets—still no color. While this was happening the rear pipe was turning rust-red from heat. The last plug that was removed had the electrode melted away. Finally the top of the rear piston melted away too.

Confusion and despair in and out of the Harley ranks was enough to submerge the project at this point. Again, Bornhurst's incredible persistence and persuasive personality salvaged the effort. Yet another new date for the run was set.

Larry took the bike over to his friend Bill Bettes, who runs the California Institute of Technology wind tunnel. Bettes had done all of the wind tunnel work on the factory Triumph and Harley fairings.

Bill remembered that overheating on the factory Harleys had been more severe at the front cylinder than the rear; the front wheel blocked the air stream. The rear cylinder problems with the Baja bike, according to Bettes, were mechanical—not lack of cooling air. Bill did show Larry how to fabricate some homemade ducts on the side of the fairing, and where to locate them for increased air flow to the troublesome rear cylinder.

Finally Bornhurst went over to see Champion's Arnold Frank, one of the top two or three spark plug experts in the country. Larry laid out the whole story—the concept, the motorcycle, the people, the heartache, the failures. The mechanical mystery was so clouded with unknown engine modifications that Arnold just loaded up Larry with a fist-full of plugs to test and return for evaluation.

A new attempt date was set for the 23rd

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of April. Things seemed to be finally coming together. On the third rebuild, Jerry Branch discovered two cracks running from each valve seat to the spark plug hole. The stock Sportster petcock was replaced with a full-flow aircraft type.

Two thermocouples were attached to the heads with a temperature gauge placed next to the left clip-on. If the gauge ever read 400° the kill button was to be pressed. A speedometer was attached to give Larry an idea of speed and braking points. After burning up a grand total of 14 of the 100-watt quartz bulbs (at upwards of \$14 each), a battery was put back in the system. A Bell Star plexiglass shield was taped to the top of the wind-screen as a deflector.

Pre-running on the 17th of April, Bornhurst and Wismer went to Tijuana. The Sportster was still running terribly lean. The jet was drilled .093" oversize. Still too lean. The coldest Harley plug, Number Five, was too hot; and colder J-2J then a colder still J-4J were installed. All were too hot for the lean mixture. Wismer took the bike back to his shop and Larry went to Arnold Frank. Arnold looked at all the plugs (six sets) and saw the same thing on all of them—DEATH. He told Larry, "You're on the knife-edge of disaster." The carburetion was far too lean, and serious engine damage within a very short distance was inevitable. When Larry returned the next day Arnold gave him a new batch of plugs, along with a very special set that he guaranteed would not get hot enough to damage the engine. The super-trick J79s are the coldest conventional plug made by Champion.

Feeling that the Linkert would almost certainly cause another engine failure, Larry appealed to Wismer and Laidlaw for a different carburetor. Laidlaw suggested letting Monte Miller work on the carburetion problem. Larry took the bike to Monte's Ventura (California) shop and briefed him on what he knew had been done to the bike. With only two working days left until the takeoff date, Monte was limited as to what could be done. With a standard oil pump now in the engine Monte changed the breather timing to insure that the big end would drain properly and not wet sump. The only major modification performed was discarding the Linkert and installing a 45mm Tillotson—an aftermarket mixer used on stroked Sportster engines.

On Monday, April 23rd, sixty-nine days after the first attempt, Larry and the Sportster left Toll Gate One on the outskirts of Tijuana for the final attempt. If the bike even so much as coughed on its way South, Larry was going home and the Sportster back to the parts shelf.

The run seemed almost anticlimactic at this point. No one could remember how many times the Sportster had aimed towards the bottom of Baja only to come home in a basket.

Before Larry left Toll Gate One at 4:57 A.M., the first pit truck drove down to Ensenada, and was to pay the second and third toll booths in advance the 20¢ and 24¢ fees for the motorcycle. Also, the

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pit crew members were to inform the Mexican officials that the Sportster would race through the gate without slowing.

With the piters not speaking Spanish and the Mexicans unable to understand English, communications were certain to be difficult. Sure enough, at the second toll booth the Mexican official smiled and nodded understandingly as he was given 20¢ for Bornhurst and the Sportster. Apparently the official thought he was being tipped. When Larry shot through the toll booth an hour later at 80-plus the toll-collector was standing in his cubicle, arm out-stretched. Blinded in the darkness by the 100-watt Super Oscar, hearing only the thundering drone of the big Sportster engine and seeing nothing but a orange flash shoot through the very narrow stall, the official was scared out of his wits. When the follow-up van arrived moments later the entire garrison had been roused and all the Mexicans were outside in frenzied panic, jumping around, waving their arms in the air and screaming. Some of the officers were south of the toll gate looking through the bushes with flashlights to see if they could find the remains of the airplane that had blasted through the booth.

An episode with the rear tire was downright frightening. Goodyear's offer to provide some 130 mph Daytona 24-hour tires was rejected in favor of using standard street skins. But Larry never knew it, and figured the A/Ts were in fact the 130 mph tires he had been told about. He never gave much thought to twisting the Sportster up to and past the 130 mark on some of the long, downhill straightaways. Running at these high speeds for so long (some of the straight sections last for 50 miles) on the incredibly coarse and hot asphalt caused the tire to start chunking badly after Guerrero Negro. Until the chunking problem was discovered by the pit crew at Santa Rosalia, all Larry knew was that the back end was bouncing up-and-down fiercely at speeds above 100 mph. After Santa Rosalia Larry turned the throttle back a notch rather than taking precious time to change the wheel. He kept the tire temperature down by riding the rest of the distance on the smoother and cooler white strip in the middle of the highway.

One of Larry's first comments when he arrived at the La Paz airport was, "I had so many close shaves I'm going to re-name the Baja road the Gillette Highway." He missed a 75-pound dog by a millimeter, knifed through a herd of meandering goats with absolutely no way to stop or slow down, shaved a dozen cows and wild burros with the fairing and misjudged over fifty turns without having oncoming traffic in the left lane. As he said later, "A lot of the road is good road, but it's all bad road at 120."

The record now stands—11 hours 58 minutes for 913.92 miles. Only three things got Larry to La Paz: a prudent right hand, two frosty Champion spark plugs and seven years of good luck concentrated into less than a single 12-hour span. If you don't think so, ask Larry. ©

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