



BAJA 500

Husqvarna won the 250 and open classes, as the Cranke/Jensen Penton took its fifth 125 win.

By Dave Holeman



This Baja 500 ran from coast, to coast, to coast; the Pacific to the Gulf of California and back.

• Baja racing has undergone vast changes since its slapstick beginning in 1967, when it started in a Tijuana bull ring's parking lot. We've had three different promoters, countless changes in the cast of characters, and no two Baja courses have been alike. In certain areas routes have been reused, but only when no other roads existed. Rarely has any part of the course led cross-country; rarely, too, has anyone said it was easy. Baja's "roads" are mostly two-rut goat paths that might as well have been invented just to frazzle machinery. Baja riders get to cope with wildly varied speeds, surface conditions and altitudes while getting soaked in morning fog, roasted when the sun is high, and frozen at night.

This year's 404-mile "500" had a little of everything but the full distance, and the stretch between checks ranged from only 36 to 80 miles. A motorcycle won it overall, maintaining between-checks averages of 40 to 55 mph. Three motorcycle classes drew 83 of the event's 387-entry total, and were contending for a \$10,000 purse. With contingency money and manufacturers' bonuses added to the purse, there was about \$25,000 up for grabs and there was some determined, strongly-supported grabbing. Being short, for a Baja event, it had some of the character of a sprint race—especially in the sense that any trouble serious enough to cost time would also cost any competitor the race. And trouble was precisely what many of the short-odds teams encountered.

HONDA: FRUSTRATION AND DEFEAT. As usual, Dick Miller and Preston Petty were teamed for the 125cc class, but this time their act went wrong before it started. Petty broke his foot days before the race and Miller's Mint 400 partner was otherwise committed. Worse, Dick found that a new super-trick engine he'd been provided for the Baja

was power-down on what he had, and was forced to re-install his Honda's 1974 engine just before the race. Still smarting from the losses to Penton's Cranke/Jensen duo in four previous big-money events and unable to find a big-talent partner, Miller decided he'd ride the 4/5ths 500 all by himself. He didn't have to ride far. His Honda broke its first gear only three miles from the start, which made the pipey, tall-g geared Elsinore all but impossible to manage in the tight sections.

Miller's first meet with his crew was only ten miles away, but when he reached the rendezvous they'd left, believing he'd already passed through. Dick chased them down the highway (off-course) and did catch up, drain and replace the transmission oil, and fit a smaller front sprocket to compensate for the lost first gear. Then it was another mad charge to get back on course, 40 minutes late—and all for naught. The Elsinore's rubber intake manifold split open, its mixture went lean and that holed its piston, leaving Miller stranded in the middle of barren desert.

Wayne Cook and Steve Holladay, with a factory-supported 250 Elsinore, were favored to win their class. They arrived in Ensenada with a new FMF-kit engine which, they said, was more powerful than anything they'd had before. Perhaps, but someone left a washer in the Elsinore's airbox. The engine ate it and expired of terminal indigestion a hundred feet from their truck the day prior to the race. So they had to fall back on their spare, a stock motocross engine, and that was just the beginning of their troubles.

Wayne ran out of gas before his first fuel stop and had to refuel from his auxiliary-supply canteens on-the-run. Two other 250s were right on his tail and he didn't want to stop. This exercise had to be repeated before Steve took over, but—though enterprising—it didn't help. The replacement engine just wasn't making enough power to



Team Husky's Roeseler and Bakken took the first-overall honors, which paid \$5000.



Eric Jensen and Carl Cranke know what they're doing, and did it well.

move Cook and Holladay up among the leaders even in a trouble-free run, and time irretrievably lost while replacing a broken expansion chamber placed them as seventh-250 at the finish.

Virtually-unknown Gary Drean, riding a stretched (440cc) Honda XL350, was first away from Ensenada and stayed a surprising first for 60 miles, holding off pre-race favorite Larry Roeseler. Drean's partner, Bill "El Orca" Isherwood, said the bike was a 79-mph stone, which made Drean's ride all the more remarkable. Unhappily, being first in this Baja carried a penalty: locals had closed two barbed-wire gates in a twisty forested section and the first caught Gary by surprise and going too fast to stop. Having almost no choice, Drean gassed it and hit the three spiked strands of wire really hard. The gate broke under the impact and Gary got through, miraculously, with only minor scratches. He was able to stop for the second gate and dropped it flat on the ground just in time to clear the way for Larry Roeseler, who powered through and left him standing in a cloud of dust. Drean repassed Roeseler at a fuel stop, was overtaken again in one of Baja's rock piles, and shortly thereafter was stopped when the Honda snapped one of its rocker arms.

Al Baker and Gene Cannady, on Bill Bell's 440cc XL350, were one of three or four teams capable of winning overall, but were brought low by a variety of incapacities. Baker picked up an eight-penny nail with the Honda's rear tire yards from the starting ramp, and had to do 30 miles on the flat to reach his crew and a spare wheel. The mishap placed him in a strung-out pack of 250s, trying to cope with traffic and blinding dust. Cannady was handed a 20-minute deficit to make up in his half of the ride, which began with a 37-mile stretch of the

San Felipe highway. This was a speed-limit section, with everyone being given a 45-minute time between checks—including Cannady, who forgot the mandatory 50 mph average in the heat of the moment and ran the Honda flat-out to average 107 mph for the distance. It was a costly mistake. Gene ran out of gas three miles from his next fuel stop and had to scrounge some from a spectator. With all this, Cannady still posted the second-quickest time in his 213-mile section, but the bike was 25 minutes behind the total time, which made it third in the open class.

HARLEY-DAVIDSON: PATCHWORK PRIVATEERS. Last year's Baja 500 saw a 250cc Harley-Davidson defeat all the other motorcycles, and Bruce Ogilvie was back with that winning bike. He had a new riding partner, Bob Rutten, replacing Larry Roeseler, who had joined Team Husqvarna. The 250 H-D is sponsored by a dealer, Dale Marschke, and soldiers along without any support from the factory. It's remarkably fast, but desert-weary and tattered. Preparation for this Baja included welding the frame where it had cracked (seven places) and replacing worn/bent pieces with whatever fell readily to hand. Bruce brought the H-D into check-one only 50 seconds off the overall leader's time, and actually lead the whole shebang at the next two check points. But the bike had sagged four minutes behind Bakken's 360 Husky at the fifth check, and then at the 283-mile mark its front axle (the entire front end is from a Yamaha) sheared completely in halves, ending its run.

YAMAHA: KNOBBY-SIDE UP. Three-time AMA motocross champion Gary Jones made a surprise appearance, teamed with Curt Jensen (Eric's brother), another dyed-in-the-wool motocross rider. These two Baja first-timers were supposed to ride a Moto



The Kirker/Dysert Husky ran into suspension woes; it still ran fast enough to finish in second place.

Bring me your sick, your wounded: King's co-op pit.





Some things old, some things new,
Some things borrowed and
Something blew.

● It's been more than ten years since I last raced a four-stroke dirt bike. In 1966 a Maico 360 took my fancy and I sold my Matchless G85 600cc Typhoon. I have since waded through a number of racing two-strokes and never looked back at the poppet-valve thumpers with any particular affection.

There is, however, no denying the advantages of Mr. Honda's lovely little fourstroke singles as play bikes and I've been using one for that purpose. It was an utter basket case when I got it, but the price was right. My XL250 proved to be heavy, slow, loud and absolutely dependable. After nearly 5000 trail-riding miles, I still didn't need the spare spark plug I had bought for it two years prior.

The Honda was a pluperfect plonker, but in a rash moment I decided to transform the pint-sized thumper into a Baja race bike. Past Baja project bikes have been single-purpose, deadly-serious efforts. But there was no sense in kidding myself about what could be done with the Honda. I was short on time and terribly limited to the amount of money I could spend. The Baja/XL250 would be an econo-bike—at least as compared with past full-fledged racers.

The bike was stripped and its stock frame cleaned, inspected for cracks and re-painted. New swing arm bushings and dust caps were installed. The engine was disassembled and the cylinder head and valves sent to Branch Flowmetrics to be ported and polished. A 10.5:1 Venolia piston, Torque pipe with baffled

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Scot Harden brought this 250 Husky home a class-winner; partner Johnson beat everybody to check-one.

PHOTOGRAPHY: DALE BOLLER



BAJA 500 RESULTS

(1)	Larry Roeseler A.C. Bakken	Husqvarna 360*	8hr. 50min.
(2)	Terry Clark Howard Utsey	Husqvarna 360	9hr. 03min.
(3)	Scot Harden Jack Johnson	Husqvarna 250	9hr. 14min.
(4)	Al Baker Gene Cannady	Honda 440	9hr. 16min.
(5)	Bryar Holcomb Cordis Brooks	KTM 400	9hr. 26min.
(6)	Andy Kirker Keith Dysert	Husqvarna 250	9hr. 34min.
(7)	Tom Kelly Jeff Kaplan	KTM 250	9hr. 39min.
(8)	Ben Maze Leroy Kyger	Yamaha 250	9hr. 40min.
(9)	Eric Jensen Carl Cranke	Penton 125	10hr. 10min.
(10)	Ed Rodine Eric Speath	Yamaha 125	10hr. 45min.
(11)	Lee Wilson III Timothy Plant	Husqvarna 125	11hr. 03min.
(12)	Tim Iufer	Honda 125	11hr. 11min.
*First Vehicle Overall			

Islo, but the big-bore prototype being prepared for them wasn't ready so Gary borrowed a box-stock Yamaha TT500 four-stroker for the occasion. Jones' closed-course experience wasn't much help down in Baja California: before he'd gone 100 miles he crashed the Yamaha in soup-thick dust, bending its fork tubes. He crashed twice more, then stopped, loosened the fork clamps and reversed the tubes—perhaps hoping the next crash would bend them back straight. In any case, the Yamaha kept going, and the Jones/Jensen team was 12th in class, 90 minutes off the pace.

Another Yamaha thumper was doing well before it stopped in the race's one serious accident. Bryon Farnsworth and Baja veteran Dick Hansen were sharing the ride, changing at about 90-mile intervals instead of just once at the mid-way mark. Farnsworth is a demon fire-roader, and had the Yamaha in third place at the first check; Hansen was holding a respectable fifth-place at the second check. But only 20 miles farther, near Tres Pozos, Hansen crashed at the edge of a dry lake while running flat-out. A rider who saw the crash went for help at Jim King's co-op pits, fortunately only two miles away. King rushed to the scene, found that Hansen was badly hurt, and sent a rider off to Tres Pozos for paramedics recruited from among Los Angeles county's firemen, who arrived very quickly. That was the last thing to go right for far too long. King managed to contact check-two with his van's CB radio, but reception was bad and an important part of the reply—that there was no English-speaking radio operator at the check—was lost. A ham radio club was supposed to provide short-wave communications during the race, but pulled out of the agreement the day before. Some of the

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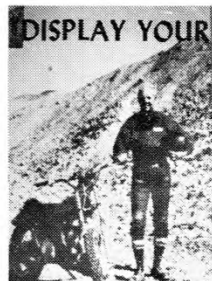



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club's members did show, but not a full crew, which is how check-two happened to have a Spanish-only radioman, who couldn't be told about the accident by the English-only Americans at the check. So the system had broken down, but Hansen eventually got lucky. The paramedics immobilized him to protect a suspected broken neck and, while waiting for a plane that hadn't been sent, spotted a helicopter landing at Tres Pozos. King called his pit on the CB and asked them to send the helicopter to airlift Hansen to a hospital—and the chopper crew refused, soon after lifting off and disappearing southward. That wasn't lucky, except that you might not want to be in the care of people like that even with a broken neck. The lucky part was that word had somehow filtered back to Ensenada, and after another half-hour a Cessna tail-dragger flown by "Cozy" Bob Atkins touched down on the dry lake. Atkins tossed out one of his plane's seats, had Hansen loaded aboard, and flew him across the border to an airport at Brawley, California. And with all the confusion, despite the Dirt film helicopter crew's refusal to play Good Samaritan (and honor a pre-race agreement with SCORE), Hansen was in a California hospital less than two hours after his crash. Jim King, the paramedics and Bob Atkins came through like champs; good men and true.

PENTON: AGAIN Carl Cranke and Eric Jensen showed everyone that winning is easy if you know what you're doing. They busied themselves with the Trask Mountain ISDT qualifier, where Eric collected the Gold Medal he needed to earn a place on Penton's Six Days Team, and didn't start to prepare for Baja until four days before the race. The preparation was all done the day before the start. Carl had stopped at home on his way down from Oregon, picked up the remnants of their Mint 400 bike, a fresh engine and a new Ceriani fork, and they assembled this Baja-bike kit in the Ensenada impound area—taking only a few hours—just in time to pass tech inspection. In all, it was very much an "Oh, what the hell!" effort: there wasn't time to pre-run any of the course; theirs was a post-entry and they missed a drawing that might have given them a better starting position, so Carl left Ensenada almost dead last; and KTM's western distributor wasn't interested in providing pit services. Still, all these difficulties did prove to be surmountable. Cranke hammered all the other 125s by 20 minutes in his half of the ride and Eric, who was delayed at San Felipe while replacing a front wheel that had lost a couple of spokes to the jolting of the Penton's stiff new fork, lengthened their winning margin to 35 minutes at the finish.

HUSQVARNA: RENEWED STRENGTH. The factory-backed Huskys should have done better in recent big-bucks Baja-type races, but have been hampered by rider injuries. They were again: Mitch Mayes, one of the very fastest desert racers we've seen, was sidelined with his fourth shoulder injury in eight months, and was not available for this

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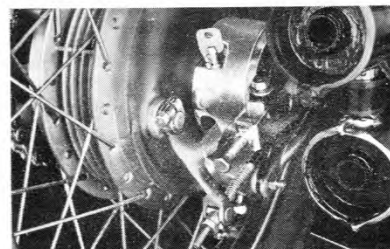
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Baja 500; neither was past-(multiple) winner Rolf Tibblin able to ride, being grounded with a broken heel. As for the Mint, the Husky team had to do a last minute shuffling of riders to man its two open-class bikes and single 250-class entry—this last being assigned to desert-jets Jack Johnson and Scot Harden. The wisdom of that assignment was clear by the time Johnson arrived at the first check with the fastest time of any motorcycle. Jack crashed shortly after leaving check-one, which resulted in the ruination of his goggles and visor and brought him the torments of fighting the Baja dust barefaced. Still, the elapsed-time advantage Johnson had accumulated was so great that pressure from Cook, on a Honda, and from Ogilvie's flying Harley-Davidson, was more uncomfortable than serious. Andy Kirker's Husky zapped past Johnson just before the second gas stop, but that didn't affect the time factor much, and after the Ogilvie/Rutten H-D dropped out of the race, and the Kirker/Dysert Husky slowed with suspension problems, the issue was settled. Johnson and Harden won the 250 class for Husqvarna by 20 minutes over Kirker and Dysert's second-place Husky.

Team Husqvarna also collected first and second places in the open class for motorcycles, and overall, but not without some drama. The Team's second-place bike, a 360 Husky ridden by Terry Clark and Howard Utsey, ran very close to the ultimate winner's time over the first 200 miles and at

one point actually held a one-minute lead. Pavement was its undoing. Clark was on the 37-mile section leading into San Felipe when the Husky's engine seized, and though he nursed it onward to the halfway point (and a waiting Utsey) it was certain to stick its piston again if pushed hard—and did, two miles after the changeover. Utsey's troubles were just beginning: the Husky stuck again crossing Diabolo dry lake, staying stuck for 10 minutes before Howard could get it freed and restarted; it tightened twice more before the finish, performance sagging badly, but still made it home in slightly over nine hours, which was just 13 minutes out of first place.

Husqvarna's best hope for an overall win lay with Larry Roeseler and A. C. Bakken, for whom winning would not be a novelty. Their Husky was Larry's first open-class Baja ride, though he'd won there on a smaller bike; it would be a last Husky ride for Bakken, who'd been hired away by Suzuki to do development work on off-road models. Roeseler rode the first half, and expected to move from his third-away starting position to the absolute lead within 10 miles. Gary Drea had other ideas. Roeseler caught Drea, and found he could go a bit quicker in the twisty stuff but not enough to pass. And even though the Husky had enough speed to get by Drea's Honda on the long straights that didn't help, because the 440cc XL350's acceleration was very strong and by the time the Husky worked up to closing speed both bikes were running about 80

mph and the Honda was churning up a dust cloud thick as mud and a mile long. So a frustrated Roeseler had to hang back out of the dust far enough to at least see the edges of the road and wait for his chance, which came when Drea stopped to open the gate.

Roeseler handed the Husky to Bakken at San Felipe, where the bike was freshened with a new rear wheel and an air cleaner, and then A. C. set off on one of his famous time-clock rides—very fast and no dramatics—which lasted until he reached a highway crossing only 20 miles from Ensenada. Roeseler was there and, thinking the Ogilvie/Rutten Harley-Davidson was still close behind, gave Bakken a "go-hard" signal. Bakken over-did his instructions, and fell off a few miles from the finish line, but quickly picked himself up and rushed on to win the race overall, defeating even the highly specialized and lavishly-financed cars. He and Roeseler picked up \$1510 in prize money, \$2400 in contingency fees and (according to rumor) a \$1000 bonus from Husqvarna. For Bakken it was a nice way to say goodbye to his long-time sponsors, and Larry Roeseler had established himself as one of the all-time-great off-road racers. Larry won the 125cc class in the 1972 Baja 500 on a 100cc Harley-Davidson, and beat all the bikes in 1975 on a 250cc H-D. Now he'd beaten everybody and everything on a Husky, and Roeseler is not yet in his twenties. It makes you wonder how he'll do when he's had some seasoning.

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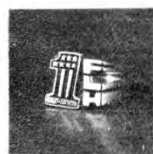
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