

● The off-road cross-country motorcycle racer is the most totally devoted competition rider in the world. Racing every weekend for many hundreds of miles for trophies, single-digit number plates and scanty dealer sponsorships keeps them honorable amateurs who happen to be deadly serious about winning. Flash a little bit of money in their faces rather than the usual marble-based plastic trophy and these youthful gladiators will wrestle a rabid polar bear as long as it has handlebars and can be shod with knobby tires.

The arena for this group of racing specialists is the desert vastness of the southwest United States and upper Mexico. These millions of square miles are absolutely laced with old dirt mining roads, wagon paths, mission trails, power line rightaways, and dry stream beds that provide unbelievable racing challenges. And the true Mecca of off-road racing is Baja, where the challenge is the land itself and the prize is not only money but prestige. The only parallel in international news fame to winning a big money Baja race for motorcycle racers is Daytona, which is more intense but not as much fun.

In the 1968 Mexican 1000 race Larry Bergquist and Gary Preston became the only motorcycle riders to win any of the big Baja races outright, beating all the cars. They ran from Ensenada to LaPaz, 850 miles that year, in 20 hours, 38 minutes averaging 41.2 mph on their factory backed Honda 350 twin. But this may have

served only to infuriate the four wheel competitors, as the subsequent evolution of Baja race cars, jeeps, trucks and buggies left the dirt bike, still virtually unchanged, back in the pack in all the following Baja races—until now.

For this race, the SCORE (Short Course Off Road Enterprizes) Baja Internacional 400, Husqvarna came prepared to do battle with anyone as never before. Even with Heikki Mikkola's phenomenal success on the Grand Prix circuit this year, Husqvarna's reputation as a formidable racing power rests on cross country race victories. Husqvarna's lack of prowess in recent years in motocross, professional and amateur, is a puzzle as they dominated the sport in its early years. Their 125s handle great but lack power and dependability; the 250s just never could cope with the fierce competition in their class and the 400s are a favorite of desert racers only. The 450 was a disaster.

Husky wins in Baja because of its riders, best in their field, and its eccentric, independent and truly incredible team

manager for the big-money off-road races, Claes Nilson. Claes' involvement with Baja is one of personal and professional passion—a driving compulsion to win at any cost. Under his direction Husqvarna has completely dominated Baja victories for the past four years. But this race was by far the greatest and most convincing sweep of all. Here's how it happened:

Baja big-money racing was virtually at an end after the Mexican politicians threw out Ed Pearlman's NORRA a year ago. NORRA had started the Mexican 1000 and 500 races and ran them successfully until it all sank in the Baja political quagmire. Greedy individuals, both American and Mexican, saw the races as easy money but mismanagement of entry fees and charity funds resulted in lengthy delays before finishers were paid. By their second race, this year's Baja 500, entries shrank to one-tenth of NORRA's draw.

Mickey Thompson's SCORE, made up of ten off-road racing groups, was brought in by the Governor of Baja Norte at the request of hungry merchants. SCORE was asked if they could get racing back on its feet again in Mexico. It could, and did. Superb promotion, excellent course layout, guaranteed prize money and a large contingency program brought in a whopping 372 total entries, 61 of them motorcycles. The prize money was to be 50% of the purse for each class. Entry fee was \$350 per vehicle. Ten entries in one class meant half the entry money, \$1750, came back to the top finishers. The motorcycles have three classes under SCORE's rules: 125cc, 250cc and Open.

The course was said by all the riders to be the best thought out and one of the fastest they had yet seen. Only 3 miles of the entire course were paved. The roads

*Young gladiators Bakken and Mayes scored their second Baja win—this time overall.*



PHOTOGRAPHY: DALE BOLLER, DAVE HOLEMAN

# Baja Internacional

In the 14 prior Mexican off-road races a motorcycle has been overall winner only once. The 15th race had a new promoter, a new course, no politics and a bike took home all the marbles. By Dave Holeman





ranged in make-up from weaving, smooth, sandy, high-bermed, flat-out, fifth gear cross-country dreams to gravel-coated, off-camber, slippery, third-cog, half-throttle heart-stoppers. The start and finish were at Ensenada, which is on the Pacific coast of Baja 75 miles south of the border. The route ran out from the very center of Ensenada, up a dry wash, through a cardboard shanty-town and toward the center of the peninsula.

The terrain varied from talcum powder dust bowls to high altitude logging forests to barren desert to ocean beach to rain soaked canyons. The course was noticeably less severe than those for most other Baja events and nothing like many of the brutal Mint 400 races. The motorcycle survival rate was correspondingly higher, with 44 finishers out of 61 starters. As a comparison, 72% of the bikes finished while only 43% of the cars made the 380 miles. What the course lacked in severity of terrain it made up in grueling speed.

Every minute two vehicles left the starting line ramp at the same drop of the flag. The motorcycles started 90 minutes ahead of the first cars to eliminate the two being in the same sections at the same time. All of the serious entrants and most of the also-rans had pre-run the course (permitted and encouraged in the Baja races). The race was run over a marked route—meaning all the entrants had to stay on the prescribed course with no short cutting permitted. One exception was a 35 mile section along the beach that had a few alternates as long as the vehicles stayed away from the highway. Policing of the course was done by plane and helicopter.

Before the race started the favorites were Mitch Mayes and A.C. Bakken on their 400cc six-speed Husky, picked because they were the winners of the last Mexican 1000 by 3½ hours. A newcomer to Baja racing in the 1000, where he replaced injured Swede Rolf Tibblin, A.C. again partnered with Mayes in the SCORE 400. This time Rolf had visa problems preventing his travel out of the U.S. Mitch and A.C. had the bike, probably the best from Nilson's stable, and they had the team experience so necessary for equipment survival.

But other teams in the open class could readily slip in for an Open class win at the slightest faltering of Husky's number one entry. The Brooks brothers, Cordis and Tom, were probably the fastest pair teamed in the race on a 352 Bultaco. Odds were, with Bultacos' past record in Baja, that they wouldn't make the distance—they didn't. It blew six miles from the start. John Watkins and Todd Martella are rock steady fast and long time Baja vets. Riding a 400 Husky in place of their big Suzuki they again fell victim to rotten luck: coming into check five at Mike's Sky Ranch fifth gear shucked its engaging cogs.

Howard Utsey, near-winner of past Mexican races, teamed with Mint 400 victor (with Rolf Tibblin) and motocross

400 miles  
of  
banzai  
road!



Unlikely looking genius, Claes Nilson directs Husky's Baja battle plans and builds the bikes. Huskies blew off everyone—cars and bikes.



A portion of Nilson's Husky pit in Baja. The fuel is special and \$1000 of wheels are newly shod.





*Hopeful after a second in Last year's Mexican 1000, the Dempsey brothers just couldn't match the pace of the Huskies on their immaculate 750 Triumph. A crash cost them their front fork.*

ace Bob Grossi. Perennial favorite of everyone, (including competitors like Claes Nilson) were the bear-like Dempseys, Gene and Sam, on their beautiful 750 Triumph twin. Oldsters Dick Vick (43) and Niles Ussery (37) were probably the toughest and steadiest pair in the race. None of these teams are absolutely the fastest but they seldom make mistakes. If the leaders sneeze or blink their eyes at the wrong time these veterans will be right there. They know how to capitalize on mistakes or errors in judgment.

While Husqvarna completely dominated the open class in both entrants and finishers, the 250 class had not one Husky. There were only two real strong 250cc teams in the race and most people figured both would break. Baja has been fatal to most 250 Elsinores and Pentons in the past—especially to their gearboxes. Pegged the fastest were Al Baker (a part time test rider for Kawasaki product research) and Steve Holladay; both very quick, both hard on equipment. They were on one of the very rare American Honda-sponsored entries that we've seen in these races; an Elsinore prepared in their motocross department. The other fast team on a private 250 Penton was that of Mark Adent and Bob Messer.

The small bike class entry had most of the known, running 125cc Huskies in the country. Four were entered, and somehow all finished. The race oddsmakers had the contest as being Husky's Mickey Quade (previous Baja winner) and Nils Arne Nilsson (motocross champ) against the winners of the last 1000 on their 125cc Elsinore once again, Preston Petty and Dick Miller.

Because the race is more against the clock, elapsed time, than the rider in front it's critical that the favorites know just how fast a pace to run. If they go a notch too fast they'll break the machine or fall; if they go a notch too slow they lose to the sleepers and veterans. It's a game of incredible precision—pacing is the unknowable but vitally important factor.

Mayes, the favorite, decided to set a pace to the rider change-over point just like he was riding one of the longer 1000 mile races. He was relatively confident that faster teams like the Brooks brothers would break or fall while he remained quick enough but mechanically secure. The rider changeover stop was 190 miles out at a village called Camalu and having left on the ninth minute (riding number 18) Mayes was at check three, 145 miles into the race, before he received any confirming report on his competition.

Mayes was stunned by a radio report that he was four minutes (about three miles) in arrears to an unknown rider



*Leaving Mike's with a scant 1.2 second deficit, A.C. Bakken holds the throttle WFO.*

named Steve Sterner, also on a 400 Husky. Not wanting to give Bakken a deficit to make up, Mayes unleashed a maximum effort for the 35 mile beach stretch into Camalu. The unknown, Sterner, (a desert racer from Southern California) had played another game called WFO (Wide Freaking Open) and caught the favorites with their leathers down.

Husky's central pit was at Mike's Sky Ranch, 55 miles past Camalu, as were most other factory teams, both bikes and cars. Radio communications were fairly good and all of the motorcycle crews listened anxiously to the checkpoint arrival times. Interest in the reports turned to

shock when the word came over that Mr. *Nobody*, Steve Sterner, had such a substantial lead. Claes Nilson was quite apprehensive about the privateer as he realized that Mayes might get rattled about his deficit, banzai it and crash. Claes' reaction, in his strong Swedish drawl, to Sterner's motocross pace was, "He's (Sterner) going too godamn fast. He make Mitch break my modocycle."

With considerably more pre-running experience to feed on than Mayes, Sterner took a legal short-route into Camalu that Mitch somehow missed. As seen by the patrol plane, this route can gain three minutes for a motorcycle over the road

taken by Mayes. There was no question that Mitch was faster than Sterner, but Steve's better planning allowed him to arrive in Camalu still in the lead.

When word came over the radio about the standings at Camalu the crowd was still stunned that Mayes, now riding WFO, could only pull two minutes off Sterner's lead. With the riders changing to A.C. Bakken on the factory Husqvarna and yet another *unknown*, Danny Robinson, on the leading private 400 Husky six-speed at Camalu, Claes then expressed concern that A.C. would over-cook it trying to make up the last two minutes. Claes said, "I just hope dis Robinson ain't so godamn fast as Sterner."

The 56 mile route into Mike's Sky Ranch from Camalu was just a sprint for the second half riders because of a mandatory 60 minute layover there. The layover was to prevent two way traffic on the section east of Ensenada with the early bike entries and late car starters. A.C. Bakken let it all hang out and came into Mike's with a deficit of only 1.2 seconds!

With the unknown privateers from Competition Cycles of Vista (Calif.) virtually tied with the factory team, they each had an hour at Mike's to go over the bikes for the remaining 135 miles. Just behind these speedsters the rest of the race was equally exciting though not as well ordered. The battle for the 250 class win initially appeared sewn-up for Al Baker on the factory Honda Elsinore. At the first check, 50 miles out, he had pulled away 6.01 minutes, almost six miles, on Mark Adent on a 250 Penton. Nobody else was really in the hunt. But things changed drastically at checkpoint two when Baker suddenly fell 2.99 minutes behind Adent. Mark had made up the six miles, plus another for good measure. Adent kept on stretching out his lead and when the Penton reached Mike's it had 13.99 minutes on the Elsinore.

Everyone foresaw a tremendous battle between Nilsson and Quade on their factory 125cc Husky (if it didn't break) and the Elsinore ridden by Preston Petty and Dick Miller. In a shattering of expectations Petty first lost five minutes when he drowned the engine in a mudhole before the first check, and his ride was concluded a hundred miles later when the crankshaft end broke off at the magneto taper.

Re-starting from Mike's was done with electronic clocks precisely 60.00 minutes after each rider's arrival. The distance from Mike's to the finish was the faster portion of the race, with the bikers averaging from 46 to 52 mph between sections. Again the race between Bakken on the factory Husky and Robinson the unknown privateer continued. A.C. was confident when he left Mike's that he could stretch out a comfortable lead over Robinson because of the two minutes he made up out of Camalu. However, as the

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elapsed times indicated, Bakken was underrating his opponent.

After the 30 mile route down into Valle de Trinidad both riders posted exactly the same time—38.00 minutes. So only 1.2 seconds still separated the two. Into checkpoint seven, the last checking station before the finish. Bakken gained only minutely and had 58.8 seconds on Robinson after that 70 mile stretch. Heading for the finish Robinson clouted a rock, which threw him off the road and slowed him ever so slightly less than two miles from Ensenada. On the final 35 miles of the road Bakken went 1.2 seconds quicker than Robinson, giving him exactly a one minute lead over the unexpected and near-flawless ride by the privateer team.

In the not-so-close 250 race the sure winners on the Penton team blew their 14-minute lead over the factory Elsinore when Bob Messer unloaded WFO. He bent the handlebars and forks and broke the light in addition to hurting his hand and foot. The two teams were close on time at check seven but Holladay unreeled the Honda into a four-minutes-quicker final section to get the class win 3.07 minutes ahead of the Penton.

The 125cc race was a runaway victory for the factory Husky. Nilsson and Quade finished 31.07 minutes ahead of second place, a privateer on another Husky. Surprisingly all four of the 125 Huskies that started finished, two of them Claes Nilsson-prepared.

Both the Mayes/Bakken and Sterner/Robinson teams beat out the first four wheeler in an impressive overall victory for motorcycles. The margin was a solid 4½ minutes. Ironically, the first five overall finishers are motorcycle champions. First car (third overall) was piloted by Bobby Ferro, winner of the famous 200 mile Check Chase Hare & Hound a few years back on a Triumph twin. The second car (fifth overall) was piloted by Malcolm Smith, winner of Baja on a bike and ISDT multi-Gold medalist, and his motorcycle racer-dentist neighbor Bud Feldcamp. Third (seventh) was the team of Mike Patrick and Phil Bowers, winner of both the Mint 400 (overall) and Baja 1000 on a motorcycle. They were all in single seat buggies.

Sadly, a tragic accident involving Parnelli Jones and Bill Stroppe in their infamous Bronco led to their early retirement. A dizzy American spectator fatally met head-on with Parnelli as the former rode, knowingly, backwards on the course from the first check on a motorcycle. The accident was so violent that Stroppe withdrew their entry on the spot. Had they continued at the pace they were maintaining (approximately 80 mph) Parnelli probably would have taken overall honors handily. It was a rotten break for the man everyone acknowledges as the fastest racer in Baja, regardless of vehicle.

OCTOBER 1974

The very basis of Baja racing is the ability of anybody, sponsored or not, to go down and lock horns with the world's best off-road racers—whether on two or four wheels. A rider doesn't need any professional license, special permission, approved vehicle, trick engine, secret tires, million dollar pits, magnesium equipment or any other heavenly approval to go race seriously or for fun. It's not an environment that rewards or even tolerates folly, but it's a home for any competent motorcycle dirt racer.

The chances of privateers winning are still slim—Husky, i.e. Claes Nilsson, has the handle on winning the big Baja races. Of the 19 Open class finishers 11 were on Huskies. The first eight places went to 400 Huskies. All of the three class winners were factory sponsored machines. But all the second place finishers were privateers, two from the same Competition Cycle motorcycle dealer. Because of Yamaha's great contingency award program (first Yamaha finisher in each class gets \$500) the third place 125 and 250 and the eleventh place open bike finishers divided up \$1500. In the case of the 125 and 250 Yamaha finishers they took home more winnings than the second place riders.

Al Baker and Steve Holladay on the other hand were quite well compensated for their effort. They won a total of \$2118 (prize and contingency monies) and this amount was matched by their sponsor American Honda. They took home the second biggest total winnings of any of the motorcycle crowd, \$4236.

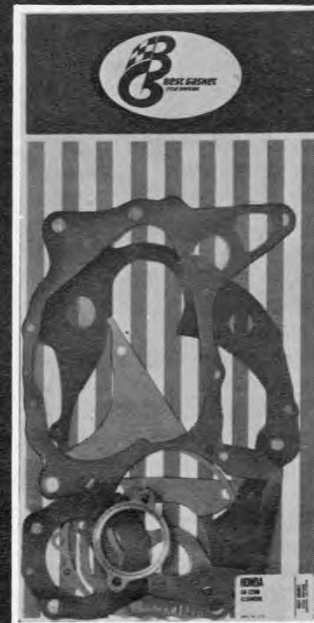
The race, the SCORE Baja International, was probably the best run, smoothest and most controlled of any of the big Baja races in years. It was a tremendous success for Mickey Thompson and the SCORE affiliates. If they decide to run the Baja 1000 in place of the bungling Mexican politicians it could easily draw 500 entrants and the biggest purse ever in off-road racing—maybe a quarter of a million dollars counting contingency awards. The success of this race has been like a transfusion to a dying patient. Baja is back. ©

#### BAJA INTERNACIONAL

Overall Winner—Mitch Mayes/A.C. Bakken—Husky 400

| Rider Team                                    | Bike      | Time      | SCORE<br>Purse | Cont.<br>Money |
|---|-----------|-----------|----------------|----------------|
| Class # 20—0-125cc 19 Entries—13 Finishers    |           |           |                |                |
| Nilsson/Quade                                 | Husky 125 | 8h59.99m  | \$1120         | \$1325         |
| Jaspeir/Padilla                               | Husky 125 | 9h31.06m  | 635            | 225            |
| Kirker/Roeseller                              | Yam 125   | 9h31.30m  | 392            | 525            |
| Holbert/Holbert                               | Pent. 125 | 9h39.65m  | 327            | ---            |
| Ward/Ward                                     | Husky 125 | 10h10.25m | 242            | ---            |
| Eddy  | Yam 125   | 10h36.75m | 84             | ---            |
| Class # 21—126-250cc 13 Entries—11 Finishers  |           |           |                |                |
| Baker/Holladay                                | Honda 250 | 8h32.87m  | \$ 893         | \$1225         |
| Adent/Messer                                  | Pent. 250 | 8h35.94m  | 558            | 150            |
| Bilkey/McCallister                            | Yam 250   | 8h54.28m  | 357            | 525            |
| Bartlett/Bartlett                             | Pent. 250 | 9h14.49m  | 301            | ---            |
| Lujan/Ley                                     | Honda 250 | 9h21.97m  | 123            | ---            |
| Class # 22—251cc-Open 29 Entries—19 Finishers |           |           |                |                |
| Mayes/Bakken                                  | Husky 400 | 8h07.41m  | \$2030         | \$2825         |
| Robinson/Sterner                              | Husky 400 | 8h08.41m  | 964            | 225            |
| Utsey/Grossi                                  | Husky 400 | 8h22.17m  | 600            | 25             |
| Ussery/Vick                                   | Husky 400 | 8h56.27m  | 451            | ---            |
| Laca/Mason                                    | Husky 400 | 8h56.49m  | 375            | ---            |
| Bishop/Hansen                                 | Husky 400 | 8h56.68m  | 330            | ---            |
| Harper/Hodges                                 | Husky 400 | 9h02.12m  | 223            | ---            |
| Shipley/Shipley                               | Husky 400 | 9h30.49m  | 102            | ---            |

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